And They Didn't Live Happily Ever After

by Betz

Summary

Answer to the WIKTT "I'm Just a Gigolo" challenge. Harry asks Hermione a favor, but it will lead her to question her own marriage to Ron. Can Hermione continue to find contentment in a mediocre marriage and a completely unfulfilling sex life? When Hermione begins to see a gigolo for conversation and companionship, the foundation of her life is shaken to the core from revelations concerning every aspect of her life.

This story was started in 2004 and is now AU, ignoring all new HBP and DH canon. Winner of Round Three Multifaceted’s Endurance category (best challenge fic).

Notes

Chapter 1 A/N: First of all, thanks to my beta Siren for improving on my sentence structure. I was a bit rusty when I started writing this.

The second thing is I've broken one of my rules for the WIKTT "I'm Just a Gigolo" challenge and that is the Virgin!Hermione factor. I wanted to go dark and this seemed the best way to make it depressing. There is another rule I'm going to break, but you'll have to wait until that chapter is posted before I tell you. Don't worry, tons 'o smut on the way, must build the story first.

For those of you who are writing or are contemplating answering my Gigolo challenge, if you need to break a rule to make the story more interesting...sure, go ahead. As Capt. Barbosa once said, "It's more what you call guidelines than actual rules."

Here are the rules for the 2004 WIKTT "I'm Just a Gigolo" challenge:
1) You must give a reason why Snape is a gigolo. Did he fall into it by accident (think of the movie 'Loverboy'), did he do it on purpose (to get more info out of the wives of Death Eaters or supplement his income) or some other combination of events. I want to know "WHY" and why he continues to do it.

2) Snape has kept his identity secret so far. Somehow, someway, his clients never know that it's him: blindfold, potion, spell, hood, dark rooms, mask, etc. Until..... You can have Hermione find out or never know it's him. You can have it where only Hermione knows or blows his identity wide open to the wizarding world or somewhere along the spectrum. It's up to you whether his "hobby" remains a secret or not.

3) Snape is very, VERY good at what he does. Why is he good? Legilimens? Those hands, that voice, his knowledge of anatomy? Why? (Hint: This is your cue for lots of lemons and tons 'O smut) You can use instances with current clients or flashbacks, his first trick, and how he learned.

4) Hermione is a virgin. Why is she going visit a gigolo? How does she stumble upon Snape? Through the reference of a good friend, by accident and where?

5) There must be multiple visits between Snape and Hermione. (They can't fall in love with each other just because of one trick, can they? Let's be reasonable and have a reason for more smut.)

6) You must list why they fall in love. (Is one of them reluctant to do so?)

7) There must be some anticipation with the smut. I know that some of the best erotica I've read had a long lead up time with lots of anticipation, so let's make that a rule that there must be some, the longer, the better. Remember that foreplay is not just for the body, but for the mind as well.

By the way, if you do respond to this challenge, please post on WIKTT so that 1) I know that it is a response to the challenge and 2) I'll know that I have something to read that day.

Options:

1) Happy or sad ending, you pick. Do they have a "happily ever after" or does one leave the other (or have a preexisting reason why it could never work out?).

2) Angst, dark, drama, romance, fluff, humor, PWP, your pick. What ever inspires you.

3) Length: one-shot or epic length welcome. Any length, we just want to read a story.

4) How does the wizarding world deal with Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD's)? Is there a potion to block AIDS? Or are wizards and witches naturally immune? Or are there other STD that are unique to the wizarding world? (I've always wished this one aspect was covered in some of these stories.)
Chapter One
"The Pub"

Disclaimer: Oh, that I had a smidgen of our dear J.K. Rowling’s talent or I wouldn’t be using her characters. They are hers alone. I’m just borrowing them for a while, I promise to return them only slightly used, but cherished nonetheless.

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Dear Hermione,

Meet me in Muggle London at the Swift & Stump pub near Tower Bridge tomorrow at one o’clock.
Please don’t tell Ron, as this concerns Ginny.

Thanks,

Harry

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Hermione read the letter a second time before folding it up neatly. She carefully placed it in her pocket, thankful that Ron was still asleep when the owl post came that morning.

She wondered if Harry needed help picking out a gift for his wife. Hermione was the only woman who knew Ginny well enough to know her style, much less size, if it came to lingerie shopping.

It seemed a bit odd, really, when Hermione thought about it. Harry and Ginny’s anniversary was two months ago, it was still another two months before Ginny’s birthday and Christmas was half a year away.

’Maybe Harry got himself in the doghouse and wants to apologize with a nice diamond bauble,’ she mused to herself. She then thought some more. Maybe Harry was ready to talk about other things.

Hermione pushed those thoughts aside to reflect on her own marriage.

She sighed heavily, feeling the invisible weight of disappointment on her own shoulders. Three years as Mrs. Ron Weasley, and the honeymoon was over long ago.

It didn't take a clever witch to know that Ron did not come from a family of means, but she thought that his circumstances would at least have driven him to make a wholehearted go at making something of himself in the world. Second string Keeper for the Chudley Cannons, while moonlighting as a barkeep at The Listing Broomstick, was not what one aspired to in one’s youth.

There were days when Hermione kicked herself for allowing Ron to talk himself out of finishing Auror training, shortly after the fall of Voldemort. She had known it was a bad idea then, but kept her mouth shut for once, as she didn't feel like butting heads with Ron again just a few months before their wedding. Instead, she went to Harry to ask him to convince her fiancé to stay the
course. Harry only shrugged, saying that Ron had made up his mind and it was out of his hands.

Putting down her now cold cup of tea, Hermione closed her eyes and tried to think of things she should be grateful for, before she headed off to work.

‘Harry and Ron survived the war, both in one piece. All of the Weasleys lived. We have our health. I have a good job at the Ministry with little chance of being unemployed in the near future. We have a roof over our heads, albeit a rather small one, but at least it fits two people.’

She paused while trying to think of other blessings, but drew a blank.

All the positive things she could think of only reminded her of the things she was growing steadily resentful of. Yes, the golden trio had survived the war, but so did Fudge and his inane administration. Yes, all the Weasleys lived, but Albus and Minerva did not, both passing away in the last days of the war. Yes, she had a good job, but she was the main breadwinner of the household.

It took quite a few months of convincing herself that it was all right for a wife to earn more than her husband. She didn't mean to sound so anti-feminist in her head, but she still had a few old-fashioned values, such as the man being able to earn enough money so that when it came time for children, the woman could stay at home for a few months recovering from childbirth, without worrying that the rent wasn't going to be paid.

It wasn't that they lived hand-to-mouth, but between the upkeep on Ron's professional Quidditch broom, food, rent and other basic necessities, money was tight. Ron's meager salary with his two jobs, and Hermione's low-level job in which she was indispensable, but hardly compensated for her skill, knowledge and efforts, was barely enough to keep anything in their vault at Gringotts. There was little room for extravagance or unplanned splurges.

And that last thought... their flat. Room enough for two and a baby, as Molly had not so subtly hinted at during the past three family gatherings.

It wasn't as if Molly did not have enough grandchildren already. She had more than enough to qualify for her own township. It was just she didn't have any grandchildren from her two youngest children.

Hermione and Ginny both bore the brunt of Molly's grilling as to why they hadn't got 'round to procreating. The brunette witch had politely sidestepped the questions by stating she was just getting her career started and that there would be plenty of time for children once they got a little more financially stable.

Molly countered with her own argument that if people waited until they had enough money before having children, no one would have any. She used herself as an example of how she made it work, despite Arthur's meager income. She clearly expected Hermione to take the same drastic measures. The Weasleys had enough love to fill in some of the shortcomings, but love did not put food on the table.

Ginny wasn’t quite in the same situation. Harry had inherited a sizable fortune of his own, and had a good paying job as an Auror. Mrs. Potter didn't work in the traditional sense, but volunteered for many charities and committees, which took up as much time as full-time employment.

Frequently, at family gatherings, Hermione and Ginny would make a quick escape to the back
garden when the talk turned to which wife of the Weasley men was due with the latest grandchild. But at the last get-together, Molly ambushed Ginny as everyone began to sit down to dinner, chastising her for not trying to get pregnant. To this, Ginny hotly retorted, "I'll have kids when I'm damn good and ready–and NOT BEFORE!"

Ginny stormed from the table and Flooed back home, only to receive a Howler from her mother before the night was out. Hermione went to visit the Potters the next day. She found Ginny smashing every breakable object within the house. Harry remained shut up in his study, servicing his latest broom.

That was over two months ago, and Ginny still seemed upset over the incident.

Hermione hoped that Harry might be able to shed some additional light on the matter when they met the next day, and if not, maybe Hermione could finally broach the subject with Ginny at their weekly Wednesday lunch, day after next. There was more than just irritation from her mother's haranguing involved.

Rising from the rickety kitchen chair, Hermione headed over to the dresser and took a piece of parchment in which to scribble a reply. After signing her name, she tied the note to Pig's leg and gave him a treat before the tiny owl took wing into the clear June morning.

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Hermione stepped into the pub and looked about the dark paneled interior, searching for the telltale thatch of unruly black hair. Near the back in a somewhat secluded booth, she saw the top of his head poking just above the back of the divider.

"Hi Harry," Hermione warmly greeted her old friend as she reached the table. She stopped cold with the pleasantries once she saw his upturned face, marred with dark circles and tears. His boyish features looked tired and drawn. A light crease was imprinted on his forehead, bisecting his famous scar.

Quickly, Hermione sat down, and her face immediately changed to one of concern.

"What's wrong, Harry?" Her tones were hushed and urgent.

The last time she had seen Harry this distraught was when Albus and Minerva died almost four years ago, just a week before the final battle.

Her mind raced through a hundred scenarios, trying to think of anything that would make her old friend so upset about Ginny, and required her discretion to not mention this meeting to Ron. Only one thing seemed to come to the top of her mind. Children.

Kids were a sore point with both Ginny and Hermione lately. After her blow-up with her mother, the youngest Weasley ranted to Hermione that she just wasn't emotionally ready for kids. She wasn't ready for the commitment to a squalling ball of flesh, as she so often referred, with sotto voce, to her many newborn nieces and nephews in confidence to Hermione. Of the many reasons she stated for why she wanted to put off children, was that she and Harry needed some more time to settle into marriage, do things that young couples do, like travel, and be insouciant for a while, without additional responsibilities. She blamed Voldemort for stealing many of the carefree years of her youth, that she was intent on reclaiming, plus interest.

Harry had never said one way or another that he was ready for kids or not. Certain he was finally...
going to discuss the issue with her, Hermione blinked and asked him to repeat what he just said, sure she had heard wrong.

"Ginny's having an affair."
Chapter Summary

Harry's suspicions as to why Ginny is cheating on him. WIKTT "Gigolo" challenge fic. Harry asks Hermione a favor, but it will lead her to question to marriage to Ron.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Two

“A Life More Than ‘Mione”

Disclaimer: Rowling owns it all, lock, stock and barrel full of pickled dragon spleen. I bow humbly to her and the universe she has created. Not a brass farthing nor a single Knut is being made off of this.

"What?" Hermione still couldn’t believe what she had heard. It seemed an implausibility, and wholly against Ginny's nature.

Harry closed his eyes, hoping that the rising tide of despair would abate enough to let him answer Hermione's questions without completely breaking apart. He could barely admit it himself, and having to repeat it a third time would surely rent his heart in two.

Flustered and shocked, Hermione blurted out, "Are you sure?"

Harry nodded morosely. A torrent of tears began trailing down his cheek, and splashing on the heavily varnished tabletop. Even during the tenebrous days of the war, Harry never looked so fragile and on the verge of shattering into infinitesimal shards.

She wanted to hug him, but the table that was between them hindered the action. Instead, she reached across the table and grasped his hand, offering some solidarity with that simple gesture.
The logical part of Hermione's mind took charge, while her emotional side kept chanting, *Please, let it not be true.*

Swallowing down the growing lump in her throat, Hermione slowly said, "Tell me what you know. Start at the beginning."

Harry sniffed and grabbed a pile of napkins from the dispenser on the table, blew his nose and cleared his throat.

"It was a couple of months ago," he began, his voice gravelly and thick with emotion. "You know that Ginny is always working of some sort of committee or another. And you know how Molly has been nagging us, or Ginny rather, for kids."

Hermione nodded, encouraging him to continue.

"Well, Ginny has been reluctant to get pregnant, saying we have years ahead to start a family. She wants to travel and do things. I told her we could still travel with kids, like Bill and Fleur do, but she doesn't want to do that. She says the kids will stop us from having spontaneous fun like young couples have when they don't have to worry about arranging a babysitter..." Harry licked his lips nervously. "Or other things."

Hermione remembered that Harry was always a bit uncomfortable when talking about sex, even engaging in "boy talk" with Ron when she wasn't around.

"Well," Hermione paused, trying to think of how to word it delicately. "She has a point. You have years to start a family; you're both very young. You're almost twenty-three and she's just twenty-one. My parents didn't get around to having me till they were in their late twenties. Just because she doesn't want to get pregnant right now doesn't mean she's having an affair, Harry."

"But I want kids now. I've always wanted a family of my own. And there's other things," he added quickly, an inflection of anger in his tone. He took a deep breath and straightened his spine before continuing.

"A couple of weeks ago I had to stop by home after lunch to pick up a few things I forgot. It was Thursday, so Ginny has her weekly board meeting with the Magical Beast Preservation Society. Or so she said," he finished darkly.
Truly intrigued, Hermione leaned closer to Harry as he continued his tale in more discreet tones, "When I was in the study looking for a file I needed, a head popped into the fireplace. It was some witch from the board asking if Ginny was there. I said I didn't know where she was. The witch said that there were a few questions they had for Ginny. It seems she resigned from the board six months ago, without telling me, and that they needed to follow up a few things since they were currently in a meeting."

Sighing, Harry sat back and closed his eyes, "I just knew something was up then. When I came home at the end of the day, I asked her how her board meeting at the Preservation Society went and she just said, 'Oh the usual stuff. Nothing much happened, just business,' and left it at that."

Harry opened his eyes, and the anger in them made Hermione a bit worried. Before she could open her mouth with possible reasons as to why Ginny might be deceiving her husband, he growled, "She lied to me. She bald-faced lied to me. So next Thursday comes around and I decided to follow Ginny using my invisibility cloak. Well, I should have said something to the witch about not mentioning talking to me, because when I was following Ginny, she kept stopping and looking over her shoulder. At one point, I noticed she used a locating spell and her wand was pointed directly at me, though I was half a block from her. She knew," he said, shaking his head, "she knew I was there. Next thing I know, she Apparates and when I try a locating spell on her, it won't lock. She blocked me. Can you believe that?!?"

"That night, I asked her about the board meeting and she casually replies—" Harry coughed to clear his voice before switching to a mocking falsetto, "'Oh, I'm so busy and I got tired of some of the politics involved; I decided to resign this week. It wasn't like they really needed me anyway.'"

Furrowing her brow, Hermione gently replied, "Maybe it's just she didn't want to disappoint you. After all, you did found that society in honor of Hagrid after he died."

"NO!" Harry looked around, leaned forward in a conspiratorial manner, his eyes darting around to see if they had anyone eavesdropping on their conversation. "There are things Ginny used to constantly ask... things... in the bedroom. There are some acts I just won't do; I'm just not 'into' certain things. And about six months ago, she just stopped asking."

Hermione could have been knocked over with a feather. She was flabbergasted and utterly speechless. She hoped it wasn't true, but the evidence strongly indicated otherwise.

"She's getting her 'needs filled' by someone else," Harry said sarcastically, with emphasis on the euphemistic phrase. A sneer was flitting at the corners of his mouth.
Before Hermione could find her tongue and speak, she felt something brush her legs under the table.

"Here, take my Invisibility Cloak. I need you to follow her. I'm ninety-nine percent sure there's someone else, but the one-percent in me is begging that it's something else. Anything but this."

She gathered the silky material into her lap, her fingers nervously clutching the cloak. "I... I... Harry," her mouth gaped, searching for words. "I don't--"

"Please, Hermione. Please. I'll go mad if I don't know. The idea of her with another man would torture me. I'm not sure what's worse, knowing or not knowing. Do this for me," he begged and the tears returned, threatening to fall.

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She didn't remember her walk back to the Ministry, but somehow Hermione found herself sitting at her desk. She still clutched Harry's Invisibility Cloak.

Finally coming to her senses, as it would not do for a Ministry official to come into her office with an Invisibility Cloak rumpled in her lap, she cleared out her bottom right drawer and deposited the cloak in it. She triple locked the drawer before donning her work robes and heading off to the lab.

Stepping into the room, she could tell from the malodorous scent that the latest shipment of Chupacabra bile had arrived from Mexico.

"Hello, Marge."

Hermione's lab partner, an elder witch whose indeterminate age was somewhere between a hundred and eighty and death, grunted in acknowledgment. It was considerably more than she did most days when the young witch greeted her.

'Why do I have to have a partner who's as sociable as Filch?' Hermione allowed herself a quick inner grumble before she began her task.

Sighing, she sat on her stool and measured out a small amount of the odious bile for testing. Hermione knew that there was a backlog of orders for this item, what with all the apothecaries around Britain; however, she wouldn't let this shipment clear through customs until she was sure that its quality met Ministry standards.
Hermione Weasley took her job at the Department of Standards & Regulations very seriously. It was a thankless job, but a vital one. Before the department was created over three hundred years ago, ingredients poured into the country with varying amounts of potency and consistency. Some ingredients weren't even what they claimed they were on the box!

Upon a rather unfortunate accident, involving the Minister’s wife, her cat, and a potion that was designed to correct the animal’s digestion distress (made with faulty ingredients), the Department of Standards and Regulations was founded.

Since then, the Department of S&R, as it was known within the Ministry, ensured that no other catastrophic incidents would occur with the import of potion ingredients. The department letterhead still carried the crest of the cat's exploded carcass to remind the employees of the seriousness of their task.

After the entire shipment of the Bezoars from Greece was finally tested, Hermione looked up at the clock on the wall. It read, 'Time to Go Home.' She was sure it was later than that, as both her and Marge had a habit of staying later than most Ministry employees.

Hermione shucked her work robes and put them in the hamper for the house elves to clean. The diurnal act of leaving her uniform for someone else to clean nightly always bothered some small part of her, but her mind was elsewhere that evening. Instead of focusing on the continuance of elf slavery after the war, another item in her long list of regrets, her thoughts were on the cloak in her bottom drawer and her conversation with Harry.

Tucking Harry's cloak under her robes, she exited her office and headed towards the elevator. Harry's words were continuing to replay themselves in her head when the elevator opened and she stepped inside.

"Main floor?" asked the elevator operator.

"Yes, please."

It killed her to say 'please' to him, but she figured that she should hold herself above reproach in her manners. The Muggle-born witch figured that if those pure-blood bigots ever rose up through the ranks of society or the Ministry ever again, they could never accuse her of being rude.
Antonin Dolohov closed the door, and the two figures stood silently as the elevator hummed and then came to a slightly jerky stop.

"Have a good evening."

She nodded in reply. Hermione wasn't sure if he had finally been broken with the humility of such a low-level job or that he was just becoming a better actor. Regardless, she always kept her wand at the ready, just in case. The first time she had come face-to-mask with him was in the Department of Mysteries and her impression of him had been firmly set from then on.

Walking through the main lobby, she glanced at the mass of canvas that hid the new fountain. It was going to be unveiled next week, on the fourth anniversary of Victory Day.

The answer to the questions of what the new sculpture would be was kept a big secret. Only a few top Ministry officials, and the artist who conceived and created it, knew what the fountain looked like.

A betting pool sprung up around the Ministry as to what it would be. Top odds were for a magical beast menagerie, with mostly dragons, unicorns and Phoenixes. The next pick was a sculpture of Dumbledore and other prominent wizards, odds running at four to one. The long shot, at a hundred to one, was a sculpture of Harry Potter vanquishing Voldemort.

Harry made it be known in the few interviews he gave after the final battle that he didn't want statues raised in his image to glorify him. He said during one of the few public speeches he ever gave, that people should look to themselves to find the hero within. Some people claimed to have never understood what he meant by it, but Hermione thought it was some of the most eloquent and humble words ever spoken.

Before she stepped into the cool summer evening, she spotted Jugson with his push broom. He had his wand out and was cleaning up the last of the cobwebs on the high ceilings of the Ministry atrium. As a custodian, it was one of the few spells he was allowed to perform with his wand. The young witch instinctively tightened the grip on her wand and kept it that way until she was well clear of the Ministry's front steps.

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Illuminated in the watery evening light, she could see Ron's pile of Quidditch robes as she lay in bed.
'If I have to pick up his clothes one more time...' Hermione contemplated how to finish the thought. She wasn't sure if she would scream, hex him or boycott the laundry again. Instead, she just began to cry silently.

It was just all too depressing at the moment. Ginny and Harry's marital problem, her less than promising job, her small flat, Ron's prospects. Where was the life she had dreamt of after the defeated Voldemort?

'Maybe life is just as mundane and anticlimactic for wizards and witches as it is for Muggles.'

As practical as she was, there were times she thought her life would be more satisfying when she "grew up." A job that commanded a bit more respect and challenged her mind. There were days she could feel her mind atrophy under the same mindless repetition of testing one box or jar of ingredients after another. Perhaps if the pay was better, it would compensate for the sheer boredom of it, but she knew money would not solve her sense of dissatisfaction.

It was an amalgamation of all the little things. And with the news of Ginny's possible infidelity, it all came to a head.

While wondering if "the old Crone was coming for a visit" soon (a common witch euphemism for menstruation) was the reason for her maudlin attitude, Hermione heard Ron come home from his night shift at The Listing Broom. She shut her eyes and pretended to be asleep. The nagging about his housekeeping habits could wait until morning.

After listening to him shed his clothes, she felt him settle into bed behind her. Right when she allowed herself to relax a little, Ron nudged up against her, his cock pressing up against her, where her thigh met her arse.

He was in the mood again. Hermione figured if she feigned arousal, he might be done with his business quickly.

She shifted her legs to allow him access, and he slipped inside of her from behind. Thankful that he at least lubed himself up before trying to penetrate her, she pretended to stir from her sleep.

Giving a fairly convincing drowsy groan of amorous delight, she arched her back to allow him deeper penetration. He took this as a cue to begin jack hammering his body against her.
Just as she could count on properly preserved Bubotuber Pus to turn the right shade of green when rapidly boiled for two minutes, she could predict Ron's orgasm by the rising pitch in his keening grunts. Hermione moaned a little louder to help push him over the edge.

Ron shuddered and deposited his sticky semen inside her.

Once he corked off, Hermione slipped from his sweaty embrace. How he could work up a sweat that easily she could never quite figure out.

She turned the shower on as hot as she could stand, washing away her husband's leavings before she began to stroke herself.

Though Ron seemed an adequate lover, she only had a sample of one in which to judge. She wondered if turning Viktor down for sex when she was fourteen was a bad idea after all. At least she would have a basis for comparison.

Remembering how Victor made her insides squirm, when he would whisper deliciously naughty and forbidden ideas into Hermione's ear, she felt a small orgasm ripple through her. It was enough to take off the perpetual edge of sexual frustration that constantly coursed through her body.

Perhaps if she had been a few years older, Hermione would have taken up Viktor's offer on many of those things that he had suggested in the dark and private corners of the castle they hid themselves away in a few hours at a time. Such simple and mild acts when compared to intercourse: A little petting, a hand slipped into her knickers, his mouth on her nipples.

It was too late to even explore those things. She was married now, and Viktor was an even bigger Quidditch star.

She sighed, remembering she just wasn't emotionally or mentally equipped to handle such sexual activities at the time. Hermione was not one to live in the state of buyer's remorse. She was married, so she would just have to make the most of it.

'All those trashy bodice ripper Ginny loves to read are full of crap. Heights of passion and blinding ecstasy, my arse,' she thought bitterly.

Hermione knew she had settled for a mundane life, as well as a mediocre sex life.
After toweling off, she slipped back into bed and looked at her husband.

‘At least he has a decent body,’ she thought; glad for some small concession fate had thrown her way.

Chapter 2: The Chupacabra ("goat sucker") is a mythical animal known for killing animals in places like Mexico and the very southern part of the U.S. Southwest (Texas and New Mexico).

In societies where artificial light has not disrupted the natural rhythm of the human body that has evolved over tens of thousands of years, most women ovulate during the full moon and menstruate during the new moon or waning phase. So, my reference to the waning of the moon relates to the "Crone" phase of the moon cycle and the onset of menses.

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B/N: Any misspellings in this chapter are mine. For those of you who eagerly awaited this chapter and find yourselves in a foaming frenzy, my apologies. Life has been increasingly busy, and therefore, a bigger pain in my lily-white ass than intended. Betz has been graciously patient with my timetable – Thanks much, doll!!!
Siren
"Sua Cuique Voluptas" (Everyone Has His Own Pleasures)

Chapter Summary

Hermione shares in a bit of theobromine therapy with Ginny while she tries to avoid thinking about her mundane sex life. Events unfold that sets wheels into motion in ways Hermione cannot currently comprehend.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Three
"Sua Cuique Voluptas" (Everyone Has His Own Pleasures)

****WARNING: Mild, consensual BDSM, very consensual.****

Disclaimer: Miss Jo (Rowling) owns everything. I own nothing in this story, except a really dirty imagination.

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Florean Fortescue's was the perfect idea for lunch. Hermione needed a healthy dose of chocolate to lift her spirits. Enough theobromine to put her into a state of catatonic bliss seemed to be the right dosage, if she could even eat that much without having to be turned on her side and rolled out the door afterwards.

Looking down into her lap, Hermione noticed she had shredded her fourth paper napkin out of sheer nervousness. Ginny was due to arrive any minute. The redheaded witch was observant and would immediately notice if her friend was jittery and distracted.

Hermione took one large cleansing breath, holding it before exhaling and regaining her composure.

Ginny flounced into the parlor, swinging a length of fringed and beaded silk charmeuse over her shoulder before sitting down in her seat across from Hermione.
"Drama Queen."

"Don't you know it," Ginny teased back.

Thankful Ginny's entrance gave her something to immediately comment about and ignore the tightness in her chest, Hermione asked, "So, what's new?"

She watched Ginny's reaction carefully while trying to remain nonchalant as ever.

There was a small twitch in the left corner of Ginny's mouth. Other than the small tic, Ginny's demeanor was exactly the same as it was every week when they met for lunch.

"Nothing much," she threw out. "Same old thing. Committee meetings, trying to talk Harry into taking some time off from work for a holiday, finishing the last of the renovations to that cursed house he refuses to sell, so on and so forth. The life of a bored housewife."

Hermione choked on Ginny's last sentence. Coughing, as her water had gone down the wrong windpipe, she hoped that didn't tip Ginny off in anyway.

"You all right, Hermione?"

"Yes (cough)... um... yes. Swallowed wrong," Hermione straightened her robes, which looked a bit shabby when compared to Ginny's.

"So, are you ready for the next family gathering?" Ginny asked with tightness and dread.

Closing her eyes, Hermione sighed and began to gently bang her head on the tabletop, which drew a few looks from nearby tables, but the two friends could care less.

Lifting her head, once her own dramatic display had conveyed her own feelings, Hermione replied, "No, but I supposed I'll have to go. Want to skive off?"

Ginny barked a short laugh, "We can go to the spa. Facials, a massage and a long soak in the
champagne springs. My treat!”

Both women looked at each other with a mischievous glint in their eyes. It was too tempting, but to feign illness to get out of one of the obligatory Weasley family gathering would only drive Molly Weasley to fret about. No doubt, it would result in a surprise visit from the matron with a fresh pot of chicken noodle soup and a newly knitted scarf with which to keep warm. And it would probably do just that, in the fireplace.

The twins attempted to skive off once, and it resulted in Molly dishing out heaping piles of hot guilt, slathered with shame and a generous side dish of hurt feelings. Both witches vividly remembered the sight of the plump, older witch beating both fists against her ample bosom in a fashion that would have made Sarah Bernhardt proud while chanting, "Oh, how sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child.”

Both sighed in resignation of their doomed fate. Another lovely afternoon ruined with screaming children, squabbles between Ginny's brothers, and the other Weasley women comparing which brand of diapers absorb more while whipping out blue-veined milk engorged breasts to feed their latest spawn. And let's not forget the hen pecking from the grand dame, beating her dead horse about when they would get down to business and start making babies.

"Too bad the whole Ministry is shut down for Victory Day," Hermione said glumly. "At least I'd have the excuse of work to bow out."

"And what, leave me to the vultures? You know how it is. Harry and Ron see each other and then abandon us for the rest of the day while they go play Quidditch, then the thinly veiled innuendos from Fleur, Angelina, Penelope, Florence, and Grace about how you can tell how a man is in bed by the way he plays Quidditch. Good God, they way they compare their husband to the rest of them... it's nauseating, especially since they're my brothers. And if I have to hear about how quick Harry is to catch the snitch one more time, I'll scream."

That comment brought Hermione's mind back to Harry's conversation with her the day before. Was Harry as quick in bed as he was on the pitch? It certainly made her think of how Ron's style did match his bedroom prowess. Basically, a bit clumsy at first, little confidence unless encouraged and then looking for a way to finish the game as quick as possible. If Harry was quick in bed, could this have been a driving force for Ginny to seek satisfaction from another source?

Hermione didn’t even want to delve into those thoughts, as that would lead her down the road of her own unfulfilled sexual needs.
"Let's change the subject to something pleasant. I don't want to go back to work depressed," the brunette witch pleaded as she eyed the Sybaritic Mountainous Matterhorn Sundae on the menu. "*Enough chocolate to raise the spirits of the dead!*" read the description. It also came with a legal disclaimer that Florean Fortescue's was not responsible for broken zippers, popped buttons or ripped seams from overindulgence, regardless of one's depressed state.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

After ruining a second test batch of shrinking violets, Hermione realized that she needed to go back to her office and think in private. Sitting at her desk, while pretending to read the latest *Journal of Potions Quarterly*, she replayed portions of her lunch with Ginny in her head.

The "Quidditch equals the bedroom" comment belied nothing beyond Ginny's disgust for her sister-in-laws' salacious remarks. Hermione had thought about offering to take Thursday afternoon off from work to go shopping with her, but that would only raise Ginny's suspicions much like Harry's questions about the Preservation Society. She was no more likely to skip work than cheat on a test. Neither of them wanted to bring up the subject of children, and Hermione had already heard Ginny's many reasons to wait before. No, there was nothing during their lunch that would indicate Ginny was hiding something. Not that Hermione would be able to tell anyway.

Though Ron was a terrible liar, almost as bad as Hermione, most of the other Weasleys had a natural knack for deception. The twins could lie with the ease that should have made them natural candidates for Slytherin. There were times Hermione wondered if lying well was a prerequisite for being sorted into Slytherin, or did they provide special classes to the first years down in their common room.

Ginny was also very good at hiding her emotions, a skill developed after her episode in the Chamber of Secrets. She had confided to Hermione many years later that no one in the family wanted to talk about what happened between her and Tom Riddle. So to perpetuate her mother's desire to maintain the façade of normalcy, Ginny had to work through all her emotional scars by herself. Upon this news, Hermione had offered her services as confidant and confessor without judgment.

Ginny had taken up the older witch's offer on more than one occasion and Hermione listened with cool detachment, for fear that tears would hinder the passive therapy she could provide. Ginny had done a formidable job of fixing her own soul, but there were still some tattered corners that needed mending.

Placing the journal back on her desk, Hermione headed off to the lab. The shrinking violets would not test themselves. She hoped that Ginny would not pass by the corner of Diagon Alley and Le Soleil Levant Mews at one o'clock, as Harry had described.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The next day at twelve thirty, Hermione mentioned to Marge as she was leaving for lunch that she
had some errands to run, and would probably be out the rest of the afternoon. The aged witch raised her left hand in recognition of hearing her co-worker, her bent, white, wiry-haired head never moving from the cauldron set in front of her while her right hand continued to stir in slow methodical movements.

A quick swing by her office for Harry's cloak, and she was on her way. Fortunately, Diagon Alley was just a brisk five-minute walk from the Ministry building.

Once through The Leaky Cauldron, she stepped into the antechamber to Diagon Alley, and donned the cloak with only the worn bricks as witness to her disappearance.

Hermione glided between lunchtime patrons and house-witches shopping with their gaggles of children in tow. After finding a suitable spot in which to watch for Ginny without being walked into by someone passing by, she surveyed her environs. It certainly wasn't the most fashionable region of Diagon Alley, but it wasn't as unsavory as Knockturn Alley.

A few minutes past one, Ginny swept past her and stopped at the corner. Hermione recognized the cloak, as she helped Harry pick it out earlier that year. If it weren't for that fact, she would have missed Ginny as her hood covered her hair and face.

Hermione watched as Mrs. Potter stopped and performed a locating spell, just as Harry had described. No doubt she was checking to see if her husband was following her again. Once convinced he was nowhere in the vicinity, she stalked forward down the narrow alley.

Leaving a discreet distance between them, Hermione followed her sister-in-law and saw her duck into a nondescript building with no markings, except for a wooden sign over the door with a depiction of red ginseng root. Hermione slipped inside, thankful there was no front door to betray her presence. She watched Ginny ascend the stone steps to the third floor. Many years of practice evading Filch helped Hermione climb the stairs without making a sound. She watched from the landing as Ginny knocked on a green door with chipped and peeling paint before opening it.

"Hello? Anyone there?" Ginny called out to a seemingly unoccupied flat.

Before Hermione knew it, the door slammed shut and Ginny let out a short shrill scream.

The former Dumbledore's Army member bolted for the door, fumbling in her pocket for the extendable eyes Harry had leant her with his cloak. Knowing it was better to assess the situation
before stumbling into a room full of dark wizards, she placed the thin thread into the keyhole and peered into the eyepiece.

What Hermione saw, stunned her. Ginny was stood manacled, naked in spread-eagle fashion, while a figure in a black hooded cloak circled her, his features hidden in shadow.

Pulling out her wand, Hermione took a deep breath and began to count to three before bursting through the door to save Ginny; however, before she could reach three, the bound witch spoke in a mildly annoyed voice.

"Could you loosen these a bit? They're a tad tight."

"I'm sorry, pet," replied the hooded figure. "I just got a bit enthusiastic over your visit."

Hermione's mouth hung open in disbelief as she continued to watch the spectacle playing out on the other side of the door. The Extendable Eyes gave her a full view of the room, from the expansive bed and simple armoire to a few doors that must have led to a bathroom and a kitchen.

"Now, where were we? Ah, yes," hissed the wizard menacingly. "What have we here? An Auror sticking her little nose where it doesn't belong?"

Something familiar in the voice struck Hermione, but she couldn't place it.

"You'll never get me to talk!" Ginny shouted defiantly while struggling against her chains, her breasts swaying with each movement. Her loose coppery hair fell forward, the ends brushing against the tops of her breasts.

If this is what Harry meant by Ginny asking him to do certain things in the bedroom, Hermione understood why he had refused. Yet, despite the lurid scene of Ginny's fetish being played out before her, she couldn't stop watching.

"Oh, but I don't want you to talk. I want you to scream." The man approached her with his wand drawn. Instead of casting a curse, he dragged the length of wood along her body, flicking the tip of it across both her nipples.
Ginny let out a gasp of surprise and pleasure. Writhing against her bonds, the chains clinked and jingled, which only made the unknown figure chuckle with delight as he watched her.

"Don't deny it. You liked that," he coolly purred.

"No!"

Hermione could see his hand slip between Ginny's legs and a single finger stroked along her folds. He brought his hand up to his face, still hidden within his hood. She heard him lick his finger.

"Ah, the nectar of Dionysus. Your body betrays you. You can't help it." His finger went back to stroking her slick flesh hidden under her red curls.

Ginny writhed as his hand stroked her some more, her hand gripping the chain above the manacles. Her face grimaced and Hermione wasn't sure if it was from pleasure or a desire to be released. The prisoner whimpered, closing her eyes while allowing a brief smile to spread across her face.

The man walked behind Ginny and surveyed her backside. "Such a nicely wrapped present the Order has sent me. Shall I open it now or wait till Christmas?" His hand began stroking her arse in slow circular movements with one hand while dragging the tips of his fingers of his other hand along her spine making her involuntarily shudder.

Growling, she struggled against her bonds once more.

The figure slowly shook his head as he walked back in front of her. Tipping her chin up to look at him within the hood, he growled, "Tell me, little Auror, are you prepared to give me what I want? Or shall I extract it from you?"

The man in black dropped to his knees in front of Ginny and dipped his head so that his face was buried in her sex, his hood still in place. From the look of exquisite pleasure on Ginny's face, Hermione could tell he was licking her as his fingers spread her lips apart for better access.

After several moments of Ginny moaning and spreading her legs as far as she could under her current imprisonment, the man sat back on his heels.
"Tell me what you know and I'll let you off easy. Refuse, and I promise a death filled with exquisite agony. You'll be begging me for release from the torture."

Hermione could easily read into the double entendre of his statements. Though spoken with malice, under these circumstances, he promised Ginny a sexual adventure.

"Torture me if you must," Ginny spat at him, "but you'll never make me betray the Order."

A deep cackle rose from his throat, filling the room with the sound. "Oh, but you leave me little choice."

He rose and he sauntered behind Ginny, his strides confident and graceful while his booted feet softly thumped on the wooden floor. Standing behind her, he parted his robes and opened the fly of his trousers.

Hermione could not see him pull out his cock, as part of his body of hidden behind Ginny, but she could tell when he finally entered his chained 'victim.'

Ginny let out a gasp, then moaned, "No."

"Yes, tell me," he demanded as he began to move in and out of her.

"No," she whimpered, her face twisted in glorious agony as he quickened his pace.

"Yes!" he grunted, his hands grabbing her hips tightly. Hermione wondered if there would be bruises, and if so, how would she hide them from Harry.

"No," she answered with less conviction.

"Yes!" he hissed as he reached around her hip and began stroking her clit.

Ginny responded by arching her back even more as he tucked his hips under to plow into her deeper.
"Yes!" she cried, "Yes, anything you want. I'll tell you everything."

He fucked her harder as his hands slid up her body and grabbed both nipples. He pulled them taut, away from her body. Ginny responded by wailing louder and bucking against him. The slap of skin against skin that echoed through the room was in syncopation to their labored pants.

Hermione was horrified when she realized her own bizarre, voyeuristic participation in this. Her own breath was coming fast and shallow and she noticed that her knickers were already sopping wet. Her insides were squirming like they used to when Viktor would whisper those forbidden ideas to her. She could not recall being this turned on in years, and it shamed her to think that she could react in such a way while watching Ginny cheat on Harry.

Ginny let out a piercing scream and shook as she came. The man continued to ride her, but at a slower pace, his hand sliding back down to her clit to prolong her orgasm.

Once Ginny's orgasm waned, she slumped against her bonds while keeping her back arched. The fine hairs around her face were plastered to her skin. Slow moans escaped her mouth in rhythm to the sensation of his cock sliding in and out of her at a languid pace.

"Mercy," Ginny pleaded.

"But I'm just getting started," he replied in a slightly sinister tone.

"No seriously, my wrists are starting to chafe."

He stopped and pulled out of her. His cock, glistening with her juices, sprang free. As he walked around to face Ginny, his rigid member bobbing around, Hermione saw how big he was. He certainly put Ron to shame.

Ron contradicted the old wives tale about shoe size corresponding to one's endowments. When she and Ron finally got around to having sex after graduation, she was pleased he was not big for fear that it would hurt the first time, but soon she found that his size rarely satisfied her baser instinct to be filled and stretched. Hermione wondered how it would feel to have something that large and wide inside of her, but banished the thought quickly, ashamed at entertaining such an idea, even briefly.
Once she was released from her restraints, the hooded and cloaked man picked Ginny up and gently set her on the bed.

"Do you want me to heal those now?" he tenderly asked, as her hands disappeared into the folds of his hood. Hermione could tell from his movements that he was kissing her bruised wrists.

"No, later. I still need you inside of me," she replied.

Leaning back onto the bed, she held out her arms beckoning him to join with her again.

Standing up, he began to undress. First his boots came off followed by a pair of black pants and black shirt, while keeping his concealing cloak and hood on the whole time. Clothed in nothing but the sweeping garment, he moved back towards Ginny.

"No. Take the cloak off. No more fantasies, no more games, just you," she said.

He dropped his hood, and Hermione clamped her hand over her mouth to keep from gasping out loud. For a split second, she thought it was Lucius Malfoy, but she remembered watching him receive the Dementor’s Kiss. It was Draco. That platinum blond hair that reached the top of his shoulders, and his profile were unmistakable.

The cloak fell to the floor giving Hermione a full view of his body. She blushed furiously.

Malfoy’s had filled out, his manly body made Ron look as though he was still in adolescence. Draco had sinuously long and lean muscles, over a tall frame, his back flaring gently like a fan to his shoulders; his bottom had a hollow from the muscle of his hips. The shape of his back from his shoulder to his arse was like a French curve and he moved with an elegant grace. Hermione was transfixed.

Draco climbed onto the bed, and Hermione turned away from the door. She quietly slumped to the ground, her back to the wall.

She could hear murmurs of mutual pleasure through the walls before the sound cut out.
'Ginny must have finally remembered to put up a silencing charm.'

Hermione's head spun. She'd vaguely wondered where Draco had disappeared to from time to time. The answer was clear; he never left.

When Voldemort was finally killed almost four years prior, Draco was a member of the Order. Harry, Ron and Hermione had all been suspect of his allegiance to Dumbledore, especially since he’d joined shortly after receiving the Dark Mark, but Professor Snape and the Headmaster had vouched for him, stating, "He has seen the error of his ways." The three of them never trusted him, and Malfoy treated them with the same disdain as before.

Between the younger Malfoy and Snape, enough information was gleaned to plan a final attack that resulted in a swift and decisive victory.

It was while Hermione and Ron were on their honeymoon that Fudge decided to implement a new plan regarding all Death Eaters. Hermione only learned about it the day she returned from Italy with Ron.

Fudge decided the best way to reform the former followers of You-Know-Who was to offer them the option of a Dementor's Kiss or a job appointment through the Ministry. Many of those jobs were so low on the social and pay ladder that many had decided to give up their soul to the insidious ethereal beings. It was as close to suicide as was possible in the wizarding world. There were a few who took neither option. Hermione would see them hanging out near Knockturn Alley begging for food, living in alcoves. Those who did live 'al fresco,' as Ron called it, had pawned off their wand for a few bottles of Firewhisky or a hallucinogenic potion that would disguise the reality of their fate for a few months.

Though Hermione did not mourn the absence of Malfoy, she did frequently wonder where his mentor went. She had secretly hoped that all those years as a spy had helped Snape in slipping out of the country. Perhaps if Malfoy didn’t escape, then maybe Snape didn’t either.

Hermione sat there, contemplating the whole situation for well over an hour, before she heard the door click open.

Ginny stepped halfway into the hallway and spun to look at Draco, who was standing in the doorway. She looked impeccably clean, with not a hair out of place, as if the afternoon's activities never took place. Malfoy stared at Ginny with a look Hermione could only place as troubled
longing. His silvery gray dressing robe was tied loosely at the waist, while his fine platinum blond hair fell across his face covering one eye.

"I'll owl you when we can meet next," Ginny whispered to Draco, as she tucked the errant hair behind one ear. "I just wish--"

"Shhhh. I know," he whispered back, one finger gently placed on her lips.

Hermione felt as if she was invading a private conversation between two lovers. In a sense she was. But she promised Harry she would find out if Ginny was cheating on him or not.

Ginny tipped her head up and Draco kissed her gently one last time, his hand cupping her cheek.

The door closed shut and Ginny heaved a soft sigh before walking away and down the steps.

Hermione waited until Ginny was down one flight before rising, feeling her knees protests after sitting still for so long in a not-too-comfortable location. After a few hobbled steps, the ease of her joints returned, and she swiftly descended the stairs to catch up with Ginny.

She saw the adulteress walking at a leisurely pace, lost in thought. Hermione moved quickly to catch up with her. Still concealed under Harry's invisibility cloak, she grabbed Ginny's arm and spun her around.

The look of utter horror and shock on Ginny's face, and the cowering of her body made Hermione pause for a moment. With her free hand, Hermione pushed back the hood and revealed her face. Ginny let out an audible sigh of relief before the look of panic returned.

"Please don't tell Harry, oh sweet Circe, please! I'll tell you everything, just don't tell Harry," she begged, her body shrinking as if she would at any moment get on her knees in the middle of the street and ruin her robes without a second thought.

Noticing her head was still floating in the middle of the air, Hermione pushed her hood back up while still keeping one hand on Ginny's arm.
"I'll give you thirty seconds to Apparate at my flat, or I'm going to tell him everything I saw and heard," she replied with steely harshness.

Ginny blushed when she realized the whole of her statement and meekly nodded before disappearing with a pop.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 3 A/N: Le Soleil Levant means "the rising sun." And those who are familiar with the song "House of the Rising Sun" by The Animals know it's about a house of ill repute in New Orleans, based on a real brothel.

Red Ginseng is a root noted in eastern medicine as a sexual performance enhancer.

King Lear, Act I: "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child."

As a side note, I am all for breastfeeding. I am merely trying to portray Hermione's current aversion to having kids and all that it entails. Also, I love kids, but if someone chooses not to have them, that's fine. It's their choice as to whether they want to invest twenty (or more) years into raising a child.
Chapter Summary

Ginny confesses everything to Hermione.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Four
"Mea Culpa, Mea Culpa, Mea Maxima Culpa" (My Sin, My Sin, My Most Grievous Sin)

Disclaimer: Miss Jo (Rowling) owns everything. Right down to the knickers and teacups. I just make them dance their little dance.

Hermione Apparated home immediately, and found the younger witch frantically pacing in her tiny parlor. Ginny was already in tears and shaking.

"Please don’t tell Harry. I'll tell you anything you want to know, just--"

Hermione held out a hand to stop Ginny's urgent pleading; a disapproving scowl accentuated the look of disgust in her eyes.

"How could you… shag… that… how could you fuck Malfoy?!?" she screamed in disbelief. "Of all the people! And you're married, Ginny! How could you do this to Harry?"

Ginny sank onto the couch, placing her face in her hands and began to sob hysterically. She lifted her face up to Hermione and her slack mouth hung open as the sobs continued, her shoulders caving in towards her chest and her back hunched over. Hermione almost pitied her… almost.

Feeling that there was something vaguely familiar about the situation, she remembered Harry's
emotional fragility a few days prior.

Hermione spoke the same words with less sympathy.

"Tell me what you know. Start at the beginning."

It took a few moments for Ginny to compose herself enough to speak. Her breath hitched several times before she could calm herself enough to begin.

"It started during the war."

"You mean you've been banging him for four years?!?"

"No! No." She took a deep breath before continuing, her breath hitching one more time. Her eyes glazed over as she started to recall all the events that led up to this moment.

"Right after Draco came over to our side I found him sitting on the back step at headquarters. He was charming some leaves and binding them together, making them fly like a butterfly. I commented on how lovely they were and we just started to talk. You and Harry and Ron were so convinced he was a spy and treated him like shit—"

"Wait a minute! He called me a mudblood—"

"After you lot took one look at him when Snape first brought him over to Twelve Grimmauld and started calling him names and accusing him of being a spy. I remember. I saw and heard it all, I was there! All he wanted was a second chance and you three wouldn't give him one."

Hermione looked away and scowled. She wasn't too proud of her behavior that day and later realized she was wrong, but the thought of having to apologize to Draco Malfoy was a bitter pill that was too big for her to swallow at the time.

"All right. I admit I wasn't… polite."
Ginny snorted at her choice of words.

"Go on," Hermione commanded.

"Well, he was feeling like it was all for nothing when I complimented him on his 'butterflies.' He actually smiled, well it was kind of like a half-hearted smirk, but something in his eyes told he appreciated that little gesture. Next thing you know, it's dark and we spent the past three hours just talking."

"Talking? Talking about what?" Hermione couldn't think there was anything Malfoy and Ginny could talk about, much less for three hours.

"Well, first it was favorite charms, then moved onto Astronomy which wound up turning into a comparison of Greek gods to Roman gods, which then turned into a discussion of charms and spells of Greek origin versus Latin and the types of magic those civilizations favored."

That sounded like the sort of discussion Hermione would love to have with anyone. She hadn't had an engaging conversation like that in ages.

"Next thing I know, it's dark and Mum is calling us all in for dinner. He looked at me with something like gratitude and said, 'Thank you.' I think he was just glad there was someone who was willing to believe that he finally realized he made a mistake in swallowing all the codswallop his father fed him over the years."

Ginny sighed and smiled a little. Hermione allowed her a brief moment to gather wool.

"The next week when I saw him, it was after a meeting. I offered to make him a cup of tea, but he said that he wanted some lunch instead. So, we went into the kitchen and I started to make lunch and he insisted I sit down. He said he would make lunch for the both of us."

Hermione's mouth dropped in stunned disbelief. "You mean Mr. 'This-is-servant's-work' deigned to dirty his precious hands to–"

"This is exactly the kind of attitude that made him call you that awful name."
Hermione went back to silently grumbling as Ginny continued.

"So he made us lunch and we talked for a while. He asked what N.E.W.T. level classes I was taking and offered some tips. Just as we were finishing up, his Dark Mark started to burn. Snape came in and said it was time to go. I told him to be careful and he just smiled at me."

The tears returned and Ginny's breath began to hitch. "I don't think he ever had anyone really care about his well being, not like that anyway. The stories he's told me about his father and mother would just horrify you. It's like they only cared that he would marry some pure-blood witch and carry on the Malfoy line. They never really cared for him as a person. They gave him things he asked for, but never bothered to love him."

Ginny obviously had feelings for him, but Hermione could feel little pity for a boy that made her life hell for so many years. It could be that he'd changed, but she didn't want to contemplate it at the moment.

"After that day, I didn't see him again for quite a while. School started and he would occasionally write me a letter and at Christmas he sent me a nice box of scented soaps. He told me never to write him as it was too dangerous, but on a few occasions I wrote a letter and gave it to Snape to pass on. I wrote in the letters that it was okay for him to burn them if he needed to."

Hermione continued to watch Ginny's face as she recounted her tale.

"I didn't see him again until after Victory Day. He and Snape were still undercover, as they were trying to flush out the last of the Death Eaters."

Hermione nodded, remembering it all and encouraging her to continue.

"We would meet up in the attic at Twelve Grimmauld and have a picnic lunch there on the floor, and a couple of times we met in Muggle London as well, so we could meet out in public without some witch or wizard recognizing us. One day, a few weeks before your wedding, we went to a moo-vee."

Hermione giggled briefly. She always thought the way the Weasleys pronounced Muggle inventions was so amusing.
"We sat there in the dark in the back and he kissed my hand. It was like an electric shock ran straight up my arm. I looked at him and I kissed him," Ginny smiled broadly, her face still red and splotchy from crying. "We didn't watch the rest of the movie cause I couldn't stop kissing him. It was the most wonderful kiss in the world. No one has ever kissed me like that and it never felt so good. Michael Corner, Dean, Seamus… even Harry. It never felt so good to be kissed. I was dizzy and excited, and I thought my heart was going to leap out of my chest."

The look of sorrow returned to Ginny's face. "So afterwards, we tried to think of a good time to tell my family that we were seeing each other. I thought right after the wedding while you and Ron were away would be the perfect time. Ron couldn't kill him if Ron wasn't here. Besides, they just finished capturing the last of the Death Eaters and they were finally going to announce Snape and Draco as war heroes. The risk of some Death Eater bent of vengeance was gone. Then the day after the wedding Fudge comes out with that... that," Ginny became flustered and angry, "STUPID, BLOODY LAW! 'All Death Eaters must abide by these rules.' All the work that Draco and Snape did... gone. Out the fucking window! This new decree that Fudge presented essentially said it didn't matter that Snape and Draco spied and risked their lives and help bring an end to the war. 'Any witch or wizard bearing the Dark Mark shall be under parole of the Ministry for the rest of their life.' And you know who drafted this law?"

Hermione shook her head. She had read bits of the law, as were published in the Daily Prophet, but she had not gotten around to reading the fine print.

"Moody!"

Understanding began to dawn on Hermione's face.

"That's right, that fucking loon! Never trusted Snape and trusted Draco even less. He wanted to make sure that they would not be seen as heroes… EVER! The law could have said 'convicted Death Eaters,' but no. Moody drafted it so that he could have the last word on his 'constant vigilance' campaign."

Ginny rose and began to pace the floor once more. This time her fiery hair matched her famous Weasley temper.

"So, the day after the wedding, this law comes out. Draco is gone. I don't know where to find him. Snape is gone too. I asked Mum and Dad where they went. They don't know. I asked Dad to fight this so Snape and Draco are exonerated. It turns out Fudge threatened Dad; if he so much as made a peep about Snape and Draco, they would fire him from the Ministry, and have it printed in the Daily Prophet he was a Death Eater sympathizer. I went to Shacklebolt and even Luna, now that she's an editor at The Quibbler. Fudge has it sewn up so tight that they'll never get out from under this law! The only two people who could vouch for Draco and Snape that Fudge could not publicly
condemn as Death Eater sympathizers would be Dumbledore and Harry. Dumbledore's dead. And if they were selling tickets to see Draco and Snape thrown down a pit that led straight to Hades, Ron, Harry and Moody would pay through the nose for front row seats."

Hermione watched Ginny and wondered if she was going to wear a hole in the floor. "So? Why doesn’t Draco just leave?"

"He can't. Boy, you haven't read the law, have you? 'No Death Eater shall ever be allowed to leave Great Britain.' Fudge put that little clause in himself. Seems if the Death Eaters are still around doing demeaning jobs; that will help ensure he gets reelected. 'Look, the Death Eaters have all been put in their place.' With them walking around, sweeping Diagon Alley, or being a conductor on the Knight Bus, he makes sure people see how he's beaten them, and that they are under control."

"Don't tell me you sympathize with them?" Hermione asked, disgusted with the idea of Ginny could even feeling pity for them.

"Merlin's teeth, NO! I wish they would all just get the Dementor's Kiss and go away. It's just an injustice that this law be applied to Draco."

Hermione wondered if she knew what happened to Snape, but thought it could wait until later. Shaking her head, as they were heading off on a tangent, she brought the conversation back to Ginny's infidelity. So far, Ginny's answer didn’t satisfy her.

"So what has this got to do with you shagging Malfoy?"

"After the wedding, Draco disappeared. Harry, all of a sudden, has an interest in dating me. I asked him why he didn't bother with me before and he says he didn't think he'd live long enough to get around to dating. I really didn’t want to go out with him; all I could think of was Draco. But as the weeks went on, I gave up hope of seeing Draco. No owl, no word nothing. So I eventually agree to go out with Harry and by Christmas he proposed."

"Don’t you love Harry?" Hermione asked, hoping her answer would be yes.

Ginny sat back down and gave a great troubled sigh. "Yes," she began reluctantly, "I love him, but I'm not in love with him."
The whole thought seemed to contradict itself. "What do you mean? What's the difference?"

Ginny looked at her sagely, and Hermione saw a woman who looked far wiser than she was, as if she knew the secret that held the fabric of the universe together. She felt as if she was not privy to that information, but somehow the younger witch had discovered it.

"If you don’t know, I'm not sure I could explain it."

"Try," she replied, angry at Ginny, but for some reason she couldn't explain.

"It's when you care for someone more than yourself... but more. When someone you love hurts, you empathize with them and can feel upset or hurt or angry. But when you're in love with someone and they hurt, you feel like you've been hurt yourself. Family and friends be damned, they are the most important person in the world and you'd give up everything for them."

She was scared to ask, but she had to. "Are you in love with Draco?"

Ginny began crying again, her shoulders shaking and she slumped further into the couch. "Do you want to know why I don't want to have kids now? Do you know why I'm putting it off?"

Hermione shook her head, knowing now that Ginny's excuses before were just that.

"It's not that I don’t want kids, it's just I don’t want them with Harry."

Hermione felt the wind knocked out of her with that statement. It unsettled her to her core.

Ginny continued, "When a witch and wizard marries, the bond is only permanently sealed with the birth of their first child. Until they produce a child, they can still divorce. Once a child has been born, they are magically bound to one another... forever. If I put off kids, I still have a chance to... get out of this marriage!"

This was one big fact that she was not aware of, nor had anyone bothered to enlighten her on the matter. What was worse was learning of Ginny's desire to leave Harry eventually.
"So what? You're going to leave Harry and marry Draco?"

Shaking her head, Ginny wailed, "I don't know, I don't know. I keep hoping that each time I see Draco, it will be the last, and then I'm with him and I don't want it to end. Then I see Harry and he's so nice, but he doesn't make me feel the way Draco does."

Remembering Ginny chained and bound, Hermione retorted bitterly, "Harry did say you were probably getting your needs filled somewhere else. And no wonder! I saw what he did to you." Ginny looked mortified. "No wonder Harry said there were certain things you asked that he wouldn't do!"

Ginny's back shot up straight and she glared at Hermione. "Do you even bleeding know what I asked Harry to do? Do you know what he wouldn’t do for me? Did he say exactly what he wasn't into?"

Hermione shook her head wondering if she even wanted to know.

"I asked him to spank me."

Hermione's mouth fell open.

"Yes, that's right, spank me. He said I was sick and that he could never hit a woman. I told him it's not hitting; it's a little fantasy. So I asked if he could blindfold me and I was met with the same look of disgust. Harry likes his sex plain. Plain and boring! Different positions and that's it, dearie. You should have seen the look of horror on his face when I suggested bringing a sex toy to bed."

Hermione didn’t know whether to laugh at the whole situation of Harry's penchant for unimaginative sex, or feel pity for the woman across from her whose sex life was more boring than hers.

"So you're having an affair with Draco."

"No, I pay for Draco's services."
Hermione's mind was close to bursting from all she had seen and heard today, but this just about made her mind split open like a ripe melon.

"**WHAT?** You **PAY** for him to… to… to... I can’t even say what he did to you," she spat.

"Fuck me like there's no tomorrow. Cause if Harry finds out, Draco’s date with a Dementor is as good as certain."

"Harry would never do that."

"You want to bet? Harry hates Draco, and what would make him go off the deep end more than finding out his wife is screwing his last living enemy. Harry's word is a good as gold. Harry could cast the Killing Curse and no one would say a thing about it. He's the golden boy who saved the world. One false word to the Ministry and Draco is off to rot as an empty husk in Azkaban!"

"But pay? You pay Malfoy?" Hermione shook her head. It just seemed so sleazy.

"Not him. Another wonderful little clause in that insipid law. Only pay through the Ministry is allowed. Seems that only if you work through a Ministry sanctioned job can you earn any money. All of the Malfoy fortune in Gringotts, *on British soil*, was confiscated. Fortunately, Draco's father, the syphilitic lunatic that he was, had the good sense to have over half the family fortune deposited in other Gringotts around the world. Switzerland, Cayman Islands, Singapore and a few other places. But if a single coin passes into Draco's hand that is not through an official Ministry job, he gets a kiss."

"So if you pay him."

"I don't pay him, I pay Lavender."

"Wait, what?"

"Draco could never do any of those jobs the Ministry said would be 'acceptable.' That damn Malfoy pride. I told him I didn’t care if he scrubbed toilets at the Leaky Cauldron, but he said he'd rather go the route of his father had taken than do that. So there are some jobs the Ministry turns a
blind eye to." Ginny began counting them off on her fingers. "Prostitution. Trash picking. Begging. They seem to deem those jobs so socially disenfranchising, they are willing to let those activities slide by unnoticed. I offered to pay so he wouldn’t fuck other women and he said he could never be a 'kept man.' I told him the contradiction of his statement, as he’s being paid to do what he does, but he says there's a difference. That damn Malfoy pride again."

"So Draco is a… a…" Hermione was finding word difficult to come by that day. "A gigolo?"

Ginny nodded, her face a mixture of pity, disgust, sorrow and anger. "When I found out, I'm glad I put up a Silencing Charm, because I don’t think I ever yelled so much. But after I calmed down and we talked, I realized it was, short of a Dementor's Kiss, one of the few things he could do."

Hermione could not fathom a choice between prostitution and living the rest of her life in a catatonic state. To her, there always seemed to be another way.

"So, when did you find Malfoy?"

"About Christmas time, a year and a half ago, I was feeling depressed, as another family gathering was on the horizon. I begged Harry, asked him if we could go away for Christmas. Anywhere! But he said he had work and couldn’t take the time off. I swear! We haven’t had a single holiday since we got married. He won’t take time out of work for a simple fucking holiday. Work comes first, then I come a distant second."

Hermione could relate to that fact. Where as Harry would not give up working, her and Ron could not afford a holiday. The only reason they had a two-week honeymoon in Italy was because Harry paid for the holiday as a wedding present.

"Anyway, I'm sitting in a tea shop trying not to cry into my cup of Christmas tea, and who happens to sit herself in the empty chair across from me? None other than Lavender Brown. She looks at me and says, 'Man trouble?' I don’t know how she did it, but she had me spilling everything to her. I mean stuff I couldn’t even tell you till today. Well, everything except giving her Draco's name and his former occupation as Death Eater spy. She just has this way about her that she didn’t have before."

Ginny nodded in answer to Hermione's question.

Upon graduation, Lavender Brown had launched her own company, with seed money from the Weasley twins as silent partners. It was an instant success, and the twins pocketed a nice return on their investment. Apothecaries throughout Britain and the Continent stocked her goods. They were top quality at reasonable prices. Part of the reason was that she hired freed house-elves, from Death Eater families, for the manufacturing process, thus ensuring product quality and consistency. Lavender's knack for Potions, where beauty was concerned, served her well. Her line of soap was the finest available, and there wasn't a wizarding household in most of Europe that didn't have at least one of her products.

"But she's such a gossip. Do think that was wise telling her all those things?" Hermione wondered if Ginny had lost her mind and wanted all her dirty laundry circulated in certain social circles.

"She's changed. She is discreet. And with her business on the side, it pays to be so."

"So what you're saying is Lavender is a Madam? I mean, runs a brothel?"

Ginny gave a sardonic chuckle. "In so many words, yes."

"And you pay Draco to bonk you and do things to you Harry won't do?"

"Well, let me finish my story." Ginny took a deep breath before finishing her tale. "So, she says that she 'knows' a nice gentlemen who can help me out. And I couldn't believe I was entertaining the idea of hiring some random man to spank me, but the next thing I know, I've paid Lavender a fee and I'm at Draco's door not even knowing he's the one she set me up with!"

"I think she has some sick sort of desire to see people squirm," she said morosely. "She knocks on the door and Draco opens it. He looks at me, I look at him and we can’t speak. She then says in an all too innocent voice, 'Oh, do you two know each other? How interesting.'"

"I swear, if Draco wasn't on parole, he would have hexed her four ways to Sunday. He was close to strangling her with his bare hands. But we were so glad to see each other. It was like he never went away. That first visit all we did was talk... well, I screamed at him quite a bit and he screamed back, but we talked and I cried. I've gotten over the fact he sleeps with other women, and some women don't even sleep with him. They just want someone to talk to."
"Talk?" Hermione was dubious.

Ginny laughed and nodded, "Yeah, can you imagine that? That's what Draco and I did the first four months we met. I paid Lavender to meet him and we talked, and kissed, and talked some more and kissed some more."

"Talk. You paid to talk to him?"

"Harry doesn’t talk to me anymore. We've run out of things to say. It's not like we had much to talk about when we were dating anyway. Besides, you wouldn’t believe the number of women Draco gets who just want someone who'll listen to them. Their husbands tune them out and they have no one to talk to about anything other than how the children are doing, bills being paid, boring stuff that drives some women mad or make them bitter at an early age."

Hermione felt like she would go mad at times being married to Ron. It seemed since the defeat of Voldemort, and after the wedding, they had run out of things to say to one another as well. She had no interest in Quidditch and he had no interest in anything academic.

"There are some who just want a man to have sex with, someone who can make them feel sexy and special once in a great while. It's just sex. I'm the only one he kisses. It's just too intimate an act for someone in that line of work to do. He's had offers for him to kiss other women, but he declines."

"So, when did you guys start..." Hermione made a vague hand gesture to imply what she could not say. She really was having a very hard time with words that day.

"It was about a year ago. I couldn’t stand it anymore. Harry's lack of creativity in the bedroom; you know he called me a nutter once – to my face – when I suggested he tie me down once. Everything was getting to me and Draco was being such a good listener. He started giving me a neck rub, and the next thing I know, we’re on his bed naked and he's making love to me. Not sex, but real, honest to God love. He felt so good and I can't tell you how many orgasms I had. I lost count after eight."

Ginny laughed, her face brightened, "You know, I never understood how a man could fall asleep so quickly after sex, but after that afternoon with Draco, I just wanted to pass out and sleep for days. I fell asleep in his bed, still tangled in his arms. I'm convinced now that you haven’t been properly fucked unless you want to go to sleep as much as the man does after sex."

A secret surge of jealously swept through Hermione. It now seemed that she did have the most
pitiful sex life on the planet.

Ginny's secret smile made her face glow, despite the tears still staining her face, "I love him, but I just can't bear to leave Harry. And it's not like he can just leave England. He's trapped in this life until he can find a way out."

"And what, take you with him?"

"If he asks me to go with him? Yes. I'd give up everything to be with him. Family, friends, everything. But that's not going to happen. He's stuck until he can find a way out."

Hermione stood up and headed to the kitchen quietly to make a cup of tea. She couldn't think properly unless she had some tea first.

Ginny came to the doorway to the kitchen and watched her friend. "Now do you understand why you can't tell Harry? I was miserable before Draco came back into my life. Even if I never saw Draco again, I think it's only an eventuality that I'll leave Harry some day."

Hermione's anger returned and she spun on her friend, the teakettle clutched in a white-knuckle grip. "Then why the hell did you marry him?"

"Cause everyone expected me to! 'Oh Ginny, you're so lucky to be dating Harry.' 'Oh, Ginny, when is he going to pop the question?' Everyone expected me to just fall head-over-heels for Harry. Everyone expected me to marry him and the pressure from my family was just too much to bear by myself. You were so elated with the idea yourself; I didn't have the heart to tell you my reservations. Everyone thought that because I had a crush on him a long time ago, that I would still carry a torch for him. Well, I gave up on that little girl fantasy a long time ago. I grew up! Let me tell you something, Hermione," Ginny said, advancing on her friend with rancor, "be careful what you wish for. You just might get it."

Ginny slumped against the kitchen counter, her hip resting against the chipped white tiles. "When I was a little girl I wanted to marry the famous Harry Potter. Well, here I am, Mrs. Harry Potter, and I'm bloody miserable. Harry won't talk to me about work, saying it's classified, and I don't want to hear about Quidditch. I used to be into it, but between my brothers and Harry, I'm sick of it now. Harry wants peace and quiet. I tried fighting with him, but he hates conflict. He's willing to fight dark wizards, but in his personal life he won't deal with anything unpleasant.
"It's those damn psychotic Muggles who raised him. They made his life hell and now he doesn’t want anything to upset that perfect little world he always dreamed of. Perfect wife and perfect home, topped off with perfect kids I'll have to change and feed and bathe, and be stuck with Harry till I'm old and have forgotten what it was like to feel alive."

Ginny slumped to the floor and cried. Between soft sobs, she begged, "Please don’t tell Harry. He'd kill Draco. And if that happens… I don't know. A large part of me would die." She whimpered in the most piteous manner. "Please… please… please,” she pleaded, whispering the last 'please.'

Hermione empathized with the wretched woman who sat at her feet, looking defeated. She couldn’t understand her relationship with Malfoy, but she could understand the need for a soul mate. That one person who could make her feel all the things Ginny described from her time with Malfoy.

The teakettle began to whistle. Hermione hadn’t made up her mind whether she was going to tell Harry or not. She had been so certain of the conversation she would be having with him the following day, but in light of all Ginny had said, she felt a certain solidarity with the desperate witch.

Once she poured the tea, they both sat at the small wooden table in stony silence. The only sound was the gentle scrapping of their mugs against the wood as they set them down after each sip.

Hermione thought about what Ginny had said. The law, Malfoy's predicament, Ginny's courtship with Harry after the war, sex with Harry, sex with Malfoy, Ginny's feelings, Moody's vendetta against Snape and Malfoy. Her mind buzzed and she felt numb from it all. She would have to think on this tonight.

"So, what are you going to tell Harry?"

Hermione placed her head in her hand. Harry was her best friend, but so was Ginny. Though she and Harry didn’t talk like they used to when they were at Hogwarts, there was a bond that was built from years spent together.

"Don’t know. I haven’t made up my mind."

Ginny rose and looked at the clock. "I have to go home. If I’m not there when he gets home, it will only make him more suspicious." Ginny placed a hand on her friend's shoulder. "You do what you
think you have to do. I won’t see Draco again until you've made up your mind."

Hermione raised her head. "Can’t you stop seeing him? Or just talk only?"

Ginny looked at her with that same wise look on her face, as if she were the mother knowing everything and Hermione was just an innocent child who could not comprehend the ways of the adult world.

"I would stay away, if I could. I don’t like betraying Harry, but I married him thinking I lost Draco. If I knew Draco was still out there at the time, I wouldn’t have married him. I made a choice and now I'm regretting it. I have to live with it, but if I can find some happiness, even if it is for a few hours a week, then I'm willing to risk it all."

Ginny walked to the doorway to the living room before she turned to look at Hermione over her shoulder, "What ever decision you make, I’m willing to live with it. Even if it means Draco's death."

And then she was gone.

Hermione broke down and sobbed hysterically.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 4 A/N: At this time, I'd like to thank my fabulous beta, Siren, without whom this fic would not be posted. Hope you all are enjoying a major dose of angst. I originally wrote chapters 3 and 4 as one, but it wound up being so long, Siren busted it into two chapters. She was wise to do so.

I know Mea Culpa means 'my fault,' but as my mother, a recovering Catholic, translated it for me that way, I just can't get the phrase out of my mind. So sorry for all you Latin buffs out there, but childhood memories of my mother analyzing guilt and Catholicism rule out over pedantic details such a proper translations (wink).
Chapter Summary

Hermione thinks on what Ginny has revealed. Rubber chicken and steamed shrew are on the menu.

Chapter Five
"Mirrors, Illusions and Reflections"

Disclaimer: The usual. Rowling owns it all and is fabulously rich (deservedly so!), and I'm a bored housewife who hopes the tech sector will improve so I can go back to work.

Hermione cried for an hour before she could stop. She cried for Ginny's predicament. She cried for the broken façade of Ginny and Harry's marriage, and all the things she believed their marriage held that hers didn’t with Ron. She cried because she was certain she would never experience the kind of love that her friend had described.

It pained her to think about it, but upon further analysis later in the afternoon, she came to the conclusion that she loved Ron, but wasn't in love with him. Except that there was no one else in her life that she loved as much as him. It was a lukewarm love at best.

She continued to cry, out of pity for her own pathetic sex life, and all the things she was growing ever resentful of: Fudge, her job, her husband, her in-laws, her life. She was especially angry at Fudge and Moody for that law. It certainly did a thorough job of controlling the Death Eaters, but at what cost to Malfoy and Snape? It had been blindly applied to them. It angered her more that Snape, for all his years of hard work and thankless toil of spying, had eventually been stabbed in the back by a fellow member of the Order. And those who would speak up in defense of them were blackmailed into silence. This was the sort of injustice she fought against, and here it was staring her in the face. The work for a better world only resulted in one that appeared to be pretty, but hid grotesque atrocities.

Once calmed down, she noticed that Ron would be home soon from Quidditch practice, and she did not want to fend off questions about why she looked like a demented hag from all her crying.
Hermione still didn’t know what she would tell Harry tomorrow. She knew she was going to have a long night ahead of her in which to lie awake and contemplate things to say.

First she had to get to her medicine cabinet and use some of Lovely Lavender’s Puffy Poof Eye Crème. A dab under the eyes always took away the tired crying look.

Ron bolted through the door with his usual enthusiasm after a good practice.

"’Mione? You home?"

"Yes," she called out from the bathroom. Mrs. Weasley checked herself in the mirror one last time for any signs she had been crying. Convinced she looked passable, she walked out to greet her husband.

"You're home early," he commented with surprise.

"I had some errands to run this afternoon. They took so long that it wasn't worth it to go back to work, so I just came home." It was true, in a manner of speaking. She had told Marge the same lie, so her fibs would correspond.

"What's for dinner?" he asked, his face bright and cheerful in expectation of another meal cooked by his lovely wife.

Hermione tried to not look pained. She hadn’t even thought of dinner. Glancing over her shoulder, she looked at the kitchen. Ron had not done the dishes as he’d promised for the last three days. They were beginning to teeter back and forth, threatening to fall over. She hadn't noticed the state of the place while Ginny was there, and now felt a bit ashamed that her friend saw what a pigsty it was.

It had been a very emotionally taxing day for her and the thought of having another battle with Ron over his share of the housework made her inwardly wince. The beginnings of a headache was starting to creep up from the base of her skull and wrap its meaty hands on either side of her head, gripping it like a vice till the pain shot through her temples like an arrow through her head. If she didn’t get a dose of headache relief potion soon, it would quickly turn into what Hermione termed as a 'knitting needle through the eyeball' migraine.
Not bothering to answer Ron's question, she ran back to the bathroom and downed a vial in hope that she caught it in time.

Ron appeared in the doorway and leaned against the jamb. "You look exhausted, love. Let's go out to dinner instead. You look like you need the break."

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye and weighed her options. Spend money, which they had little to spare, for a mediocre dinner that was a tad overpriced for the fare, or avoid a battle over housework while still figuring out what to fix for dinner. With what she had been through, she was willing to toss a few Galleons away for a little relaxation.

The chicken was rubbery, the sauce had separated and the wine was corked. She was willing to overlook those appalling culinary blunders in search of some quality time with her husband.

Since Ron had taken a second job at The Listing Broom, the couple had become as passing ships in the night. She would be in bed when he came home from the evening shift at the pub, and she would be up and out of their flat before he rose and went off to Quidditch practice. They had the weekends, but most of them were taken up by a weekend Cannons game, in which she would come and play the supportive Quidditch wife. She always brought a book along, just like in her school days, and would periodically peer up from it to see how the game was progressing. On a few occasions, the Keeper for the Cannons had been injured and Ron would get a chance to play. Hermione would put her book down and watch her husband fly about, and do a fair job of blocking the Quaffle. The game would give them something to talk about for a few days, with Ron asking if she had noticed a new move he had been working on with the team during the week.

Ron had been rambling on about how the coach was considering moving him to first string, an ongoing promise that the man never delivered on, when Hermione interrupted him.

"Do you think we could talk about something other than Quidditch?" she asked, hoping her request had not seemed peevish, but polite instead.

"Like what?" he replied, as if there was nothing in the world better than to talk about his favorite sport.

"Oh, I don’t know." Hermione's mind frantically searched for a topic they could mutually discuss, a dim fear growing in the back of her mind that she and Ron truly did not have anything in common anymore. "Don't you ever wonder what happened to Snape after the war?"
"That overgrown bat? You must be joking. Yeah, he did some stuff for the Order, I'll grant you that, but if I never see or hear of him again, that's fine by me."

"Don't you ever wonder if the Death Eater Decree was applied to him? If he got away? He did work for the Order, so he shouldn't have to be punished under that law."

Ron frowned and answered in a sour tone, "Well, I think he deserves a little hell, especially after all those years he tortured us and treated us like something he scraped off his big, black boots." He ignored the injustice of the situation and seemed glad at the idea of Snape suffering.

Desperate for a new topic, she blurted out, "I haven't talked to your Mum, yet. Are we all going to the fountain dedication ceremony?" She really didn't want to talk about his family, but it seemed she was short on ideas to talk about at the moment.

"Yeah, Dad mentioned something about it. You haven't heard anything on what the new sculpture is, have you? There's a betting pool going down at the bar. If you had a hint, then maybe I could win us a nice pile of Galleons."

"Ron," she whinged, "please don't go wasting any Galleons on some bet. No one knows except Fudge, McPebbles and Dennis Creevey."

It was starting again. The lecturing tone and if she didn't stop it now, they would end up bickering again.

"You're no fun sometimes, Hermione." That comment raised her ire unlike the other times he had said it to her before. "It's not like I go spending Galleons left and right. It's a one-Galleon bet. The pot stands at five-hundred ten Galleons and I thought it would be nice if I won, then I could buy you some new robes and shoes."

"Well, maybe if you hadn't quit Auror training, you'd have a decent job instead of trying to live some childhood fantasy you won't let go of. Face it; your coach is never going to give you the position of Starting Keeper. He's kept you strung on the line for almost four years now, promising you that position. Other teams have made you offers and you keep turning them down. Some silly dream to be Keeper for the Cannons. Maybe if you made choices and decisions in life as well as you play chess, then maybe we wouldn't be so poor!"

Hermione realized her voice was rising in volume, and dropped it several decibels before
continuing her tirade is a hissing whisper.

"I'm tired of picking up after you. Two simple bloody chores–dishes and trash–and you don't even do those. I do all the shopping, laundry, cooking, pay bills, run the household, buy all the presents for Christmas and birthdays for your whole family, work overtime at the Ministry in the feeble hope of a promotion for all my hard work. And for what? A tiny flat, and barely enough money to exist, but not live?"

Furious, Ron's ears were turning purple, but Hermione couldn't care less. Her nerves were shot. What was worse was that she realized that maybe she and Ron were better together as friends, and not as husband and wife. She felt like a shrew when he was around. She didn't mean to, but with greater frequency, that seemed to be the case. The worst part was she finally admitted to herself that they had grown apart. He was still the same dreamer she knew at Hogwarts and she had moved on to mature into someone else.

Ron stood up. "Don't expect to see me home tonight," he said venomously; then he Apparated before leaving the restaurant.

Hermione scrubbed her face with the heels of her hands, quietly muttering under her breath, "Bugger, fuck, double bugger, shit… bugger all."

She got the bill and quickly left, after throwing down some money with a meager tip for the abysmal food.

Desperate for a shoulder to cry on, she wanted to go visit Ginny, but after that afternoon, and with the thought of Harry there wondering if his wife was cheating on him, she banished the thought. Ron's brothers and their wives could not provide the solace she needed, especially with wailing babies and ungovernable toddlers to abrade her fragile nerves.

It had been so long since she had talked with any of her old schoolmates from Hogwarts, she had fallen out of touch with most of them. The Weasley clan demanded much of her free time and she had let correspondences lapse. Instead of going to visit anyone, she wandered Diagon Alley for a while, lost in thought.

Her mind returned to Ginny's confession earlier in the day. Her bad sex life, the lack of mutual interests, and the lackluster marriage. It was shockingly like her own in many ways. It scared her, too. Was she doomed to leave Ron? And why did she not want to have children, besides the financial issues involved? And she knew why, but ignored the truth. She would get stuck raising the child, or children, all by herself. If Ron did make Starting Keeper, there would be a huge pay
raise, but he would be gone more than he was now. So in addition to keeping house and working, she would have the children to look after. She knew Molly and the other wives would be more than willing to help out with taking care of the children, but there was still more to it. And until that afternoon, she’d been unaware of the binding magic of having children with someone. But ultimately, the thought of her giving up her career to raise children was a concept she didn’t even want to entertain, ever. So she would have to find a way to make kids and work mix, if it ever would with Ron.

When she thought about it some more, Hermione realized that she had never met a witch or wizard from a magical divorced family. Not one. Children with divorced parents were a common enough thing among Muggles, but she could not recall a single pure- or half-blood schoolmate that had divorced parents.

This would definitely be worthy of further investigation before she even considered getting pregnant by Ron.

She had more pressing matters to think about right now. At the top of the list was whether she was going to tell Harry about Ginny and her not so slight peccadillo. The thought of them together still made her shudder.

Harry was her best friend, but Ginny had become her best friend, as well.

If she told Harry, Malfoy would get the Dementor's Kiss and Ginny would leave Harry. If she didn’t tell Harry, Ginny might not leave him and maybe she could help them patch things up.

It just seemed so wrong, the idea of lying to Harry. But he said himself that he didn’t know what was worse, knowing or not knowing.

Somehow, Hermione wound up at a bar called Blotto's. Sitting in a back booth, she looked in her bag and wondered if she had enough money to get blind, stinking drunk. She hadn't gone on a bender since the end of her N.E.W.T.s, but tonight certainly called for ethanol-induced oblivion.

Just as she was about to splurge and buy a whole bottle of Doodle's Dragon Blood Wine, she heard a familiar voice.

"Mind if I buy you a drink? You look like you could use a friend."
Hermione looked up. The first thing she saw was the gray and pink summer-weight houndstooth tweed dress under a very expensive pink linen robe, noticeably charmed to resist wrinkling. There stood Lavender Brown, smiling beatifically at her.
"News Flash"

Chapter Summary

Hermione talks with Lavender and a decision is made. Coconut creme pie for dessert!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Six
"News Flash"

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Hermione's mouth went slack with disbelief. It was just like Ginny described it. Lavender Brown had magically appeared while she was in the midst of wallowing in pity and despair.

Ignoring Hermione's gob-smacked expression, the blond witch slid into the booth across from her old schoolmate like the Queen sitting down for tea.

Hermione’s brow furrowed while her mind whirred, and the frazzled brunette wondered why Lavender had chosen that very moment to come back into her life.

Lavender, looking all too relaxed and well dressed for the establishment they were in, raised one hand in casual elegance and said, "Bottle of your finest and two glasses, please."

The barkeep, recognizing the cosmetic empire empress – and a very large tip on the way – scuttled to the back room and brought out a bottle of aged Calvados and two new, relatively clean snifters.

The barkeep, a balding man with a large potbelly and a slightly spotty apron, bowed repeatedly as he retreated to the bar after placing the bottle and glasses on the table. Hermione looked at him in horror; his smile was one of the examples her parents used to scare children into brushing their teeth every night before bed.
"So, how is married life treating you?" The richly dressed witch wiped the tip of her finger against the snifter, and frowned as she studied the dirt that appeared on her glove.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. It was all too suspicious for her liking. She hadn’t seen her schoolmate since graduating Hogwarts and when she was on the verge of crisis with her friends and husband, the blond just happened to saunter into the picture.

"I know what you did to Ginny," she replied, not bothering to hide her disgust.

"Ginny was not forced into anything. She chose to do what she did. She was already miserable when I met her, or hadn't you – as her friend – noticed at the time?"

Hermione thought back and tried to piece together any changes in Ginny's behavior between the time lines; before Malfoy and after Malfoy. Ginny did say that she hid her reservations about marrying Harry because everyone was too thrilled with the idea. And she had been, as well. The whole package of Harry, Ginny, Ron and herself living happily ever after in a Voldemort-free world, except in reality it was anything but hunky-dory. She had to admit to herself that Ginny was far better at hiding her emotions than she gave the younger witch credit for. Hermione shook the cobwebs from her muddled mind and got back to the matter at hand.

"How is it you know just when to show up? Just like that? I haven’t seen you for… years, and now, poof! Here you are in this—" here she paused to glance around at her surroundings, realizing she had picked the bar because it would be cheap, "—rat-hole of a dive, asking me how my marriage is. Ginny told me when you popped into her life. Is this how it works? Find women who are at the brink of emotional destruction and 'save' them?"

Lavender smiled at her in a reassuring way that was most unsettling to Hermione as she removed her gloves. "You were brilliant in every subject at school except flying and divination." Hermione snorted angrily, but the other witch ignored her and continued, "Though Trelawney was right only once in a great long while, she was correct in sensing my inner-eye."

Hermione rolled her eyes, unable to stomach the tripe she was sure Lavender was going to go on about, regarding the so-called “fine art” of Divination.

Lavender pulled the cork from the Calvados and poured a small measure into both bulbous glasses. "It might not be an inner-eye in the sense you know. I tend to think of it as an extraordinarily large amount of woman's intuition."
Hermione huffed at Lavender's self-assessment of fortune telling.

"No, it's not tarot cards or tea leaves, but a sense one has. Much like when a mother knows when something is wrong with her child when they are apart, or a wife's knowledge that her husband had been severely injured when he's miles away. It's that intuition that both Muggles and witches posses. I have just learned to tune into it, listen to it when someone is upset. If I could see auras, I'm sure yours would be a mixture of gray and sulfur. You're upset and in pain."

Hermione looked at her and understood what she was talking about. She had similar experiences with her mother. Whenever something bad had happened with Voldemort or the Death Eaters, she would receive an owl from her mother asking if everything was all right. She never understood how her mother knew to owl her at those particular moments, but with Lavender's explanation, it made sense.

"I don't know how to say it, but it calls to me. Did you ever wonder how I learned about all the awful news at school? I was drawn to it, and in my youthful stupidity, gossiped about. Since then I've learned discretion."

"Now what? Do I tell you what's wrong with my life and you set me up with a man to shag me and make me forget about how miserable my life is for a night?" Hermione asked bitterly.

"If that's what you want, then yes. But I have a feeling you're more of a talker. You need to get things off your chest, verbally analyze what's bothering you. I can provide a non-judgmental man, who will listen and provide a shoulder to cry on," Lavender answered with ease, while her manicured hand flicked off an invisible piece of lint off her linen robes with a sophisticated grace that Hermione envied.

Hermione mulled it over in her mind. If she had not had the day she had had with Ginny and her husband, she would have balked at the idea of paying someone to listen to her. However, after what Ginny told her, and after facing the harsh realities of her own marriage to Ron, it was a tempting offer.

"Why?"

Lavender looked at her with puzzlement.
"Why do—" she waved her hand, unable to say the words that added such a prurient nature to the situation, "—what you do? You have all this money and yet you dabble in this... trade. It seems beneath you."

Lavender laughed lightly at Hermione's naiveté. "The courtesans of the old days were not beneath kings and princes, except in the bedroom. Unless she was on top," she added glibly. "They provided companionship and sex. In a way, that is what marriage is. Except many witches and wizards marry and quickly forget why they wanted to get married. Their friendship falls by the way side lost in the quagmire of day-to-day life. I just help some people rediscover what they have thought lost. Some witches go back to their husbands with renewed vigor, once they remember that sex is fun and how to have a real conversation. Some wizards just need a little appreciation of their company. There are a few who like the thrill of cheating on their spouse, but some go back to their husband or wife with a greater appreciation of them, and never visit my business again."

The weary witch couldn't believe it, but it all made sense to her at the time. Perhaps she would regret it in the morning, but somehow, she found herself asking, "So how much would an evening with a sympathetic ear cost me?"

If she didn’t know better, she could have sworn Lavender's smile turned predatory. Perhaps it was the Calvados, which tasted so good and mellowed her nerves, or maybe she was just exhausted and imagined it.

"I work on a sliding scale. Those that can afford more, pay more. Those who do not have as much to spare," she said, her eyes sliding over Hermione's less than fashionable outfit, "pay less."

Hermione sat up in her seat and tried to look proud despite her slightly worn robes and slightly wild hair that began to escape its braided confines.

A smirk played at the corner of the madam's lips. "What were you willing to spend tonight in drinks?"

Hermione looked in her pocketbook. She had planned to spend every Knut she had that night or drink until she was too drunk to order another round. "Ten galleons."

"I'll cut you a deal. Since this is your first time, I'll charge you seven. If you like it and you come back, I'll charge you ten the next time."
Options weighed in her minds. Should she turn down Lavender's offer and get arseholed (along with that was the possibility that she would likely do something really stupid like the last time she got unbelievably drunk), or spend the money to have someone listen to her have a good cry.

That one time she got completely bladdered after her N.E.W.T.s had been rather embarrassing. She didn’t think making front page of the *Daily Prophet* with headlines blaring "Head Girl Bares Her Soul and More!" bore repeating. The accompanying picture had her prancing about with no top, her hands cupping her breasts singing, "I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts." The little black bars over her nipples barely covered her in the photo and left little to the imagination.

At least if she paid some man for a little comfort, Ron wouldn’t have to read about it in the morning paper.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 6 A/N: Calvados is a fine apple brandy from France. Pronunciations vary. Americans say CAL-va-dos, where as my French speaking friends say it is pronounced cal-VA-dos.

Aura colors: Gray: dark thoughts, depressing thoughts, unclear intentions, presence of a dark side of personality. Sulfur (color of a mustard): pain or lack of ease, anger

According to effingpot.com, "arseholed" means getting drunk. So you fellow Americans, is does not mean she got mean, just really, really drunk.

“I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts”: composed in 1944 (as "I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Cocoanuts") by Fred Heatherton, a songwriting pseudonym for a collaboration of English songwriters Harold Elton Box, Desmond Cox and Lewis Ilda. Published by Box and Cox Publications(ASCAP).
Severus sat in his flat, reading his latest monthly copy of *Eccentric Elixirs*. Since he had been essentially banned from ever touching a cauldron ever again, it was one of the few ways in which he could stay up to date on the latest Potions research.

It was nice to have his Thursday evenings back to himself. His usual appointment during that time slot had gone back to her husband determined to work on her marriage, inspired by some of the more creative talents he taught her. This left him with some personal time. He hoped his employer would not be bringing him any new clients for a while, as his schedule was rather full.

He glanced out the window and listened to the bustle of the evening. Down in the alleys below, witches and wizards were leaving restaurants to head back home, while others had just arrived for a night of drinking in the many taverns that populated the nexus of wizarding London.

If he hadn’t been in his current situation, he wondered if he would still be teaching at Hogwarts, or better yet, free to pursue his own research and publishing. Still, he couldn’t complain about his job at times. He *had* silently lamented for many years about how pitifully inadequate his sex life was. It seemed that when it rained, it poured.

*’Be careful what you ask for, you just might get it.’*
It had been a shock when Miss Brown approached him with her unusual offer. The Death Eater Decree had just been declared a few month prior, and he was caught unaware, to his own chagrin. He should have suspected Moody was up to something when the man wouldn’t stop grinning like an idiot. Had he known what was written in that insipid law, he would have flown Britain much like the bat his students frequently compared him to. Instead, he woke up bereft of money, Potions equipment and all his freedom. A quick visit to the Burrow that morning, and Arthur informed him of his own precarious employment situation if the head of the Weasley clan contested the enforcement of the law on his two fellow Order members.

It was while he was wondering if he could bribe someone – with the false promise of money later – to help him get his hands on a cauldron and enough of the right ingredients so he could brew a poison for a swift and painless death that she had found him sitting on a bar stool in The Listing Broom. He was contemplating the many ways he could pull out the stopper in death. The barkeep had given Severus a bottle of Firewhisky out of pity, which made the alcohol taste less than pleasing. He hated pity.

Sliding onto the stool next to him, she offered to buy him a drink. He could recall the whole conversation with perfect clarity.

"It seems I already have one," he replied, grim images of his dead and bloated body found by the street sweepers floating through his mind.

"So it seems. How about a job?"

He remembered giving her his best sardonic laugh, but he couldn't muster the strength to make it effective enough to drive her away. It was then that he turned and recognized his former Gryffindor student.

"Miss Brown, if this is some sick, perverted joke, then I suggest you leave immediately!"

She smiled at him in a way that not only confused him, but also made his spy senses thrum with trepidation.

"No joke, Professor, or should I say Mr. Snape now."

He narrowed his eyes at her with suspicion.
"If you are not aware of it, I have started my own company, but have found a lack of Potions masters who are willing to work for me. You, a Potions Master par excellence, are currently unemployed."

Severus knew she was fully aware of the limited employment options available to him. He also knew there was more to her offer than just whipping up a batch of wrinkle erasing crème.

"Unless you have the Ministry's permission to offer me this job – which I doubt, as I'm not allowed to brew anything more than a cup of tea without breaking parole – then you are just wasting my time," he said with restrained anger for her taunting.

"Who said anything about you brewing anything? I need a consultant. Is there a law against you telling me how to brew a potion or beauty crème?

He licked his lips nervously. It was too good to be true. Granted, it would be Potions to perpetuate a world of vanity that had scorned him for not fitting within their narrow ideas of beauty, but he was desperate.

"What's the catch?"

She had the gall to give him a broad and warm smile. That insufferable, machinating wench!

"Ah, there's the Slytherin I remember." She said it with such relief; he began to worry that she was actually an uncaptured Death Eater under the disguise of Polyjuice Potion. "I have a little hobby on the side. I think you'll like it once you get used to it. You see, I have a growing list of clients who are in need of… 'company.'"

He didn’t like her phrasing and immediately understood the implications of her statement.

"So you want me to be part of your stable? What's involved? A personal interview in which you judge my performance? Some sick little fantasy in which to seduce your former teacher?" He was revolted by the whole idea and was tempted to not even bother to bid her farewell.

"You don’t have to shag me, unless you’d like to."
He could not believe his own ears; an ex-student was propositioning him. Questions about her sanity were beginning to form in his mind.

"I have watched you over seven years, Mr. Snape," she continued. "Despite your brittle exterior, you have the makings of a great lover."

He snorted at her declaration, though secretly, he always thought he would be great in the sack, despite his meager experience.

"As a first year, you scared the hell out of me. But as a seventh year, I saw the potential in you."

Severus watched her, waiting for her to break into peels of laughter.

"Those hands. Your voice, when you're not shouting, sneering or making disparaging remarks. Your keen sense of observation."

"You want a Death Eater working for you in that capacity?" He was still in disbelief of the opportunity presented to him. "Don't you think that's a little dangerous?"

His name had been published in the Daily Prophet along with Draco and all the other Death Eaters who were walking among the good witches and wizards of Britain. It was common knowledge now. However, his work for the Order was still a secret, thanks to Fudge and Moody's agenda.

"I have faith you're a good guy at heart." She winked at him. He wasn't sure if she was jibing him or knew about his life as a spy.

It was a tempting offer. He had hoped to parlay his new status as war hero into some time in the sack with several celebrity clinging witches, who would brag that they had shagged him, all claiming to have had the best sex in their young and nubile lives. It was a silly dream, but even snarky, sensible Potions masters could dream of being proclaimed a sex god by voluptuously beautiful witches. It was just unnerving when faced with the offer to prove how adept he was in the art of erotica and seduction.

"And if I refuse to become a gentleman of the evening?" He had to know just how badly she needed his potion making skills. Would she be willing to forgo this particular clause in his employment for his expertise?
"Then I'm willing to continue my search for a Potions master who would be willing to have a constant stream of royalties from my ever expanding empire of beauty products. I'm doing very well for myself now, but I intend to dominate the market. Everything from hair products, skin cremes, make-up, nail polish, soaps, deodorants, oral hygiene, anything related to the beauty trade I intend to conquer."

His mouth twitched. "Royalties?" The thought of calling her bluff quickly evaporated from his mind as he schooled his features.

"Of course I could not pay you directly," she said matter-of-factly. "Everything would be kept in a special vault at Gringotts held in my name under some pseudo-business venture fund. Your activities in your other job would pay well, too. Through your royalties and fees, I would take care of food, lodging, clothing, books, and anything else you are allowed to have, so not one single coin would pass into your hands, thus violating your parole.

"The job as companion is more of a cover than anything else. You see, the Ministry is willing to turn a blind eye to prostitution, and as your employer, I would be handling all the money. However, I think it only best that you do actually perform some of the work I claim you are fulfilling. You never know when an Auror from the Ministry might decide to look closer into my side business. Moody has been known for liberal use of the Veritaserum when it suits his needs."

Severus was all too familiar with the crackpot Auror's methods of hunting for the imagined evil lurking around every corner, especially since he came out of retirement.

Before Severus agreed, he wanted to be sure of the terms of his new employment. "I sleep with women and you'll allow me to consult on potions for your company. Is that it?"

"Not every woman will want sex. Some will want to talk. They look for nothing more than a shoulder to cry on, or a sympathetic ear to listen to them."

He knew it was too good to be true. He had to listen to the hormonal snivelings of his pubescent charges for years, as Slytherin's Head of House. Now he would have to suffer and feign interest in the inconsequential ramblings of lonely, bored housewives. Sex he could perform; all he had to do was close his eyes if they weren't pleasing to look upon. But talk?

But what other options did he have? He almost had to beg for the bottle of Firewhisky that he had sitting in front of him. Somehow this Gryffindor, who he had dismissed as a vanity driven
simpleton, had presented him with an option worthy of making her an honorary Slytherin.

His pride goaded him to make one request before he struck such a bargain with the formidable Miss Brown.

"I would like to draw up a contract, so that the duties in both of my positions are clear."

"Of course," she offered and then plopped a sizable scroll into his lap. "I've taken the liberty of having my lawyers draw this up for me. Don't worry, I Obliviated them after they wrote it up."

He read it twice to make sure there was nothing to his disliking, or violated what little dignity he had left. The contract said he would receive ten percent of the profits from products he consulted for development. As a gigolo in the service of Miss Brown, he would have the option of refusing to service any client, as long as he met his weekly minimum of three clients a week. All royalties and fees would be put into a trust under Miss Brown's name until such time as the Death Eater Decree had been lifted from him, or he had been exonerated. Only one thing was missing from the contract.

"May I make an addition to this contract before agreeing to these terms?"

"That depends."

"As my face and persona are well known, I doubt I would be able to meet your standard of three clients a week. Most witches would run away screaming in fright at the thought of having sex with me, much less listening to them without expecting a sarcastic remark escaping my lips. In addition, I would like to preserve my good name as an unsociable bastard. My reputation as a misanthropic curmudgeon should not be tarnished in any way. I would like to have the option of wearing a mask when interacting with the clientele, and your discretion regarding the unsavory aspects of my employment."

She gave a low throaty amused chuckle. "Yes, that is agreeable. And you are correct in the respect of your face being known. So glad you thought of that."

The contract unrolled so they could see the last clause of the contract and Severus' terms magically appearing in clear black letters.
Lavender produced a very expensive quill and handed it to Severus.

With a flourish, very much unlike his usual manner of signing his name, he put his signature on the parchment; it was followed by Lavender's rounded cursive.

It was done.

He was immediately put up in a flat on the fourth floor in a building Lavender had bought from the Weasley twins earlier that year. Of the few personal affects he had not bartered off for food or lodging yet was an armoire paneled with flame mahogany, accented with bird's eye maple and wenge wood inlay, some clothing, a few photographs and his personal library. The Ministry had confiscated every single Knut he had saved from his many years of work at Hogwarts, but at least they had the decency to let him keep most of his belongings, especially his books.

The only thing he did mourn the loss of was his precious Potions equipment. Every measuring spoon, scale, knife, sieve, spoon, grater, reamer, ladle, chopping board and cauldron had been confiscated. He knew Moody was sitting in the Ministry laughing his arse off. If it wouldn't have landed him a date with a Dementor, he would have transfigured the man's grotesque eyeball into a rabid Niffler trained to attack the Auror's more delicate parts, if dark wizards before him hadn't already hexed them off.

That first week was one he would never forget.

During the day, he would be in the Lovely Lavender research and development laboratory. Since the Ministry, as part of his Potions equipment seizure, had confiscated his work robes, the only things available for him to wear at his first day of work were robes in lavender or turquoise. Severus threatened to quit the next day if proper black robes weren't available for him. Standing behind Lavender, he would peer into a cauldron brewing the latest batch of beauty crème, his hand itching to stir the elixir just once. How he longed to feel a spoon in his hand and the familiar movements of his body swirling the liquid in clockwise then anti-clockwise motions. He made recommendations and suggestions; she listened and came up with some of her own ingredient combination theories. Though it was not as challenging as the private research he longed to do after the war, it was enough to satisfy his desire to continue working with Potions for the time being.

His nights were another matter. His first 'customer' was a recently graduated Hogwarts student he remembered teaching. She had not taken Potions past her fifth year, but he recalled her name and face. She had a little fantasy she wanted help acting out and Severus reluctantly agreed to fulfill her desire, while feigning a keen interest in helping her out.
He could still hear her cries in his head. "I'm a bad little Hufflepuff! I'm a bad little Hufflepuff!"
Each time she shouted that infernal phrase, a tortoiseshell hairbrush would come thwacking down on her bare bottom. He was the 'stern headmaster' and she was the naughty schoolgirl who had forgotten to wear her knickers. After some fingering while still held over his lap, her bottom welted a bright red, she would orgasm. It was on her third visit that she mounted him as he sat on his chair and came like a wild woman. After that, he never saw her again. He always wondered what Deputy Minister McPeebles would think if he knew his precious little girl had lost her virginity to a Death Eater.

His other two clients that week were a twenty-year-old who wanted a brief course in fellatio, so she could surprise her fiancé on their wedding night, and a fifty year old woman who needed a shoulder to cry on. The young bride-to-be was a quick student. It took every last fiber of control, as it had been a very, very long time since he had any oral stimulation of that sort, to keep from grabbing her by the hair and driving his cock down her throat.

The middle-aged witch was another matter. It was then that he had a true appreciation for Albus. Severus missed the old fool. His old Headmaster had been his confessor for years. Now he was playing that role. It helped that he wore a mask. He would nod in the appropriate places, ask her the right questions, encourage her to go on, and gave her a hug when she was done.

Though he hated to admit it, he felt an obligation to be as an attentive listener to these women as Albus had been to him. In some strange way, it was his own way of honoring his old friend. Some had problems that were petty; others had problems he would never wish on anyone decent. Yet his simple act of listening gave them the absolution they needed, and the feeling that their concerns mattered to someone. He supposed it was another form of penance, but this version did not involve risking his life as a double spy.

He was snapped out of his reverie by a familiar rapping at his door.


It was his employer. This was her signal that she was alone and he would not have to bother with his mask.

Severus opened the door and imperiously looked down his great nose at Lavender.

"And a good evening to you too," she cheekily said, swirling her robes as she entered his flat.
He watched her and knew something was up. "All right. Out with it. What now?" Severus snapped at her.

"I see our mood had improved," she replied as she primly sat herself in a chair next to his chessboard.

"You know that I only have Monday and Thursday nights off. You wouldn’t be here unless you have a new client for me," he said testily. He didn’t mind the sex at all. He just wanted a bit more personal time in which to catch up on his reading.

"I have a very special client. She's in need of some very tender loving care."

"What is she, a stray cat? Send her over to Draco. He gives a fairly convincing performance."

"Oh no. This one needs your special touch. Besides, I have a feeling that Draco would be the last person on earth she would want to talk to at this moment."

Something in the way her voice paused and lilted made his spy senses tingle. "Who is it?"

"She's very bright. I think you'll find her an interesting conversationalist."

"Who is it?"

"She young and I'm sure quite pretty once she's cleaned up a bit and has not been crying."

"Who is it?"

"She married and she's only interested in talk."

"WHO. IS. IT."
Lavender paused, and he could see she was contemplating whether or not to smile when she dropped this little Filibuster in his lap.

"Hermione Weasley."

There was a moment of silence before he shouted, "Absolutely not! That… that… know-it-all! That Gryffindor! That little boomslang skin stealing, impertinent, pyromaniac bookworm! She set my robes on fire! That was my favorite robe!"

Lavender seemed to be having some perverse joy out of watching him pace the room like a caged panther, his brow furrowed. Tense muscles and potential power under a coat of black.

"If it's any consolation, I'll buy you some new ones."

He shook his head, still walking along a pattern in the rug. "Oh, no you don’t. You are not going to make me take this one. In my contract, it states clearly that as long as I meet my three client a week minimum, I can refuse a client."

"What if I were to take away enough of your clients so that you would have to take her to meet your minimum."

He stopped pacing and faced her. Shock and anger contorted his unique visage. "You wouldn’t dare."

"Oh, but I would. And as your employer, I could. I'm sure Macnair could take over a few of your clients."

"Now you are joking," he huffed. "That psychotic maniac? The only reason you have him around is so you can have him play the submissive, so witches with a penchant for pain can flay him on the rack." At least Lavender never insisted he take a client requiring him to be the submissive one. As part of his nature, he would always be the dominant one, as he could not let himself be sexually subjugated.

"Yes, I am joking. But I do have something to offer you if you take her on as a new client. I don't know if she’ll visit you only once or if it will be a recurring habit. Knowing the touch you have with women, I could see her becoming a regular, despite her… what do you call it? Ah yes, her
noble Gryffindor nature," she smugly explained.

She had something new to offer him. She always did. It was this skill that got him and Draco caught in her contractual claws. He still don’t know what she promised Draco to get him into her stable, as he never volunteered that information, but it must have been something too good to resist.

When Lavender found Draco, he had bartered everything away. He had spent the past week living in empty alcoves. It was when he was eyeing a stray with rapt attention, considering if cat truly was the other white meat, that she found him and made him an offer to work for her. His day job was as a marketing and sales consultant with the same requirements for the evening job as Severus.

Draco, Ginny and Lavender were three of the only four people who knew what he did during his nights.

Severus stood rigidly and gritted his teeth. "Your terms?"

"Meet with Hermione Weasley as often as she would like, and I will let you have twenty percent of the profits of a new sexual enhancing line of potions we're going to begin working on next week."

Sex Potions. He could see the heaping piles of Galleons glitter before his eyes. Enough to even bribe Fudge into making a public apology to him, or pay some Auror to look the other way as he fled the country.

"Fifty percent," he countered.

"Twenty-five."

"Forty-five."

"Thirty."

"Forty."
"Deal. Now if you will excuse me, I have to go fetch your new client. She'll be here in a jiffy."

And with a pop, she was gone.

Severus slumped against the mantle with a weary sigh before walking over to his armoire. He opened it and looked at the display of masks he had available. He pulled out his Casanova mask embellished with a few gold baroque swirls, and the scarf to cover his hair.

Though his hair was no longer greasy, a result from the volatile oils that were released during Potions classes and permeated his hair, it was still rather limp. Lavender's attempt to give it some body had resulted in a bad case of dandruff. The best she could do was suggest a long, layered cut, leaving the length to brush the tops of his shoulder. Despite his improved follicle condition, his ex-student and fellow Order member would probably be able to identify his hair. It was unfortunate that glamour charms were so unpredictable as to when they would wear off.

Just as he finished checking himself in the mirror, he heard her knock.

*Knock-Knock. Knock-Knock.* Lavender had given Hermione the signal that indicated she was a client.

Straightening his robes and steeling his nerves, certain he would be spending the evening listening to her prattle on about academic subjects or asking endless questions, he took one last breath before opening the door.

Opening it, he was glad he had his mask on. Before him stood a shadow of the vibrant, though annoying, young woman he once knew. To say he was shocked would be like standing in a hurricane and commenting that it was a bit damp.

Glancing at her robes, he wondered how much she was able to pay. By the look of it, his handkerchiefs cost more than what she was able to afford for tonight.

He stepped aside and gently bowed his head in a courtly manner.

In his most soothing and caressing voice, he said, "Please come inside and have a seat."
Chapter 7 A/N: There! If you haven’t figured it out, there is the second rule I broke of my own challenge. Lavender, Ginny and Draco know about him and his career. That's it… so far. I'll let you stew and wonder if I'm going to let Hermione know. I will not be breaking any more rules of my challenge.

If you haven’t figured the rhythm of Lavender's knock, it's "Shave and a Haircut."
Hermione looked about her surroundings, licking her lips nervously. It was a room similar to Malfoy's, except this one had a chess table with twin chairs flanking it, a settee with an accompanying low table, and the bed curtains were a dark charcoal gray instead of red.

Passing through the doorway, she startled a little when she heard the lock click behind her. A quick look of panic filled her eyes.

"You are not a prisoner here," Severus cooed. "Just merely insuring that no one will bother us. You may leave anytime you wish."

She pondered the idea of bolting for the door that minute.
The idea of talking with a strange man… and for money! What were you thinking? she internally chided herself.

Sensing she might leave and be faced with Lavender knowing he did not at least make an effort, he said, "Please have a seat. I'm here at your command to do as you wish."

His arm extended out to the settee, gently coaxing her to sit down. She gave a jerky nod of gratitude, and with uncertainty, walked over to the seating arrangement by the fireplace.

He let her lead the way, surveying his latest customer. She had on a simple white blouse that looked a little tired and almost unnoticeably frayed at the collar. The blouse looked like it had been worn and washed so many times that it took on a subtle dingy color. Her skirt was simple and dark blue, falling just below the knees. Her maroon robes were slightly out of fashion, probably purchased three years ago. The scuff marks on her shoes were hidden from a recent polishing. From afar, she appeared modestly dressed, but upon closer inspection, her dress matched her demeanor; worn, tired, dull and a little gray.

Had Severus seen her this way shortly after Victory Day those four years ago, he would have laughed to himself and savored the idea of this young woman put in her place. All her exuberance, confidence and self-righteousness taken down several notches. But after some years apart from the Golden Trio, he could find nothing humorous or satisfying in seeing this sad example of a woman in front of him.

Watching her, he noticed how she sat rigidly on the settee, her hands grasping at her knees with white-knuckled tension. Her eyes darted about the room some more, noting where the windows and doors were. She was sitting on the side closest to the door, her nearest escape route.

Before he sat down himself, Severus asked, "Would you like a drink? You look like you could use one."

Hermione shook her head. "No, I already had a few glasses with Lavender before I came here. I don’t think I would have come if I hadn’t drunk something first." She gave him a meek smile before her face returned to its worried and tired look.

"Tea perhaps? Something soothing?" he offered.

Her weak smile returned briefly. "Yes, that sounds lovely. I could use a cup of tea."
No sooner has she spoken than a tray filled with cups and saucers, milk, sugar, honey, lemon and a large pot of fragrant tea appeared on the low table in front of her.

Severus walked over and sat on the other end of the settee, leaving a comfortable gap between them. She looked like such a frightened cornered animal; it would not do to scare her by invading her personal space.

He sat forward and poured the tea.

"Lemon?"

"No, nothing." The nervous witch swallowed hard. "Please."

She took the perfumed brew with a slightly shaky hand, noting the delicate hand painted geometric motif along the rim of the cup and saucer. Inhaling, she let the scent wash through her senses feeling their effects immediately.

She inhaled deeply and paused. "Chamomile… lavender… mint… raspberry leaves… feverfew… and…” Hermione inhaled once more. "… Uva-ursi?"

Had he not been wearing a mask, she would have seen the quirk in his smile. The uva-ursi was used in such minuscule quantities, he could barely perceive its presence, but its flavor was a wonderful sub-note in the tea.

"Your guess is correct." He kept his voice neutral, but reassuring.

She took a long slow sip, allowing the aroma to envelop her mind. Once she felt the hot liquid sliding down her esophagus, she opened her eyes and regarded the man sitting next to her more closely.

He wore a dark plum shirt with an elegant cut. Nothing fancy, no flourishes, but simple and well made. His trousers were black and showed off his lean, muscular legs. What intrigued her most was the mask. It was white with a few gold embellishments hiding his whole face with a large protrusion that allowed him to sip his tea while still concealing the lower half of his face. The
shadow of the mask made his eyes appear black. She noticed his hair was hidden under a black scarf he had wrapped around his head, further intriguing her.

She wondered if he was less than handsome or was this his way of remaining anonymous. The brief idea that she could one day stand next to him in Flourish and Blotts and never know he was the same man popped into her mind.

He sat with ease and calm, the antithesis of her current state. Watching him, she saw the graceful movement of his hand as he set the cup and saucer back on the low table in front of them, and then recline against the back of the settee like a cat lounging in the sun.

Severus continued to watch her in silence. She squirmed under his gaze.

"So," she began shakily, "what do we do... erm... I mean, what happens now?"

He was usually not a generous man, nor forgiving in nature, but he knew she was a line about to snap if not treated delicately and encouraged kindly.

"I was under the impression that you needed someone to talk to."

He could see the tears already forming. It was a new world record for him. Usually they needed to talk a bit before the crying started. The strong and proud girl he remembered from Hogwarts was gone.
"I don’t know what to do. I'm lost (sob). I have no one to talk to about this. It's all so confusing and complicated," she quietly cried. She bent over and put her hands in her face, crying without concern of what the gigolo might think of her blubbering.

He pulled out a crisply pressed handkerchief and offered it to her.

Peering out from between her fingers, she saw the white square of fine Irish linen and took it, dabbing at the tears before blowing her nose loudly.

"Why don’t you tell me your problem. Start at the beginning, that's usually the best place," he assured her genially.
She sniffed once and wiped at some more tears before she began. "You see, I have a friend, a good friend. Well, he suspected his wife was cheating on him and he asked me to spy on her and see if she was. So he loaned me his Invisibility Cloak."

Severus felt his heart begin to thump loudly in his chest. He only knew of one person who owned such a cloak.

"Anyway, I followed her today and found out he was right."

Severus reached for his tea, as his mouth had unexpectedly gone dry.

"I saw her with... this bloke, who we all hated while we were at school together. And the worst part is, she’s my best friend, too."

He set his tea down and watched as her hands continued to grip her knees, her legs locked tightly together.

"And so I confronted her and she tells me that she's been seeing this other person on the side for a while. And the worst part is, she's not in love with her husband. Well, she loves him, but not in love. Oh, I don't know. So, I can only assume she's in love with this other man. And now my friend, the male friend, is going to ask me if his wife has been deceiving him. See, he found out she wasn’t doing what she claimed to have been doing some afternoons, and he started putting the pieces together. If he finds out, she says he'll probably kill the other man, which he could do since he's an Auror, I guess, which I don't think he would... I hope. But she says if her... lover dies, then she'll leave her husband."

She drew a long breath, reaching for her tea and taking another long sip, hoping it would calm her nerves.

"If I tell him what his wife is doing, then someone might die or get a Dementor's Kiss and she’ll leave her husband. If I don’t tell him and lie, then that's letting her continue this... affair. He's my best friend, but she is too. And the worst part is, after talking to her, I've realized that my marriage is just as miserable, in its own pathetic way."

Severus' mind whirred. Though she left out the names, he knew exactly whom the actors in this sordid little tragedy were. He fought to keep his concentration on the conversation. If he played his
part well, he might be able to convince her to not tell Potter about Ginny's infidelity with Draco.

"Dementor's Kiss?" he asked softly. "Surely a man wouldn’t get such a harsh punishment for adultery with another man's wife," he said in placid, innocent tones.

"Well, it's a long story. One I don’t want to go into at the moment." Since Malfoy was one of Lavender's employees, if she named him, then this man might feel some need to protect one of his own. She did not feel like having an Obliviate – or worse – cast upon her.

Severus nodded his head, allowing her to go on.

Hermione continued the tale of her conundrum, and how she felt she was between the proverbial Scylla and Charybdis. She went on about her own marriage, how it scared her that she might wind up a bitter old woman if she stayed in her marriage, her shock regarding the undisclosed magical bond wrought from bearing children, and dread over a life stuck with her husband.

Periodically, she stopped to cry a bit before continuing. Severus kept pouring her tea, refreshing her cup every so often. Hermione's bleak marriage was nothing he hadn’t heard before, but news of Potter's suspicion was a twist he was not expecting.

When she finished, he asked, "So, will you tell your male friend about your female friend's activities? Or help them save their marriage?"

It was a very Slytherin way of phrasing the question. From what she’d told him, it sounded like she had already made up her mind, but needed to talk it out with someone before finally deciding.

"I don’t know. I won’t know until I see him. I don’t know if I can lie to him; he's not the sort of friend you can just lie to."

He nodded in his most convincing sympathetic manner, conveying the part of the non-judgmental listener.

"I’m sure you'll do the right thing," he said, knowing the girl would never care for the idea of a dead man on her conscience. Her Gryffindor nature would not allow it, even if she did despise Draco.
Hermione looked about sheepishly. "It there a toilet?" She had drunk most of the tea and no doubt needed to relieve herself.

"Through that door," he replied with a gesture towards the door on the opposite side of the room.

He rose when she did and bowed his head. Once the door clicked shut, he silently swore to himself. 'That boy is going to get us both killed.'

The sound of rushing water brought him back to the present. She would be leaving soon and Draco's fate would be in her hands. If Potter knew what had been going on between his wife and Draco, the Auror would no doubt snap. He always had doubts about the boy's mental stability. And despite Potter and Draco working in the Order together, their animosity towards each other surpassed the hatred that he and Sirius Black had for one another.

Hermione was rinsing her face, hoping the cool water could reduce some of the puffy redness. Looking about the well-appointed bathroom, she saw an assortment of sample-sized bottles in a basket with a note that read, “For your convenience.”

Inside the basket was a small tube of Lovely Lavender's Puffy Poof Eye Crème, a small bottle of Luxurious Lathering Lotion, Redness Reducing Salve and other products from the Lovely Lavender product line. She dabbed the Puffy Poof Crème on around her eyes and worked some of the salve into her cheeks noting how they quickly returned to their non-splotch even color.

Once satisfied that her appearance was no long frightful, after a quick pass through her hair with a hairbrush and a botched braiding job, she looked in the mirror.

It was good to finally talk to someone about a few of the things about her marriage she couldn’t tell Ginny or Harry. Ginny, as Ron's sister, had her own bias and Harry was equally friends with Ron as with her. There was no one she was close enough to, especially since she had become estranged from her parents. As much as she hated to admit it, it was the best seven galleons she spent in a long time. Hermione’s heart felt a little lighter, though the weight of the responsibility to Harry still sat heavy on her shoulders. Since the wizarding world did not have anything even remotely like a priest or psychiatrist, she supposed this was as close as she could come on short notice. There was the Muggle Alliance Network, but she needed someone that night.

'We only talked,’ she reminded herself. 'It's not like I did anything wrong.' But she still couldn’t help but feel that she had somehow been unfaithful to Ron. Pushing the guilt down deep inside of
her so it would not resurface anytime in the near future, she squared her shoulders.

'This is just one time. I'm never doing this ever again.'

For a split second, she averted her eyes from the reflection in the mirror. Somehow, she didn’t want to face herself and the idea that she might want to see this strange man again. He had been attentive and considerate. Ron used to listen to her like that years ago, when he wasn't jumping to conclusions or shooting his mouth off with hasty remarks. And she and Harry hadn’t talked like that in years either. Somehow, now that they were grown, the dynamics of their friendship had changed. In the world of boys and girls, they were just friends, but as adults it had slowly evolved and she could no longer completely confide in them like she once could.

This man, this gigolo, had given her comfort. He provided release and relief from her burdened heart. Perhaps now that she had done what she needed to do, she'd never see him again.

She wasn't sure if it was the mask, his scent of patchouli, sandalwood and musk, or the peculiarity of the situation, but she enjoyed the evening more than she had thought she would. The atmosphere was serene, with no reminders of the housework that needed to be done, the tiny size of her flat reminding her of how cramped her life had been feeling, and no Ron to grate on her nerves.

Hermione closed her eyes and solemnly swore to herself, 'Never again. Thank him for being a patient listener, then bid him good-bye.'

Opening the door, she saw him sitting on the settee patiently waiting for her. He rose with a languid grace and she swallowed hard once more. He had a body unlike Ron’s. Though shorter than her husband, he was still taller than her by about five inches. He had a man's body, similar to Draco’s in the way it had filled out, but different. Not quite so broad in the shoulders, but proportionally wider than Ron's. She could see his leg muscles flex under the drape of the fabric as he shifted to his other leg, inviting her to sit back down.
Quickly, she wondered if he had well defined abdominal muscles. Ooh, she had a weakness for those. She quickly snapped her mind back to the present and out of her insane daydream of what this man would look like without his shirt on.

With purpose, she strode over to him and offered to shake his hand. "It's been lovely. I can’t tell you how grateful I am to have had someone to talk to."

He took her hand. Instead of shaking it as he would another man's, he bowed slightly and brought her hand up to his face, guiding her knuckles just under the protruding mouth area of his mask. His lips gingerly brushed her knuckles while keeping eye contact with her.

"I'm so glad to have been of service to you this evening," Severus answered in his most seductive voice.

She was paralyzed. The touch of his mouth on her hand sent a shock from that small patch of skin straight up her arm to her brain. Hypnotized by the eyes that never left hers as he kissed her hand, she felt her pulse quicken and her heart hammer against her rib cage. Somehow, it had become quite difficult for her to breathe at the moment and Hermione wondered if she was still riding out her buzz from the brandy, as the room seemed to tilt a little.

His mouth lingered on her hand a little before he rose from his bow and released her hand.

Coming to her senses, she snapped her mouth shut. Flustered at her momentary lapse of sanity, or was it control, she gave him one more nervous lopsided smile.
In her haste to exit her environment, and regain control of her hormones which had suddenly begin to rattle the bars of their cage, she walked over to a door that led to the kitchen area. Opening it, she realized her mistake and scanned the room desperate to find an escape route. Spotting the door in which she entered into this den of dawning temptation, she bolted, slamming the door with nervous energy.

Once out in the dim hallway, she ran for the stairs and flew down them as if she were on a broom.

Severus was amused beyond all measure at her startled response to his charms. He quietly chuckled to himself at how he discombobulated the young witch. His enjoyment was short-lived as Minerva’s voice began lecturing him in his mind.

‘That poor girl!’ he could imagine the old biddy exclaiming. ‘Severus, how could you do that to her, and in her state!’

If his old colleague and friend could see her most prized student today, she’s be rolling over in her funeral pyre. Thoughts of gagging the mental image of Minerva with her own tartan scarf drifted through his mind.

Severus did have a conscience. It usually came in the voice of Albus or Minerva in the back of his mind while his own personality played the devil to their angels on his shoulders. Two against one was not exactly a fair fight.

The image of Albus looking at him over his half moon spectacles still haunted him. ‘My dear boy, you did an admirable thing giving her comfort. I’m proud of you.’ He could hear the phantom voice of his old Headmaster, knowing the wizened man would be simultaneously praising him and giving him a reproachful soul-penetrating stare that said he should not have teased the distraught woman.

Severus pulled off his mask and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. The relished feeling over Hermione’s discomfort had fled, replaced by a sense of disappointment and reluctant shame.

Glancing at the bed curtains charmed to reflect the mood of his clients, he noted the subtle swirl of purple in the gray folds of the fabric. He supposed it wasn't nice to arouse a sexually frustrated woman, but he tamped down the surge of guilt.

"It's not like I'll be seeing her again," he said to the imaginary Albus and Minerva he envisioned
sitting at his chess table.

He could imagine the silent glare they would both be giving him over their spectacles, were they both still alive.

"Hell, if you both hadn't died I wouldn't be in this cursed situation."

Rubbing his eyes, he knew that if they were both alive, they would ask him to help her in anyway that he could.

He still didn’t know what she did for a living, as she’d spent the whole time fixated on her most pressing problem. It would be something he would have to inquire about at a future date, if she ever came back. No doubt the imaginary Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress in his head would not stop pestering him until he found out.

Severus knew they didn’t really exist and his flat was not haunted. He just preferred to think of them there, so he wouldn't have to deal with the uncomfortable notion that he really did care about what happened to one of the most promising students Hogwarts had produced in several generations.

Certain that he would not be able to enjoy reading his magazine for the rest of the evening, he drew a bath in which to soak and think some more.

Sitting in the scalding water, he remembered how Mrs. Weasley looked. She was thin, too thin for his liking. Women were supposed to have curves, not bony angles. The quality of her hair reminded him of his own when he spent hours in the dungeons sticking his head over simmering cauldrons in which to judge if potions were coming along nicely or if he would have to prevent another caustic disaster. Whereas his hair was greasy, hers has lost the luster associated with youth and health.

Wondering if she _had_ pursued a position involving potions, he thought of her hands. They were slightly stained a distinctive faint purple, indicative of working with shrinking violets. Her hands were nimble and slightly callused similarly to the way his used to be. Severus rubbed at his hands, remarking at how time had erased the rough calluses where the handle of his favorite knife and spoon used to cradle against his fingers and palm.

She was so repressed; it was pitiful. The tension in her voice regarding her marriage to Ronald
Weasley told him pages alone. Her edginess, the way her body vibrated with potential energy, her dissatisfaction with her husband on so many levels. He had not spent the past years as a shoulder to cry on without picking up on the typical signals of a woman unfulfilled and desperate for release.

An image of Hermione under him naked and crying out in pleasure filled his mind. He immediately evicted the thought from his mind.

Severus had had sex with women Hermione's age and younger. Some of them had come fresh from the halls of Hogwarts seeking experience that their boyfriends lacked. So why the thought of carnal relations with this particular woman bothered him was a concept he would have to ponder another time.

Sighing, he considered the other pressing issue at hand. Hermione's knowledge of Draco and Ginny's affair was a tangle in the little world they currently lived in. He had warned the young wizard about the danger involved with sleeping with an Auror's wife, but Draco disregarded it and took his relations with Mrs. Potter to a sexual level anyway. He claimed it would have happened sooner or later, which was the unfortunate truth.

Love was something he found to be a burden at times. It could be used against you in the most dangerous way, if you weren't careful.

He would see Draco in the morning and tell him of his possible impending doom then. It would do no good to tell him now, as it would only deprive him of a good night's sleep. The boy was so picky about getting his beauty sleep. Besides, there would be no where to run to if Mrs. Weasley decided to tell Potter everything, and he would need his rest if confronted with an enraged husband.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Hermione practically ran the whole way home, located on the far end of Diagon Alley. Once she was standing at her front door, she paused to collect herself.

"Get a grip on yourself," she scolded herself.

Thoughts of the gigolo filled her mind. His lips on her mouth, sending those same tingling currents through her body, his hands on her breasts, holding her tight around the waist to his body, suffocating her in drowning kisses. Her legs wrapped about his waist, her nails in his back, her head arched back, his scented skin on her skin.

"Stop it," she quietly hissed to herself. Hermione shook her head back and forth, hoping the physical act would somehow purge the enticing visions in her mind.
Opening the door, she was surprised to find Ron sitting on the couch, waiting for her.

"Ron!"

To say she was surprised to see him there was an understatement. Usually when he threatened to be out all night after one of their fights, she wouldn’t see him till the following evening when their tempers had returned to normal and they could fight in rational volumes.

"I thought… you said…” Hermione had been hoping he would hold good on his promise to stay out the night so she could have some privacy to mull over the day she’d had.

Ron quickly rose to his feet. He looked like he wanted to sweep Hermione up in his arms, but stood a few paces a way from her and fidgeted.

"I was wondering where you were. I'm glad you're okay," he said anxiously.

"I… I…” Her mind drew a blank.

What could she tell her husband? 'I've just come back from a brothel where I paid a man to listen to me, since I can’t talk to you.' Instead she came up with a half-truth.

"I needed some time to think. I had a few drinks."

Ron gave a small sigh of relief. "Hermione, you were right. I've been a complete prat. I've been a terrible husband. I haven’t been keeping up my end of the housework and I've been taking you for granted. You do everything and I'm just a complete berk for not helping out as much as I should."

A leaden lump of guilt began burning in Hermione's gut.

Ron went on with his speech. "And you're right. I should have taken the offers as Keeper for other teams. It was selfish not to consider how it would affect you. We could have had a larger flat by now… or a house even. Just like the ones in the wizarding quarter of Oxford. You would have nice
new robes and you could tell the boss to shove off and go look for another job. One that makes you happy."

Hermione wanted the ground to open up and swallow her whole. Here she was, having spent seven galleons they could barely spare to have some strange man listen to her bawl about her insignificant life, while Ron was waiting at home to apologize to her after she behaved like a complete harpy toward him.

Her cheeks burned with shame and she could feel her heart crumple up upon itself in her chest.

"I'm the one who should apologize," she confessed. "I've been a complete and utter shrew, nagging you like a fishwife. You have two jobs; it's only fair I should do more. I've just been really stressed lately and I'm just really, really tired today. I snapped, and it wasn't very nice of me to do it out in public and embarrass you, and…"

Ron grabbed her and kissed her deeply. This was the part where they made up. Granted, she would have welcomed the affection most times after they had been fighting, but now that she had been with the man in the mask, she felt soiled.

More than anything, she wanted to shower and scrub the scent and the memory of him from her mind and body.

"Ron, I—"

He kissed her soundly to silence her reservations and mouth.

"Shhh. We're both sorry. We just need to work a little harder together, that's all. We'll talk about this later."

He kissed her again and Hermione's mind drifted. She recalled how the gigolo's kiss on her hand sent sparks up her arm… 'Just like Ginny described earlier with Malfoy.' Panicked, Hermione kissed Ron back harder, attempting to expunge the terrible idea forming in her mind.

She would not entertain thoughts of this mystery man making love to her, bringing her to orgasm after orgasm. Hermione loved Ron, and even if he didn’t turn her on to the point of insanity where she would beg him to slide his cock into her, she would not let herself fantasize about being with
another man while she was kissing her husband. It felt like she was cheating on Ron in her heart. It made her feel… dirty.

Instead, she concentrated on the good things Ron made her feel. He was an adequate kisser, and granted they didn’t kiss fervently like they did before they’d started having sex, she could find the act pleasant, though a bit boring after a while.

In their haste to consummate the make-up-and-kiss portion of the evening, they didn’t even make it to the bedroom.

During their coupling, Hermione forced her mind to concentrate on her husband and the way his body felt when joined with hers. She tried to enjoy the feel of his skin on hers and the friction of him entering and withdrawing from her as he ground his body against her.

The more she pushed herself to enjoy the moment, the less satisfaction she got. Images of her gigolo flashed briefly in her mind before she banished them once more. She could tell Ron would orgasm soon, and to make him feel that he had brought her some pleasure out of this bout of make-up sex, she faked an orgasm.

Since she had never really experienced an orgasm with Ron inside of her, she had learned a fairly convincing repertoire of faces and noises to make. Even his fumbling with his hands at attempts to bring her off before, during or after intercourse did not result in the tingling glow she desperately wanted to experience.

Ron collapsed on top of her, panting and sweating. For the fact she did not receive that much pleasure from it at all, she considered it her penance for her actions and thoughts.

He pressed light kisses at her temple. His hot sticky breath was too much for her to bear.

"That was fantastic, 'Mione," he panted into her hair. "Have I told you what an amazing lover you are?"

Hermione shut her eyes, hoping Ron wouldn’t lift his head off her shoulder, and squeezed back the tears.

'Tm an awful woman.'
Ron could get pleasure from the sex they had, why couldn’t she?

'Maybe I'm frigid. I'm too controlling to let myself just enjoy what Ron and I have. So what if he's not the best. He's my husband and I love him. What's wrong with me?'

They went to the bedroom quietly, hand-in-hand. Slipping under the covers, Ron spooned behind her, his heavy arm pinning her down around her waist.

Once she was sure he had slipped into a deep slumber, Hermione began to cry silently.

Chapter End Notes

Chpater 8 A/N: A big thanks to AquiliaSevera (Cindy) for the lovely illustration called "Hermione's Tears" which I commissioned for this chapter. AquiliaSevera has also drawn a second illustration for me of Severus sitting on the couch, "Languid Pose," when Hermione returns from the loo with a background illustration of Severus kissing her hand.

You can view the fanart either on the Tumblr account I have for this fic, which also includes other goodies for some chapters, or on AquiliaSevera's Deviantart page. Atdlhea-betz: http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/post/129365415330/severus-could-see-the-tears-already-forming-it
“Hermione's Tears”: http://www.deviantart.com/deviation/12905509/
“Languid Pose”: http://www.deviantart.com/deviation/16050712/

Scylla and Charybdis is the Greek equivalent of "rock and a hard place" from the story of Ulysses.
"Morning Has Broken"

Chapter Summary

Severus enlightens Draco to his precarious situation. Croissant, brioche and scones for breakfast.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Nine
"Morning Has Broken"

Disclaimer: Rowling owns it all.

Severus woke shortly after sunrise. Friday was the one day of the week he needed to rise so early. After a languid stretch, he rose and donned a summer silk dressing robe and headed into his study.

The house-elf had his tea ready and waiting for him on his desk as he sat down to go over a few correspondences.

Letters addressed to Sebastian Delgado laid waiting for his response. Since Severus Snape was a Death Eater, his nom de guerre gave him liberty to pursue research and books otherwise forbidden to him. It was a simple combination of his middle name and his mother's maiden name. It was one hidden clue to his identity that he doubted even Moody would put together, as his father had brought Severus' mother back from Spain already wedded to her. After penning his replies, he sent them off with an owl.

Dressing quickly, he noted the time. It would not do him good to keep his parole officer waiting for him. Once his outer robe had been clasped and the hood pulled up to conceal his face, he headed out.

Draco was ready when Severus rapped on his door, the younger wizard covered in a similar cloak. While the older man preferred the color of bottomless black, his companion preferred the subtleties of a dark flecked gray for his cloak.

Severus preferred the winter for his weekly errand, as the right ascension and declination of the sun in this northern climate allowed him to walk to the Ministry under the cover of pre-dawn darkness.

As the disgraced pair walked through the bright, clear morning in Diagon Alley, their booted feet made light noises against the dew-covered cobblestones. Neither of them spoke; it was routine. Not until they stopped by the baker for a roll before going to the Ministry would they exchange a solitary word.

Once Draco has his habitual croissant and Severus his brioche, they were on their way. (Lavender
Draco was the first to speak this week. "Did you enjoy having a free evening? Or were you lonely?"

Severus always thought Draco's sense of humor needed a bit more refinement. At least his jibes were better than his father's, however.

"Unfortunately no. Our dear employer saw fit to saddle me with a new client last night," he said, not bothering to hide his irritation.

"Anyone I know?"

Severus wasn't eating his roll. He picked at it and tossed the crumbs away for the morning bird population to eat, as he had suddenly lost his appetite.

Draco leaned forward a bit and peered into Severus' hood to gauge his mood.

"Hermione Weasley," he bit out.

Draco stopped walking and started laughing. He had the pure gall to laugh out loud. The sounds echoed down the deserted thoroughfare. Even the street sweeper, a fellow Death Eater whose name they couldn't recall, wasn't up yet to bear witness to Draco bent over, one arm clutched to his side, his free arm braced against a wall.

"So," he asked between gasping chortles, "does she have a lovely pair of coconuts?"

Had Hermione been the same unbearably annoying witch he knew four years ago, he would have joined Draco with a snicker of his own. Instead, he frowned and walked faster.

The gray-cloaked wizard ran to catch up and peered into Severus' hood again.

"Don't tell me you're upset with my little joke over that Gryffindor pain-in-the-arse!"

"I wouldn't be laughing if I were you. She knows about you and Mrs. Potter."

He was amazed at the speed in which Draco's complexion went from pink to gray.

"It seems," Severus over enunciated, "that Potter has been suspicious of his wife and enlisted the help of Hermione and his Invisibility Cloak to follow Ginny. She traced your paramour to our building and saw you two together. While she didn't give details or names during her confession last night, she knows enough to tell Potter the truth."

"Hermione? On a first name basis now are we?" Draco said with raised eyebrows.

"There are six other women I could be referring to with that last name," he answered shortly. "No, all she did was soil a clean handkerchief and confide in me her dilemma. Tell Potter everything and have your death on her noble conscience, or tell him nothing and try to play counselor to fix their marriage."

"What's there to fix? It's broken beyond repair. She doesn't love him, she loves me!" Draco pouted angrily.

"Perhaps if you had at least let her know you were still alive instead of playing the heartbroken fool who lost everything except his woman, she wouldn't have married him. Instead, your pride demanded that you have something to give her besides yourself," Severus lectured him through
"It took you losing everything – including her – to realize she loved you regardless of your money. So stop playing the petulant lovesick boy and pray that my 'guidance' and consoling last night was enough to convince her not to tell Potter anything. I just hope she's become a better liar since leaving school or I will be looking at florist shops for graveside arrangements for your funeral."

Their usual Friday morning banter was overshadowed by Severus' revelation of Draco's predicament. Both men were lost in their own thoughts as they glided through the streets on the way to the Ministry.

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Severus knocked on the door and was invited to enter.

"Severus, Draco," Kingsley Shacklebolt greeted them perfunctorily. The Auror hated to do this, but at least as their parole officer, he could word questions carefully and not pry into any activities they may be up to in order to leave the country. It was the least he could do for his fellow Order members.

The two ex-Death Eaters sat down in the straight-back wooden chairs, Draco attempting to slouch down and hook a leg over the arm of the chair. He quickly gave up that position, as the government issued chairs were designed to be as uncomfortable as possible. In fact, they were charmed so that the more comfortable you tried to become while sitting in them, they became even more uncomfortable.

Shacklebolt pulled out a sheaf of parchment and a Quick-Quotes Quill, setting the quill to take dictation.

"Let the record show that it is six-thirty in the morning, Friday, June twenty-seventh, two thousand and three. Death Eaters Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape are here for their weekly parole meeting with me, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Auror First Class," he recited in a monotonous fashion, having done it every week for almost four years.

The quill scribbled down every word, attributing the words to the black wizard.

"Have you, Severus Snape, brewed any potions, hexed or cursed anyone, or performed any prohibited charms, spells, or transfigurations under the law, according to the Death Eater decree?"

"No." Severus sat there, sullenly answering in a monotonous voice.

There was a pause while the quill caught up to the proceedings, its scratching noise filling the silence of the room.

"Are you still employed as a prostitute under the supervision of a Miss Lavender Brown?"

This was the part he hated most. As part of his weekly probation meeting, he had to admit that he made a living by rendering sexual services. To do the act was one thing, but to admit it on record battered his dignity. At least the sex he had was consensual, unlike what Lucius had done over the years, especially during the war.

"Yes." After all this time, he still couldn’t look Kingsley in the eye when he admitted it. He always averted his gaze when answering.

Shacklebolt did not want to know about Severus or Draco's other jobs with Miss Brown in her cosmetic business. The Auror had explained that he didn’t want to know what they did beyond the
required information. Even he did not want to have Moody slip him a dose of Veritaserum, asking him questions to see if he was hiding knowledge about the activities of two certain Death Eaters.

Kingsley made it known when the law came out that Moody had gone too far. And with the threat of losing his job and being labeled a Death Eater sympathizer, he kept his mouth shut and did what he could do for his war comrades. As he was their parole officer, he never checked up on them like he did his other charges, or used a Prior Incantato on their wands, and never interrogated them under the influence of the truth elixir. But voicing his opposition to Moody had made him a man under surveillance where Draco and Severus were concerned. Thusly, he was extremely careful how he conducted himself during these meetings, keeping everything above the board, dotting every "i" and crossing every "t."

The Auror, satisfied with conducting the bare minimum required, nodded his head.

"Have you, Draco Malfoy, brewed any potions, hexed or cursed anyone, or performed any prohibited charms, spells or transfigurations under the law, according to the Death Eater decree?"

"No," Draco answered with bored irritation.

"Are you still employed as a prostitute under the supervision of a Miss Lavender Brown?"

Draco lifted his head defiantly and replied, "Yes." He wanted to add, 'But not for very much longer, if the Fates see it that way,' but held his tongue.

"Very well," concluded their parole officer. "Let the record show that Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy are in good standing with the law. End of meeting."

The quill finished its transcription and set itself down. The bass voiced wizard picked up the quill and parchment and put them away. After a sweep with his wand for extendable ears, eyes, hidden Quick-Quote Quills or any other methods in which someone may eavesdrop, he cast a sound sealing spell on the door and ventilation grate to prevent anyone from listening in on their conversation.

Letting out a sigh, now that it was over, Kingsley asked rhetorically, "Am I correct to assume that both of you will not be gracing us with your presence at the fountain dedication ceremony on Monday?"

Severus glared at the man's jest while Draco rolled his eyes.

Kingsley nodded his head. "I know, I know. But I've been talking with my boss, Amelia. I think I've convinced her to run for Minister in the election next year. She's open to the idea of a fully accounted exoneration and public apology to you both. I haven't talked to her directly about it, but she would do it based on my recommendation alone."

Severus shook his head. "And wait another year? What happens if she doesn't get elected? We're back to square one. If it weren't for the Dementors, the things I would do to Moody and Fudge would make the Dark Lord look like a first year Hufflepuff," he growled.

"Well, don't tell me any particulars. I don't want a 'surprise' visit from Moody again. The last time he showed up with tea, I had to spill it on my lap in order to get out of the room. He's getting suspicious that I'm not making your life hellish enough and he keeps asking what you two do for food and lodging. Fortunately, I can keep your files from him under privacy protection laws that he can't overturn without the Wizengamot ruling of at least eighty percent. He wanted me to change our weekly appointment to noon so you two would have to walk in here for the whole Ministry to
see as they were leaving for lunch. I told him to go shove a Blast-Ended Skrewt up his arse."

Severus gave him a lopsided grin. He would have to ask Kingsley to put that one in a pensive for his personal viewing.

Running a large hand over his bald pate, he said, "There's less of them out there. Last night we found young Goyle in the back corner of Knockturn Alley." He glanced at Draco with a look of sympathy. "I'm sorry. I know you were classmates."

"How?" asked Draco in an emotionally detached manner.

"Far as we could tell, poison. There was a vial in his hand, but it was completely drained of its contents."

Severus turned his head to watch the blond wizard. He could see the younger man's mind working, wondering if Potter would make it look like an accident or just kill him in the street where he stood. It was distressing to him as well. All his old classmates and students from his house who had followed the Dark Lord were dying off one by one or giving up and asking for a soulless sentence in Azkaban.

"If there is anything I can do for you, legally, just ask. You both seem to be doing well. If your employment with Miss Brown ends, let me know. You're more than welcome to stay in my home until we can find a way to ensure that this law no longer applies to you both."

The two men nodded in thanks to the Auror's offer.

The friends they had were few and far between. They had cut off all contact with everyone in the Weasley clan except Ginny and beyond her, Miss Brown, and Kingsley, there was no one else they socialized with. They were persona non grata in the eyes of the wizarding world. Severus, as a service to Arthur Weasley, had not talked nor owled him, as the man could not afford to lose his good standing in the Ministry. It was the least he could do for the patriarch who always had faith in him, though they rarely talked beyond business concerning the Order.

Their meeting was over and it was time to leave before Ministry employees began arriving for work.

As they walked through the main lobby, Severus glanced over at the tented sculpture and wondered what it looked like under the yards of canvas charmed with a Repelling Spell to prevent prying eyes from spoiling the surprise.

Their boots heels clacked on the granite floor as they strode through the atrium, a companionable silence settled between them. Neither of them spoke until they arrived at the Lovely Lavender headquarters located on Dorian Loop in the manufacturing sector of Diagon Alley.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Hermione woke with the sun glaring in her eyes. After prying her tear-crusted eyelids apart, she glanced around. She couldn't comprehend why she was on the couch instead of in her warm, soft bed. Then her memory returned and the events of yesterday came slamming back into her mind like the Hogwarts Express. Shutting her eyes again, she threw her arms up over her face to shield her eyes from the overly bright sun and her guilty conscience from further recollection.

After Ron had fallen asleep, she'd cried as quietly as she could without alerting her husband to her distress, refraining from making any sounds and controlling her breathing so her body would not shake. Once again, she sought the isolation of a shower. Instead of feeling the usual post-coital
bitterness and dissatisfaction, she had felt filthy and unfaithful.

Not content with the shower, she then filled the bath in order to scrub every square inch of her skin raw as a form of self-flagellation. She sat in the unbearably hot water sweating, feeling the sting of her abraded skin protesting the water's temperature.

Now that her skin felt slightly less contaminated, she began to ponder her own actions of that night. Why did she feel so guilty over talking with some random person? Granted she had paid for the time, but she had struck up conversations with strangers before, engaging in lengthy discussions before bidding farewell, never to see them again. What was different about her masked man that made her feel as if she betrayed Ron?

It was the same quality Ginny described when she was with Malfoy. That kiss on her hand had felt like fire and velvet. One simple act aroused her more than Ron ever had in their entire courtship.

Hermione and Ron had fallen into their romance through a simple kiss. He had aimed for her cheek, but she turned her head unexpectedly and their lips met. Out of curiosity, she kissed back and he took it as a sign that she was interested. They both viewed that kiss as a sign to take their friendship beyond the platonic stage. Though Hermione never fell madly in love with Ron, like her other schoolmates did when they finally started dating someone they knew for a while, her rational mind dismissed the absence of this phase as a sign she was too mature to get all silly and sentimental. She had always wondered why girls got all moony-eyed over their boyfriends, gushing and walking about as if under a Levitation Charm. She thought she was too sensible to engage in that sort of behavior.

It seemed that perhaps she had missed out on a part of life others took for granted. Still, she and Ron had a strong friendship and that was more than some other married couples had, marrying out of love with no friendship to strengthen their bond. Now she wondered if friendship was enough to keep them together for the rest of their lives. She felt no passion with Ron. It wasn't a loveless marriage, but it lacked certain quality when a witch and wizard look adoringly at each other after being together for a century or more, still seeing the beautiful young person they fell in love with decades ago.

When Hermione looked at Ron, she never saw a man she wanted to lounge in bed all day with, talking about nothing and everything. She saw her old school friend who she shared an amicable companionship with. She never felt the yearning hunger for his body when they were apart. She’d never really wanted him as a lover, but had let the tide carry her into that relationship without ever examining it, to see if it was what she really wanted.

Her mother had told her many times it would be best if she found a husband while still in school, as dating and relationships, once out in the real world, were much harder to come by. By Hermione’s seventh year, no other boys had come into her life after Viktor. She’d contained a certain amount of dread that she would grow old and never marry like Professor McGonagall, so she was relieved when she discovered Ron's romantic interest in her. The pressure to find a future husband had been lifted and it was one item on her list of life goals that she could check off as completed.

She wondered what she would be doing right now if she hadn’t married Ron. The choices seemed limitless, yet nonexistent at the same time. What could she do, get a Time-Turner and relive her life without Ron? And do what? She found the door to apprenticeship closed to her, discovering that even with the war won, unspoken prejudices against Muggle-borns still prevailed. Her career options would have been the same, a job as a library apprentice to Madam Pince or a job at the Ministry. And the infamous photo of her in the *Daily Prophet* didn't help either, but nor did it hurt her career.
It seemed a tradition that at least one student would do something interesting enough in an act of post N.E.W.T. stress relief that it made the paper most every year. Even Harry's father and godfather were among the long list of headline grabbing 'victims.' Interestingly enough, streaking was not only a popular fad for Muggles in the seventies, it was for wizards, as well. Professor McGonagall still had the news clipping to prove it, which made Hermione blush. It seemed that Harry had grown up to look exactly like his father, but she never saw as much of Harry as she did in the photo of James and Sirius running down the high road of Hogsmeade with only their shoes on. The same black censoring bars covering their bobbing bits. What she later found out was that her Head of House had neglected to mention she had her own alcohol induced post N.E.W.T.s stress buster, involving the transfiguration of armor throughout the castle into rather randy nude life-sized chess pieces. It gave new meaning to the term 'jump the queen.'

Hermione missed her old Transfiguration professor. If McGonagall were still alive, she would have given her an apprenticeship. She would have continued to be her mentor and provide Hermione with the strength that she now seemed to lack in life.

Her mind wandered back to the gigolo. The whole experience was refreshing, to say the least. She wanted someone to discuss and debate with. She wondered if he was of at least average intelligence, and could engage in a profound or enlightened conversation.

Unfortunately, Ginny, though bright, was not the sort of friend she could have the sort of intellectual discussion that the redhead witch could have with Malfoy. For some reason, their talks could never be like that. To try would be to force the flow of their friendship.

In some twisted form of logic, Hermione tried her best to convince herself that she really hadn’t done anything wrong that evening. And if she were in need of a sympathetic ear, she would go to him again, but only if she was really desperate. When or if she ever did see him again, she would inquire to his ability to discuss things of an academic and theoretical nature. Perhaps if she found an outlet for her pent up intellectual frustration from her marriage, she would appreciate Ron more and resent him less.

Glancing in the bedroom, she saw that Ron was still asleep, and hoped he didn’t notice her gone from the bed last night. Her late-night ablutions had removed the need for a morning shower. She dressed herself quietly, hoping to not wake Ron. A peek at the clock told her she’d get into work by seven if she left soon.

She normally didn’t get to work so early, as she preferred to arrive when everyone else did during the morning hours, and stay late instead.

Diagon Alley had a different feel about it at that time of the morning. Owls began swooping about carrying today's Daily Prophet and delivering post while a few shopkeepers were sweeping the thresholds of their establishments preparing them for the morning flux of witches and wizards on their way to work to buy a quick breakfast with a cup of tea or coffee.

The smell reached her nose before she even came around the curve of the street. Fresh bread and rolls were ready for purchase and the heady, homey scent drew her into the bakery. The Twenty-Four Blackbird Bakery was known to have the best baked goods in Diagon Alley and Hermione was glad to not have to wait in a long line for her usual scone. She hoped they still hadn’t sold out of the ones with sultanas this early.

Stepping up to the empty counter, she spied the tray of scones fresh from the oven. After paying and heading over to the service counter to dab some strawberry jam on it before continuing her morning stroll to work, she caught the flash of two dark cloaked figures out of the corner of her eye. They walked in tandem, their long legs carrying them forward with purposeful strides.
With a dab of strawberry jam still stuck at the corner of her mouth, Hermione ran out the door to watch the two wizards walk away. She wasn't sure if she was imagining things or if it was the mentioning of Snape's name yesterday, but she swore she recognized that walk. The wizard on the right walked with a stalking grace, as if he did not want to be seen. Before she could get a good look, they had rounded the curve in the street and she could only remember the shape of his cloak and the sound of his boots.

Hermione's tongue swiped away the offending bit of jam away while she continued to stare at the empty expanse of narrow street in front of her.

"No. Couldn’t be," she muttered to her self.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 9 A/N: Delgado is a common Spanish last name; it's origin meaning "The Thin", so he would be Sebastian the Thin. Appropriate, no? I still hold the personal theory that Snape is a fine example of the Black Irish (Black Irish a mix of Spanish, stranded after the sinking of the Spanish Armada in 1588 off the coast of Ireland, with the native population). I think he has Spanish blood. Some of the Spanish actors I can recall have pale skin and dark hair and eyes. Look at an El Greco painting sometime and I swear you'll exclaim, "Oh my God, it's Snape!"

Oops. Okay, Kingsley and Ginny are the TWO other people who know what Severus does. I forgot to add the Weaselette. Okay, so four people know what he does. No more so far.

Dorian Loop is named after Dorian Grey, the vanity driven character who hid his true age and physical flaws. I think that's appropriate for a beauty supply company, don’t you?
“Dead Men Walking”

Chapter Summary

Hermione meets Harry for a debriefing, Severus gets some unpleasant news.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Ten
“Dead Men Walking”

Disclaimer: Rowling owns it all. You know it, I know it, her lawyers know it (I hope). Most of all, a big thanks to her turning a blind eye to what we do with…or should I say to her characters.

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Hermione had been working for a few hours before Marge showed up at the stroke of nine to begin work. The old crone walked in and took one look at Hermione.

"Gell, you get yourself home. You look unfit for work today."

Hermione looked up at her co-worker with her mouth agape. If her antique co-worker were feeling chatty, she would greet her with a "Morning." This was the first full sentence she ever heard uttered from the old witch's lips in the almost four years they worked together.

Marge's wrinkled, droopy eyes narrowed, reminding Hermione of a vexed basset hound.

"I will not have you blowing us both up," she croaked. "In all the time we've worked together, you've never taken a single sick day. One look at you and I know you're in no condition to be testing anything. Go home; you deserve it. I'll vouch that you are unwell, for you look it. Very much so."

Hermione didn’t think she looked that horrible when she headed out the door earlier that morning. Sure, her eyes were puffy to the point that the eye crème did little to hide it. Her hair had refused to
be tamed into a braid, as she’d fallen asleep on it wet, and the circles under her eyes had a distinct violet cast to them. But she didn’t think her appearance warranted a day off from work.

Before she could protest, Marge added, "What you have cannot be cured with Pepperup Potion, but with an extra day of rest. Go home, make it a four-day holiday and I'll see you Tuesday. Happy Victory Day."

Hermione was feeling quite bone weary, due to a few hours restless sleep last night. Nodding in reluctant agreement, she wished Marge the same celebratory salutations and went back to her office.

Stepping into her office, she saw a memo waiting for her. Snatching the flapping pale purple colored airplane from the air as it circled her small office, she shook it open. Hermione had a sinking feeling it was from Harry, and she was correct.

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Dear Hermione,

Meet me at the same pub, same time today.

Harry

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Hermione didn’t think she was able to feel more tired than she actually was, but reading Harry’s letter drained the last of her energies.

Now she had to make up her mind. She was leaning towards lying to Harry, but the thought of deceiving him tore at her heart. One thing she did know for certain, if Draco went to Azkaban or died, her friendship with Ginny would be forever changed. Perhaps this one lie could be the turning point where she could help her two friends salvage their marriage. With resignation, she put her own robes back on and left.
As she walked through the lobby, she changed course. Instead of heading home to grab a few hours sleep before meeting with Harry, she went over to a fireplace.

Grabbing a handful of Floo Powder, she clearly announced, "Number Twelve Grimmauld Place."

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Severus and Draco were in Lavender's office going over the end of fiscal year numbers.

"You made a nice tidy little sum this year, Mr. Snape," his employer commented.

He made a noncommittal noise as his eyes scanned the figures on the scroll. The men's line of toiletries he developed, Valiant Wizard, experienced thirty percent growth during the year, in no small part due to Draco's marketing campaign.

Draco had his own profit sharing arrangement with Lavender based on reaching target sales numbers. If he ever got out of Great Britain, it wasn't like he needed the money, but it gave him a purpose until they both could find a way out of the country or get full pardons. His day job did help pay for the custom tailored clothes he was used to.

If the launch of the Lovely Lavender and Valiant Wizard brands in the Americas went well in the fall, they would soon expand into the Asian market where those sorts of products sold very well.

"So." Lavender had that tone in her voice Severus knew too well. "How was your new client last night?"

Severus gave her a sardonic smile. "Well, I would suggest that if you have any marketing plans in the works, you get Draco to finish them up by noon today. It seems Mrs. Weasley knows about Mrs. Potter and Lover Boy," he said coolly with a head tilt towards Draco. "Mr. Potter asked her to go spy on his wife and caught them flagrante delicto. I did my best to convince her to not tell Potter anything, but knowing the woman's nature, I'd count on a visit from some Aurors today before finding a nice set of black dress robes for Draco's funeral."

It gave him pleasure to see Miss Brown blanche at his words. Her eyes were wide with shock and he could see the gears furiously grinding away in her mind.

He gave a deep chuckle amused at her reaction. "Its not that bad. Well, maybe it is. But I doubt Mrs. Weasley will tell Potter about them. As long as she can lie convincingly enough, Draco
Lavender and Draco exchanged looks in a way that Severus could not read at the moment, but they must have had some sort of agreement in place if something like this happened.

"We'll wait and see," was Lavender's final word. Draco refused to speak on the matter. "Back to business."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

"Hermione?"

Ginny was surprised by her friend's sudden appearance in her living room.

The older witch dusted herself off and removed the last of the soot with a swish of her wand. She hated traveling by Floo. It was so sooty.

"Hello, Ginny," she greeted her wearily.

Hermione walked over to the couch and collapsed on it, tired beyond her twenty-three years.

"What are you doing here? I thought you'd be at work," Ginny asked, perplexed by Hermione's visit.

"Marge sent me home, essentially saying I looked like I'd been to hell and back on a broom… in so many words."

She saw the look of guilt wash over Ginny's face.

"It's okay, Ginny. Well, no it’s not okay. Ron and I had a fight last night over money and housework. And coupled with yesterday afternoon, I just didn’t get any sleep last night."

Hermione sat there pondering the idea of telling Ginny about her visit to a gigolo, but crossed it out of her mind. By admitting to the act alone, it would give validity to Ginny's reasons for her infidelity. She decided to keep her own counsel on the matter.
"Harry wants me to see him today at one."

The words hung heavy in the air and Ginny sat quietly in reflection.

"Are you going to tell him?" she whispered.

Hermione supposed she would have to make up her mind eventually and yesterday she already knew what she would have to do.

"No."

Ginny began sobbing in relief with her head in her hands. "Thank you," she quietly wailed through her hands. Lifting her hands up, she began rambling, "I'll make this up to you, I swear. Anything, just ask."

Hermione snarled, "I don't want anything out of this. I just don't want him to die. As much as I hate him, I'm not that… cruel."

As Ginny's tears subsided, Hermione thought back to a lingering question in her mind. "Do you or Malfoy know what happened to Snape?"

Had Hermione been looking at her friend, she would have seen that same facial tic from Wednesday.

"No, he just seemed to disappear into the woodwork."

No, the man she met last night couldn't be Snape. The gigolo had been charming, attentive, and patient. Snape was anything but those particular traits. Besides, Snape was taller and thinner, at least she remembered him that way. And that voice, it was like a salve on her nerves. It relaxed and calmed her. Snape's voice in the dungeon brought dread and fear, not delicious thoughts of that voice in her ear as he would slide his cock in and out of her with slow movements, creating a wonderful friction of…
"How does it work. Do you owl Lavender? How do you pay her?" Mrs. Weasley just wanted to know out of curiosity, nothing else, she reminded herself.

The redhead witch cast a sideways glance at her. "I owl to meet with her, usually at the Leaky Cauldron. She owls me back a time to meet. I pay her the money, and give her a brief description of what I want. She makes sure everything is arranged. Most of the time, I just say, 'have him surprise me,' which is what he surely did yesterday." She gave a brief laugh.

"What sort of things does she… he… whatever. What sort of 'arrangements?'"

Ginny sat back on the couch and smiled secretly. "One time, I had been complaining that Harry wouldn’t take a holiday and had mentioned several times I’ve wanted to go to Japan. One day when I showed up, he’d turned the whole flat into a Japanese tea garden."

Hermione's mouth fell open. It seemed so… romantic.

"There was a moss covered path with stepping stones, a running stream, stone lanterns, a couple of beautiful bonsai trees and a cherry tree in full bloom." Ginny got a far away look in her eye. "We sat there in the tea house where his bed usually sits and we wore kimonos. He studied how to do a tea ceremony, just for me. We sipped tea and talked while watching the cherry blossom petals fall and drift down the stream." She swallowed hard, as tears formed in her eyes. "It was wonderful. It's the most romantic thing he's ever done. Anyone's ever done, for that matter. I never wanted the afternoon to end. I would have given my soul for a Time-Turner to relive that moment over again."

Mrs. Potter continued. "We make love, have cream tea, laugh, talk about all the places we'd love to travel to, sometimes we give each other a massage." A wicked smile played on her lips. "Sometimes I get to play the dark wizard and he plays Auror."

Despite her aversion to the memory of what they did yesterday, a mental picture of Malfoy chained spread-eagle and naked popped into her mind. She could envision every muscle and plane of his body. It disgusted her to think she could somehow lust after Malfoy's body. However, in the effort to expunge the image, she replaced Malfoy with that of her gigolo. Mask and scarf in place, while the rest of his body was nude. Her mind created a picture of what his body should look like from the way his clothes fit him, his body straining against his bonds.
She could see herself sauntering up to her captured prey. In her mind, her hand was reaching for the mask to reveal his face, grasping the edge of the mask when Hermione finally realized she was fantasizing. Her attention snapped back to the present and their conversation.

Remembering Ginny mentioning a massage, she thought about how perfect one sounded at the moment. She hadn’t had one since Ginny gave her a day at the spa for her birthday last year. The tension in her neck and shoulders was on the verge of giving her another headache.

"Got any headache potion?" Hermione asked.

"Sure, let me get you some. Would you care for some tea, as well?"

Hermione nodded her head and both of them rose from their seat. Ginny headed upstairs and the worn out witch went to the kitchen to put the kettle on.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Hermione took the tube to the Tower Hill stop. As she strolled across the Tower Bridge, feeling the warm summer air on her face, she could understand why Harry would want to meet at a pub away from where any witch or wizard on lunch break from the Ministry would go.

Ginny had given her some Pepperup Potion to combat the look of fatigue that plagued Hermione. She needed it to have the strength to lie to Harry.

Arriving before Harry, Hermione sat in the same booth to wait for him.

She really didn’t like the pickle Ginny had put her in. Reflecting upon the situation, she wondered if she would have done the same. Hermione tended to think she would have just left Ron, telling him that it was a youthful mistake, a grand leap of faith that as friends they could have a successful marriage. But what would that action have resulted in? Being socially shunned with a gigolo boyfriend. And Hermione did not have the family that Ginny had, with all the familial pressures and expectations heaped upon her. She supposed considering all the options, maybe she would have done the same, but hoped she wouldn’t.

Still, the fact was she would have to lie to Harry, and convincingly at that. If she didn’t, then Harry would suspect she was covering for Ginny and then where would she be? In trouble with Harry, which would only lead to trouble with Ron and the whole Weasley clan. No wonder Ginny did her best to keep things a secret. The thought of Molly Weasley leading the charge in criticizing Hermione’s participation in Ginny's ruse made her head spin, as the headache relief potion was still
Just as she was considering ducking out and claiming to have never received the memo to join him for lunch, Harry showed up.

"Hello," Harry quietly spoke.

"Hello, Harry."

He slid into the booth across from her, his hands fidgeting and tearing at a piece of loose skin at the corner of his thumb. Hermione noted the freshly bitten look of his nails.

"So?" he prompted her.

'You can do this,' she convinced herself, hoping she was right.

"She never showed up. I waited as long as I could, but I never saw her."

There. She did it and if she didn’t say much else on the matter, it would be fewer falsehoods she would have to remember. Somehow she felt as if she had just set a great stone wheel into motion with this action, as if her lie had pulled the lynchpin on a chain of events that she might later regret.

Harry's shoulders relaxed in a manner she could only interpret as relief.

"Maybe…” He paused to collect himself with a shuddering sigh. "Maybe it's just work. I mean, I'm always hunting down dark wizards and looking for suspicious activity. Maybe I'm just imaging things that aren't there."

Hermione took this as an opportunity to start playing marriage counselor. Perhaps if she helped their marriage, Ginny could love Harry as much as she did Malfoy. If things got better, perhaps she'd stop seeing Malfoy all together.

"Speaking of work," Hermione said, hoping to bring the conversation around to a different tangent,
"Ginny had been wanting a holiday for quite a while. A holiday might be just what you two need. A chance to reconnect and have some quiet time together. No work, committees or family obligations. A chance to talk and catch up."

Harry smiled a bit. "Yeah, maybe. It's just that I get this feeling when we're... doing... you know." Hermione understood his implied suggestion about sex. "I get this feeling she's off somewhere else, like she's fantasizing about someone else."

"Well, it's common for people to fantasize during sex, Harry."

'Where had that come from... oh yes.' Hermione suddenly remembered reading some sex article in one of her mother's women's magazines at home. No doubt her mother left it out as part of her 'education,' as she and her mother never had a formal bird and bees conversation.

"Really?" He seemed to perk up at this news. "So, I'm not imagining... I could have sworn." Harry shook his head in embarrassment.

Hermione felt for her friend. From what she knew, it was now painfully obvious that Ginny was fantasizing about Malfoy while having sex with her husband. It wouldn’t have been such a bad notion, if it weren't for the fact that Ginny actually was sleeping with the Slytherin prat. Suddenly, Hermione’s own fantasies about her gigolo while having sex with Ron didn’t seem quite so bad. If men fantasize all the time during sex, why couldn’t she? In the back of her mind, she knew why she was reluctant to latch onto that one fantasy.

More questions that had been nagging at Hermione over the past few days surfaced. She wanted to cross-reference her information for validity.

"Harry," she said delicately, "you mentioned there were things Ginny asked... in bed. What sort of things?"

"Well, she asked me to spank her," he whispered hurriedly.

"So?"

"That's hitting a woman. I can’t hit a woman," he professed in scandalized tones.
Hermione wanted to roll her eyes at Harry’s naiveté, but refrained.

Harry's face began to turn into a dark frown. "You know during the final battle. You know how I touched Voldemort while I cast the last spell before he died?"

She nodded.

"Well, while I touched him, our minds joined. I saw everything in his mind. All the things he'd done and ordered his Death Eaters to do. I saw wizards killed in a way that would leave you with nightmares, women raped while their throats are slit. Impaled on pikes, blinded and tortured. I know Ginny thinks I'm boring in bed, and maybe that's why she fantasizes, but the things she asks me to do only bring back the memories I can’t get out of my head. So sex toys and blindfolds and tying her down are just out the question. I just want to throw up because I can’t help but think of those things I saw. I just don't want to see Ginny like that, because I won’t be aroused, I'll be sick."

Hermione just put her head in her hands. Now it all made sense and she felt pity for them both. Harry could never provide Ginny with the sexual stimulation she craved and Ginny could never love Harry in the way he thought she did.

"Have you ever told Ginny why you won't do the things she asks?" Hermione pressed.

He shook his head. "No. After what she went through during her first year, I don’t want to have her drag up her own memories with Tom Riddle. And to have a husband with Voldemort's memories, I think it would be too much for her."

"Have you asked her?" The complete breakdown of communication between her two friends was now more than she could stand. "Have you ever actually spoken to Ginny and found out she needs to talk about what happened in the Chamber of Secrets? And you! You keep this all bottled up. You should be seeing a psychiatrist or something. Someone to talk to and help you resolve these things. This is not healthy, Harry. You just assume Ginny doesn’t want to hear, when actually, she does need to hear this from you. What she doesn’t need is you keeping secrets from her. You both have been twisted around at the hands of Voldemort. Maybe if you both just started talking about it, you’d feel better." She was ranting, but she didn’t care at this point. "You know how many times I've listened to Ginny tell me about what Tom Riddle did to her? Enough times to know she doesn’t think you want to hear about it. Well, Harry. Do you want to hear about it or just pretend it didn’t happen to her and go on like nothing happened and you're both just fine and dandy, WHEN YOU'RE NOT!"
Not knowing why, she felt disgusted with the whole situation. Ginny and Harry had obviously never talked about something that they both shared. Granted, it was a disturbing thing to bond over, but it was something they shared in common.

Tired and irritated beyond measure, Hermione stood.

"I suggest you and Ginny have a long talk. And if I were you, I'd schedule some time for a holiday if you want to save this marriage."

Storming out the door, she didn’t see the flummoxed look on Harry's face as she left him sitting there, contemplating her ranting advice.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

After slamming the door to her flat, Hermione realized that she never got around to eating lunch. The point was moot however, as she had no appetite. She did need a drink though.

Alcohol on an empty stomach was never a good idea, especially for someone with a low tolerance for it; however, Hermione was in no mood to dawdle on about it.

She polished off the last two cans of Ruddles in the cupboard, making note that she would have to stop by the Muggle market this weekend for more. Once they were gone, she then scrounged around and found a half full bottle of Voodoo Rum, while ignoring the city imps – the magical equivalent of cockroaches – that had infested the pile of dirty dishes Ron had still not cleaned.

The zombie on the bottle's label kept falling over the same gravestone as Hermione kept on drinking, one large swallow at a time.

Tired of watching the foul little creatures romp in a water filled pan that had begun, over the past few days, to grow a sickly layer of white scum on it, she went out to the living room, rum bottle still clutched in her hand.

Hermione needed someone to talk to. Ron, Harry and Ginny would not do for what she needed. Ron, well, Ron was Ron. Ginny had her own set of issues, and Harry was probably the most repressed, screwed up one of the bunch. Suddenly, the idea of seeing her gigolo again sounded very appealing, while in her drunken haze.

Stumbling back into the kitchen, she grabbed some parchment, her quill and some ink.
Dear Lavender,

Had a lovely time Thursday night. How refreshing it is to have someone to talk to with an open mind, and without fear of judgment too. I would like to take you up on your offer of seeing the same gentleman again. He’s the one with the incredibly sexy voice. Thursday evenings work well for me. Is he available then? Does your offer of ten Galleons a visit still stand?

Please owl me privately and let me know when we can meet and make arrangements for payment.

My most sincere gratitude,

Hermione Weasley

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In her state of intoxication, Hermione’s handwriting seemed passable.

Pigwidgeon complained with a rather loud, harassed squawk when Hermione accidentally tied the note around both of the small bird's feet, her numb fingers difficult to control. The bird took off with haste to escape its none-too-gentle mistress, her note dangling precariously from one leg.

Satisfied that she finally had the Gryffindor courage to do something really outrageous and for herself, she tipped her chair back.

Somehow, the floor had decided to fly up and hit her in the face.

Laying on the floor, stunned with the dull ache that slowly bloomed on her right temple and cheekbone, she finally realized she was no longer upright. While staring at the walls, amazed at the speed in which the room could speed around her, she started to feel nauseous. That phrase that she so often heard Harry and Ron chant their seventh year came back to haunt her.
'Liquor then beer, never fear. Beer then liquor, never sicker.'

Oh God. She couldn’t even get properly drunk. She had to mess that up and ruin a perfectly good afternoon of mindless stupor.

Lifting her head from the tile floor, she quickly turned so she was on her knees and began retching up the contents of her stomach. Thankful that her hair was still braided to keep it out of her face and the puddle of vomit in front of her, she remained in that position for a while. It took a few more contractions of her stomach to finally be rid of the poison.

Rising from the floor, her knees shaky and unsteady, Hermione leaned against the table.

The city imps, tired of playing in the dirty dishes, had begun leaping from the counter to frolic in the dark brown puddle of ale and rum mixed with stomach acid. They danced a mad ballet of delight, greedily drinking up the putrescent liquid with their tiny black hands while splashing their hairy, bare feet about.

Repulsed by the whole scene, Hermione whipped out her wand.

"Scourgify!"

The vomit and city imps that had made it to the floor were gone. The remaining imps on the counter scattered when Hermione turned to face them, no doubt to crawl back into the wall space where they lived.

A few swishes of her wand and the dishes were on their way to cleaning and stacking themselves away in the cupboard. Why Ron couldn't get around to doing a few spells himself, she couldn't understand.

Satisfied that the kitchen didn't look quite so disgusting, she headed off to the bathroom to finish riding out the remaining buzz of her binge in a hot bath.

Severus, Draco and Lavender had spent the better part of the day going over numbers and ideas for new product lines, and projected figures for the 2003/2004 fiscal year. It was one of the few times
they all sat together and discussed business, as Severus spent most of his time in the research and development lab and Draco had his own work corresponding with graphic artists, sales teams and advertising directors at publications.

"What do you mean a variation on the Swelling Solution won't work?" she queried.

"Despite the leap in logic that one might think that sort of potion might work, let me remind you that I am a Potions Master. As such, I know which potions can not be used in such a capacity." Before she could ask why it wouldn’t work, Severus continued. "The reproductive organs are too delicate and can be irreparably damaged if used incorrectly, which considering how many students of mine actually went on to N.E.W.T. level potions, would be a large percentage of your consumers. We need a potion that can be used in small or liberal amounts without the threat of a lawsuit for burst breasts or," he paused looking very uncomfortable all of a sudden, crossing his legs, "other… exploded things."

Draco winced noticeably and shifted in his chair before reaching for his cup of tea.

"All right," Lavender conceded. "We'll take a different approach. That's why you're the Potions Master and I pay you. Still, we need to work on a natural lubrication solution, something to stimulate the production of cervical mucus. I was thinking that maybe a base of Evening Primrose oil and…"

The landing of a small owl on her desk distracted Lavender’s attention.

Reaching out for the small bird, she smiled. "Well, I wasn't expecting you today. Got something for me?"

Pigwidgeon held out his little leg with the note still attached. After untying it, she read the letter.

Severus hated it when she smiled like that.

"Seems I was right, Mr. Snape." Lavender was positively glowing with delight.

"About what?" he gritted from between his teeth, knowing he was not going to be pleased with her answer.
"Mrs. Weasley would like a repeat performance. She wants to meet, quote, 'the one with the incredibly sexy voice,' … again." She emphasized the last word with a waggle of her eyebrows, knowing it would irk him to no end.

Severus glared at Draco, warning him not to laugh lest he be Severus' guinea pig for an alternative to the Swelling Solution.

"Seems I was right," she crowed. "You do have a way with women despite your public demeanor."

"You think you're always right," he muttered, glowering at the small owl for being the bearer of this news.

Unfortunately for Severus, Lavender almost always was right where people were concerned. It was times like this that she reminded him of some of the more annoying aspects of Dumbledore.

"With one exception, yes." The witch smirked.

"And what, pray tell, was that one time. Someone didn't agree to one of your little plans?"

"No, I'd thought you'd loosen up once you started getting shagged on a regular basis."

Severus wasn’t sure what was more insulting. The fact that she’d made the impertinent assumption, or Draco snorting his tea through his nose in response to her comment.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: "Gell" should be pronounced as Col. Pickering did in the movie 'My Fair Lady.' It never came out as girl, it always came out sounding like 'gell,' rhyming with bell.

Flagrante delicto means 'in the act of committing a crime.'

Ruddles is a brand of ale that is very popular in England.
Hermione didn’t like what she saw when she looked in the mirror.

"You look about as chipper as a turkey on Thanksgiving Day, honey," the mirror quipped. The relevance of the American holiday celebrating the mass consumption of the large poultry was rather lost on Hermione. "What's wrong? Someone done run off wit' cho' man?"

Hermione had bought the charmed glass at a steep discount, as it had an American Southern accent with a cheeky attitude and brutally honest opinion. It was times like these that she thought plain Muggle mirrors were far superior to their magical counterparts. To her dismay however, she knew the mirror was right.

She forced a smile on her face that didn't quite reach her eyes.

Her reflection winked back at her. "That's right. You keep telling yourself you're all right. Denial isn’t just a river in Egypt, honey,” the mirror drawled with a twang.

"Quiet," she hissed, glad that Ron was still in the shower. "Anymore talk like that and you'll be floating at the bottom of the Thames… face down."
Hermione wanted to rub her face in frustration, but she restrained her impatience. She didn’t want to smear her freshly applied make-up. Normally, she found the candor of the mirror appealing when compared to the sycophantic ones that hung in the places she and Ginny shopped, but those types of remarks around Ron today would certainly not be welcome.

The mirror quietly muttered under its glassy breath, "Just 'cuz I read your beads, missy… ungrateful limey…"

Looking at herself one last time, Hermione decided that her best robes were most certainly out of fashion. She had three sets of robes to wear: maroon, navy blue and black. She had her navy robes on and they were looking a bit worn. Hermione was never a slave to fashion, but she did appreciate well-made clothes with classic lines.

Kicking off her brown shoes, she decided the black ones went better with her outfit and slipped them on. She would have liked a pair to match each of her robes, but she just didn't quite have the money. Besides, with robes that old, she might as well wait until she bought new robes and the shoes to match.

Thinking of money, Hermione was wondering how she was going to afford ten Galleons for her next visit to the gigolo. The part of her mind that excelled in Arithmancy took charge of the little math problem.

’Hnm, if I break it into five, that's two Galleons a day. Where can I save two Galleons a day?’

There was only one answer: lunch.

It wasn't as though she ate much to begin with. Even Molly had been complaining she was too thin. Unfortunately, chicken was inexpensive, so she made a habit of buying it most of the time. Fortunately for Ron, the team always provided a good hot lunch for those hungry Quidditch players.

One of the few guilty pleasures she had was going out for lunch. She knew it would be cheaper if she brought her own, but going out to lunch with Harry, Ginny or a few other co-workers from the Ministry was her chance to socialize. Harry always insisted that he pay for her lunch, but Hermione refused on principle. Her two close friends were rich, but that did not make it right that they should pay.
Lately though, Harry wasn’t available for lunch. During the past several months he’d been unable to join her. She had found a bunch of girls from the Department of International Magical Cooperation, in which the Department of S&R was a subset, with whom to eat. They weren’t intellectual giants, nor did they engage in scintillating conversation on a wide variety of topics. She hung around the fringes of their discussion, occasionally commenting on Ministry policy and some of the historical precedents in which decisions set said policy, when the topic didn’t center on who was dating whom, or fashion.

Hermione performed a quick mental calculation of how much it would cost to make her own lunch – a sandwich, fruit, a beverage and a bag of crisps – versus what she would spend at an establishment. She realized that she could save a little more than two and a half galleons a day. Perhaps she could talk Ginny into joining her for a brown-bagged lunch instead of eating at one of the many luncheon joints located in Diagon Alley.

Maybe after she had grown bored of her gigolo, if his intellect was equally as paltry as that of her contemporaries, she could save enough money in a few months for some very nice day robes and shoes to match.

Pleased that she had found a new goal to strive for, her attitude improved. It was just in time as Ron had just stepped out of the shower.

"You look nice," he commented while running a towel through his hair.

Hermione wasn’t sure if he was trying to make her feel better, or if he was sincere. Her light blue top and dark blue skirt did go well with her robes, even if the shades of blue made her look a bit pasty.

Glancing back at Ron as he finished drying off, she looked at his body with a critical eye. With the addition of his face and neck, his arms, legs and shoulders were positively covered in freckles of varying size and color. Even his back and chest held testament to the many summer he spent at the Burrow growing up, days spent shirtless while playing a quick game of Quidditch or de-Gnoming the garden. Some freckles were light coffee colored, some orange and some the color of dark chocolate. Many of them blended into one another. His chest was flat and completely hairless with the exception of a faint trail of red hair that trailed from his navel to his pubic region. He was strong, but his body did not show it. His body was the same as when he was sixteen and finished his last major growth spurt. Long gangly legs, caved-in chest, narrow shoulders and all. It was the perfect body for a Keeper, where a long arm reach was critical, but it still had a very boyish quality about it that didn't make her hormones churn and bubble with vigor.
Ron caught his wife staring at him and he turned his backside to her, shaking his arse in a playful manner.

"Want some of this now, don't we?" he teased.

Hermione laughed at his jocular antics, shielding her eyes as his naughty bits wiggled about. He could usually make her laugh, but he had never really turned her on.

"Come on now. We'll be late if you don't hurry," she reminded him.

Victory Day always filled Hermione with a bittersweet feeling. The day celebrated the ending of terror filled years, but it reminded her of the sacrifices wrought along the way. Her two dearest mentors, Dumbledore and McGonagall, were dead. So were Remus Lupin and Hagrid. To be amongst all the other members of the Order only served to remind her of their absence.

Neville and Luna were talking in a corner of the atrium of the Ministry when Hermione and Ron arrived. They walked over to their old schoolmates and exchanged greetings and hugs.

"Neville, you old dog. How's life been treating you?" The redhead greeted his old Gryffindor roommate with enthusiasm.

Hermione and Luna exchanged idle chitchat for a bit. The two men were still talking when Hermione excused herself to circulate within the crowd, searching for other Order members.

Arabella Figg, with a mewling kitten in her pocket, was talking excitedly with Podmore, who nodded with a glazed expression on his face as Mrs. Figg went on about her latest litter of cats.

Some of the Weasleys had already arrived. The twins were wrangling their twin sets of toddlers, Henkles & Ignacio, and Hortensia & Ingrid, while their wives held their infants, Jasmine and Jasper. It seemed that not only did the twins do everything together, their wives got pregnant at the same time, both with twins the first time and with single children the second time around.

Giving the twins and their wives a nod of recognition and a smile, Hermione went in search of people she hadn't seen in a while. As she passed near the loo, she spotted Tonks chatting with Dedalus Diggle.
"Hermione! Cor blimey! I haven't seen you in a wizard's age," the fuchsia haired Auror called to her.

"Tonks! So good to see you," she warmly returned the greeting. "Dedalus! How have you been?"

"Not bad. I was just telling Tonks here about some work I was doing for the Ministry in France," he said excitedly.

"Really? What sort of work?" Hermione asked. She figured if she was going to start inquiring about Snape, today would be a good day, as many of the other members of the Order might know something of his whereabouts. It would be easier to bring up the topic while discussing the lives of other Order members.

"Remember Hestia Jones?" Hermione nodded to his question. "Well, she left the Auror division after the war and went into diplomatic circles. She got a post in France, sort of like an ambassadorship, and she asked for me to come help with some security matters. I just got back from a month in Paris, as I was telling Tonks here." He was practically bouncing on the balls of his toes. The chartreuse tassel at the tip of his puce hat was doing a dance that distracted Hermione.

"Oh, that sounds like it's fun. Speaking of old members," Hermione said in quieter tones, "do either of you know what happened to Snape and Malfoy?"

Both of her compatriots' mouths fell open and Diggle stopped fidgeting.

Before Hermione could speak further, Tonks grabbed Hermione forcefully by her upper arms and led her into a secluded corner behind a parlor palm and cast a sound buffering charm. Tonks looked Hermione in the eye and the brunette witch never saw the youthful Auror look more serious.

"If you know what's good for you, I suggest you never ask such a question in this building again. You're too nice and honest to be crucified by others with an agenda."

Hermione's eyes went wide with apprehension over the gravity of Tonks was reaction. It told her that there was something very wrong and unsettling going on.
"I'll tell you what I do know." Tonks scanned the crowd to make sure no one was watching her with Hermione. If the ex-Head Girl decided to make a crusade out of the situation, she did not want her name associated with the younger witch. The Auror wanted to keep her job and name out of the papers. "The day the decree came out, Moody called us all into his office and had a talk with us. I can't reveal anything that was said, because he made us sign a piece of paper, but what I can tell you is, talk to Harry. He would probably know more than I do, and he wasn't at that meeting. I doubt Moody made Harry sign anything when he became an Auror."

Without another word, Tonks walked away from Hermione, casually exiting the spot behind the palms. She was soon talking with Shacklebolt in a friendly manner while Hermione continued standing behind the foliage, drinking in Tonk's revelations.

Stepping out from behind the potted palm, Hermione continued her circuit of the room. When she was close to coming back to where Ron, Neville and Luna were still standing she heard a familiar voice.

"Well, well. I haven't seen you in a while," the man's craggy voice came from behind her.

Hermione spun around and found herself face-to-face with Alastor Moody.

"Alastor," Hermione replied, a little stunned to have come across him.

She fought to clear her mind of the growing dislike for a man she once admired. His magical eye was somewhat disquieting to Hermione. She always felt as if she was making an obvious point of not staring at his aberrant eye.

"Yes, it's been a while." She hoped she didn't seem too standoffish. The man was highly suspicious and any change in her behavior from their previous encounters would produce paranoid speculation.

Smiling as warmly as she could without being over enthusiastic, Hermione looked over her shoulder and spotted Ron. "Would you excuse me? I must speak with my husband."

She hoped her excuse to leave his company quickly was believable, for she really did want to get away from him. With her stubborn and righteous nature, it was too tempting to get into a moral debate with the man over Snape and Malfoy's treatment under the decree.
When Hermione got back to Ron's side, the rest of the Weasleys had congregated in the same area.

Ginny was holding Charlie and Angelina's youngest, Kayleigh. She was cooing to the babe in her arms, looking quite content to hold the child for a while.

"Don't let your mother see you like this. It'll only be fodder for her nagging," Hermione said out of the corner of her mouth.

Sighing, Ginny whispered, "It just makes me wonder sometimes." She gazed back down to the infant, grabbing one chubby fist and kissing it repeatedly as her niece giggled. Kayleigh had Angelina's curly locks and Charlie's blue eyes.

"You don’t mean with..."

Her eyes shot up and looked at Hermione, pleading with her not to say his name.

"We'll talk later, at the Burrow," she replied to Hermione, ending the discussion till later.

"Where's Harry?"

Ginny nudged her head in the direction of the dais erected behind the canvas-curtained fountain. "Up there with Fudge, McPeebles and Dennis."

Hermione stood on her toes to peer over the crowd and spotted Harry looking quite ill at ease on the stage. It was times like this she truly felt sorry for him, as she knew how much he hated the spotlight and how the wizarding world expected him to make his public appearances every year.

Fudge and McPeebles were strutting about the platform, puffing their chests out and bending down to shake the hands of admiring constituents. It was only a few minutes later that Fudge placed his wand to his throat and cast the Sonorus spell.

"Ahem. Welcome witches and wizards," Fudge began, his voice echoing through the grand foyer. "It is with great pleasure that I welcome you all to the dedication of the new fountain on the fourth anniversary of Victory Day."
A round of applause circulated through the room with a few hoots and hollers from the twins.

"If it were not for this very brave man here," Fudge said as he extended his arm towards Harry, "we would not be here today for this joyous occasion."

Harry looked like he wanted to crawl away and avoid the eyes of the whole room on him. McPeebles sidled up and nudged him none too gently, making Harry stumble forward a few steps. He regained his footing and meekly bowed his head a few times before going to stand at the back of the stage, shooting daggers at McPeebles with his eyes as the crowd gave a huge cheer for man who killed Voldemort.

"And on this momentous day, we will now unveil the new fountain commemorating Victory Day."

There was an excited murmur in the crowd as that gave them an idea for the theme of the fountain, which would be shortly revealed.

"First I must thank the Creevey brothers. Colin Creevey for the concept and Dennis Creevey for creating the new masterpiece that we will hope will grace our Ministry atrium for many generations to come."

Dennis came towards the front of the stage and bowed to polite applause.

"And now I reveal to you…” The crowd held it's breath as Fudge swished his wand and the canvas coverings disappeared. "THE FOUNTAIN OF WITCHES AND WIZARDS!"

The water began to spring forth from several spots in graceful arcs. The fountain featured the statues of several prominent wizards and witches on a steeply angled mound that led to a cliff, their wands in the air spouting water over one another. Merlin, the Four Founders of Hogwarts, Ignatia Wildsmith, Barberus Bragge, Mungo Bonham, and Gunhilda of Gorsemoor all stood looking towards two other wizards at the front of the group. There stood the figures of Albus Dumbledore and a nineteen-year-old Harry Potter at the apex near the cliff edge, Harry's wand the highest of the group.

There was a loud cheer from the crowd, but not from Hermione or any of the Weasley clan. Every one of Harry's in-laws knew this was the last thing he would ever want.
Hermione didn’t notice her mouth hanging open at first, as she stood in shock. She knew Harry would not only be upset over this, but apoplectic. He had stated many times in the past that he did not want statues of himself erected.

There was a rush of people towards the fountain to get a better look. Hermione could now see the stage better and caught sight of Harry storming off.

Glancing at Ginny, she saw the look of trepidation fill the young witch's face.

"Harry's going to be furious," Ginny whispered apprehensively.

"I'll go find him," Hermione offered and pushed her way through the throng of people jostling for a better view of the fountain.

She found Harry in a corner with Colin Creevey, fistfuls of the younger wizard's robes clutched in Auror's hands as he shook the younger man. Colin's head bobbed about, fear mounting in his eyes.

"How could you *DO THIS TO ME*?!?" Harry bellowed, slamming Colin's body up against a wall, his eyes rolling momentarily as his head made contact with the dark wood paneling. "You've made me into some... some fucking legend."

Collin stammered, "I, I, I thought you'd be pleased."

Harry had him pinned tightly against the wall with his forearm under Colin's chin. The trapped man's feet were barely touching the ground. His wide eyes were looking down at Harry like an animal brought to the slaughter.

"Dennis seemed to think it was a good idea."

"Yeah, cause you put the fucking thought into his head. I'm not a hero, you sodding, witless pillock! I don’t deserve to be up there. You talked him into this, you talk him into removing me from that fountain now, before I hex you so you shit barbwire for the rest of your short life!"
Harry tossed him in the direction of Dennis, who was busy talking to reporters. Colin stumbled away towards his brother, shooting nervous glances at his hero and Hermione while rubbing his sore throat.

Hermione approached her distraught friend cautiously.

"Harry?" she spoke gently.

He hadn't heard her, as the blood was still pounding in his ears and the adrenaline rushing through his system blotted out the sounds of the world around him.

"Harry?" she said again, gently placing her hand on his shoulder.

He startled at her touch. "Hermione." He looked about, realizing he had just lost his temper and wondered who had witnessed the altercation.

Everyone seemed to be busy looking at the fountain or congratulating Fudge or the younger Creevey brother for his craftsmanship to bother with Harry. For that one small concession, he seemed grateful.

"You were right, Hermione."

Taken aback by his non sequitur, she replied, "About what?"

"I'm not right in the head." At this admission, he slumped against Hermione and began to sob.

Looking about furtively, Hermione pulled Harry into a broom closet and closed the door, casting a silencing charm on the small enclosure.

She held her friend in her arms and let him cry for a while. When the wailing and tears abated, he pulled back and smiled weakly.

"Thanks," he muttered thickly.
"What are friends for?"

He glanced up at her briefly from his lowered head. "Ginny and I talked over the weekend," he confessed, his voice still shaking with emotion.

Hermione swallowed hard and hoped she didn't look nervous. She remained silent in hope that Harry would continue.

"We talked quite a bit, actually. She was pretty understanding when I told her about… Voldemort… in my head, his memories and all. She told me all about Tom Riddle. Things he said to her, did to her."

Her mind flooded with Ginny's confessions, remembering all the things mentioned in previous conversations.

"She said she understood why I can’t do the things she wants in bed and she seemed willing to accept it."

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek. She knew the real reason why Ginny would never ask Harry again for those particular sexual favors.

"I'm just afraid that if I tap into that part of me, I'll never turn it off ever again. I'll be tainted by the dark if I start accessing that part of me," he confessed hoarsely.

Hermione watched him as his eyes darted from side to side as he collected his thoughts.

"Do you know why Ron dropped out of Auror training, Hermione?"

She had never really confronted Ron on that issue, as he always seemed to duck answering her in any satisfactory manner.

"He doesn't have it in his nature to do what needs to be done at times. What you just saw, with
Colin, that was just a *taste* of what I have to do at times. I have to use the anger, the rage and darkness inside of me to do what's right. That's the only way I stay sane, convincing myself that what I do is for good and that I haven't been spoiled from the inside out by Voldemort's memories. Ron is too nice and good-natured to do what needs to be done as an Auror. That's why he dropped out. I talked him out of it so he wouldn't lose his soul... like me."

If she hadn't been holding onto Harry, she would have dropped to the floor out of shock. Her knees buckled and she leaned against Harry in light of his revelations. She had always sensed that he was a changed person after the war, but she hadn't known how bad the damage was. A wave of guilt crashed over her with the news that Harry had talked her husband out of becoming an Auror. All the resentment she held over his career change now seemed too much for her to bear. He did it, on Harry's recommendation, to stay innocent in a way that Harry could no longer be.

They both stood silently for a while.

When Harry finally pulled away, Hermione cleared her throat. "Maybe," she began tentatively, "tomorrow you can swing by the Muggle Alliance Network and see if there is a psychiatrist you could see. They're bound to patient confidentiality, so there's no worry about anything you say getting into the papers."

The Muggle Alliance Network was a new department within the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes, as a sub-department of the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee. During the war, Dumbledore began arranging a list of all the parents and siblings of Muggle-borns, so that if the need arose, if the war turned badly, many witches and wizards could go underground in the Muggle world while the Order regrouped. Soon, the list expanded to include the jobs of those on the list. It had proved quite useful for witches and wizards who needed the odd service or good that could not be procured through the wizarding world. Hermione's parents had a twenty-percent increase in business once they joined the Muggle Alliance.

Harry sniffed, wiping his nose on the sleeve of his robe, strongly reminding Hermione of his boyhood days at Hogwarts. If it wasn't for the world-weary look in his eyes, she could have sworn he was still only seventeen years old.

"Yes, that sounds like a good idea. I guess I finally realized that I do need to talk about some things," he admitted.

'*Yes, especially about your horrid Aunt and Uncle for one,' she thought bitterly.

Hermione was amazed at the resiliency of Harry's spirit, especially after meeting his family.
She glanced at the door then back to Harry. "You ready to go back out there?"

He nodded as he stared at a spot on the wall just over Hermione's shoulder.

After ending the silencing spell, Hermione cracked the door open to see if the coast was clear. She saw a sea of red hair in front of her. Evidently, the Weasley clan had seen her haul Harry off to the closet and was providing a protective barrier. If anyone did see Hermione guide Harry away, they couldn’t get to him through the wall of Weasleys.

"It's all right, Harry," she whispered.

They both exited the ambry unnoticed.

Ron spoke over his shoulder as he nonchalantly looked about the atrium, "Ready to go, mate?"

"Thanks, Ron," Harry replied. "Let's go back to the Burrow."

The Weasley clan, who had been milling about, dispersed and began walking towards the fireplaces to Floo back to the Burrow. Children, unaware of the scene their uncle created, ran about as their parents began to corral them.

Ginny walked up to Harry and slipped her arm into his as they strode away.

Hermione watched this simple endearing gesture. It was evident from the look on Ginny's face that she did love Harry, but in a way that only could be described as platonic. Hermione wondered if she looked the same way when she looked at Ron.

Glancing over her shoulder, she spied Colin frantically trying to convince Dennis to remove the statue of Harry from the bronze formation.

Colin's eyes briefly caught sight of Hermione, who was scowling at him. He averted his eyes quickly, not forgetting the slew of hexes Hermione cast upon him after that rather revealing picture
of her was published in the *Daily Prophet* after her N.E.W.T.s.

The vindictive and vengeful part of her that she frequently denied existence too bubbled to the surface. If Harry ever needed help with some additional hexes to place on Colin, she knew of an especially painful one that resulted in pissing fire.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 11 A/N: I figure the same department that Percy worked in that dealt with cauldron bottom thickness would be the same department that would regulate imported potion ingredients.
Hermione and Ginny had wandered off to their usual corner of the garden, away from Molly and Dobby.

Harry and Ginny had lent the house-elf to other members of the Weasley family, as there was very little for him to do in the regard of cleaning and cooking for the younger couple. Over the past few months, Dobby had been spending most of his time at Fred and Grace's or George and Florence's home, helping them with housework and cooking while the witches took care of their new infants.

Dobby was helping Molly in the kitchen today, and between the house-elf's insistence that he do everything and Molly's territorial instincts when it came to her kitchen, it was best if the two young witches were not present. Molly was more than pleased to have a house-elf help her, but that didn't stop her from wanting to figuratively kick Dobby out of her domain periodically. It was when Molly shouted, "Out! Out! Out of my kitchen," that Hermione and Ginny knew that if Dobby weren't there to help, they would get drafted.

Hermione glanced over her shoulder and saw the men buzzing around on their brooms while their wives sat under the shade of the spreading oak tree, heavy with children in their arms or wombs. The toddlers were running about under their fathers, shouting directions at them to fly this way and that in order to score.

Ginny was watching her husband fly about, her brow slightly furrowed, as Hermione sat with her in a companionable silence.

"So what happened in the closet?" Ginny asked.
The older witch heaved a sigh. "He mentioned you both talked."

There was a long pause before Ginny spoke again. "I always wondered if that was the reason for his lack of sexual creativity. He confirmed my suspicions."

Glancing at Ginny out of the corner of her eye, Hermione realized that no matter how hard she scrutinized, she could not see beyond the face that Ginny presented to the world.

Ginny gave her own troubled sigh. "I should have ignored my mother's – and brothers' – insistence that I remain a virgin till I married Harry. There is certainly something to the 'try before you buy' philosophy."

Hermione gave a light chuckle to the analogy. Funny thing was, she did try and didn't know if it could be any different than adequate. There seemed to be no way to win.

"Harry mentioned you talked, as well. How did he react?"

Ginny turned her red head to the side and shrugged slightly. "He was pretty understanding." She glanced over her shoulder at her husband once more. "But I got the sense that he was uncomfortable with it. That somehow he was at fault for letting it happen in the first place. I told him it was Lucius Malfoy and Tom Riddle's fault, but you know how Harry is. He still has trouble dealing with the idea that he can't fix everything and save everyone, that some things just slip through the cracks and we have to live with it and move on with life."

Reflecting on her friend's words, Hermione wondered if she was the same. She knew she was. But there was something about the wrongs of the world she wanted to set right, as if they were equations and her sole purpose was to solve them and find the correct answers. The thought of Snape and Malfoy came back to the forefront of her mind.

"I told Harry to go to the Muggle Alliance and see if there is a psychiatrist he could see. He really needs help, especially after that outburst with Colin."

Ginny stared at her feet. "I know." She glanced about to make sure they were alone without anyone eavesdropping. "You see why I think he would kill him? Or lie?"

Suddenly feeling tired, Hermione dropped her head. Her face was hidden behind a curtain of hair, as she reluctantly answered, "Yes."

She closed her eyes and mourned for the boy she once knew. Adulthood and the war had brought about changes that no longer made people appear in black or white, but varying shades of gray. Life was simpler when she was younger.

"At least he's willing to get help. Maybe you could see one too. It couldn't hurt," Hermione added for good measure.

Her friend shook her head. "I doubt even a professional, even a Muggle who knows about our world, could understand what it was like to be manipulated by the likes of Tom. You understand, but he understands better. He took the Dark Mark, he'd been used, too."

"Maybe for marriage counseling then?"

Hermione hoped she could get Ginny to reconsider and try to patch up her marriage instead of casting it aside.

Ginny looked about once more. "You know why I love him, really love him?"
She shook her head.

"He loves me for who I am. Not for the big family that comes part and parcel with marriage and not because his brother-in-law is also his best friend. And not because it's convenient to be with me, because you and Ron are around. I am his friend, not because of you and Ron, but despite it. He was willing to look past the fact I'm related to Ron and I hang around you and Harry to see me for Ginny, not some hanger-on like he always used to tease me in school."

"So he was willing to turn a blind eye to people you associate with that disgust him," Hermione sneered. "How very fucking noble of him."

"At least he can look past it. You still see him as a copy of his father and reigning prat of Slytherin."

Hermione turned her face away. When phrased like that, she sounded just as bigoted and close-minded as the people she hoped would be enlightened after the war to the fact that Muggle-borns could be just as powerful as pure-bloods.

"So what, am I supposed to embrace and welcome him with open arms?" Hermione asked sardonically.

"No, but you can at least be open to the idea that he's changed. Be civil. You're not exactly about to cross social paths with him, but be aware that he can be kind when treated with respect."

"Respect?" the brunette hissed between gritted teeth. "After..." She dropped her voice to a whisper, looking about. "After he called me a Mudblood countless times? You've got to be joking!"

"He's already admitted that he was wrong to believe all that pure-blood bullshit. He's grown up and moved on. Why don’t you?" Ginny said, glaring at her friend.

A shout behind them drew their attention away from the conversation. Harry was circling the grassy area holding the Snitch in his right hand. The children were shouting with joy, asking their uncle to show it to them, each of them wanting a chance to hold it.

The tension between the two witches abated slightly with the distraction.

"You want to know another reason why I love him?"

Hermione didn’t really want to know, but knew her friend would tell her regardless.

"When Harry wants to apologize, or a birthday or Christmas comes up, he owls you and has you take him shopping. He buys me lingerie or jewelry–"

"We should all be cursed with a rich husband who wants to buy us nice things," Hermione interrupted with a snort.

"What I was going to say – before I was interrupted," Ginny ground out, "was that Harry doesn’t bother to know me. He never asks what I want. He goes to you to find out what I want."

"Don't you want to be surprised?"

Ginny shook her head, frustrated with how to phrase what she was trying to say. "When we were dating, he would ask Ron where he should take me to dinner. He never asked me. It's like he's taken all he knows about me from talking to you and Ron and he doesn't try to get to know me better. I thought once we were married, he would open up and talk more, but he's just as secretive"
now with certain aspects of his life. He won't share. Getting him to open up and talk is like pulling blood from a stone. And he doesn't seem to be interested in knowing the real me. I feel like some damn trophy wife and I'm sick of it."

"Harry is a very private person."

"I'm his wife," the younger witch growled. "If he can't talk to me, then who can he talk to? But I guess I know the answer already. You and Ron. At least he knows me. Far better than Harry."

Hermione thought of a snide retort, making reference to what she saw through the keyhole about how much better Malfoy knew her, but held her tongue. In some ways, she did know Harry better than his own wife knew him.

"He listens, he asks me questions, he pays attention," Ginny remarked. "He knows I would prefer a nice bunch of peonies or tulips to some lingerie. He knows that I like milk in my tea and my opinion on a number of things. He can finish my sentences as easily as I can finish his jokes."

"I still think you should both go in for marriage counseling."

Hermione heard the rustle of the tall grass behind them. Turning around, she saw Fleur slowly waddling her way over to where they were sitting against the stone wall. Bill's wife was too far away to have caught any other their conversation, but Hermione hoped their terse tones did not carry as far as the oak where the other wives had been sitting.

Ginny and Hermione both plastered believable smiles on their faces as their sister-in-law, heavy with child, approached with her hands laced under her belly to ease the strain on her back.

"Hello, Fleur" Ginny greeted. "What brings you over to this part of the garden?"

"Can't I jus' stop by to zay 'ello? What is zee matter? Molly nagging you both about children again?"

"No," Ginny sighed. "Not yet. The day is still young."

The brunette witch didn't know whether to laugh or groan. Fleur looked about conspiratorially. "You know, you should both do what Bill and I did."

Now the part-Veela had caught their attention, both regarding her with interest.

"When Bill and I got back from our 'oneymoon, Molly was already azking if I was pregnant."

At this news, both younger witches rolled their eyes in empathetic disgust.

"Zo, after a few infuriating months of her een'cesant pester'ing, I told her zat I 'ad gone off contracept'eeve potions and we were going to let nature take 'er course."

Hermione and Ginny's eyes both lit up with the same realization. Bill and Fleur didn't announce the arrival of the first Weasley grandchild until shortly after their first anniversary.

"So when did you start trying?"

"On our ann'eversar'ee."

"On the first try?" asked Ginny.
Fleur nodded. "And to make sure Molly stayed off my back that first year, I told 'er zat nagging would only induce stress, which could interfere with fertility."

The two friends started laughing at this revelation. It was so simple it was brilliant.

"Why do you think it took a couple years for Charlie and Angelina to 'get down to business and start making babies?'" Fleur added with a wink, giving her best impersonation of her mother-in-law. Her French accent threw off the effect, but she hit the correct shrill pitch to get the point across.

It seemed Hermione and Ginny had been left out of the information loop when it came to dealing with Molly where the other Weasley women were concerned.

Placing her hands upon her back and giving a good stretch, Fleur concluded by saying, "I suggest that only one of you make that lee'ttle announcement at the time, and the other wait a few months. We don't want to have her suspee'cious now, no?"

They looked at each other and nodded.

"One, two, three," they jointly said.


"Damn," Ginny exclaimed. "I knew I should have used scissors."

Draco was in the kitchen fetching another bottle of some fermented and distilled beverage while Severus was setting up the chessboard again.

"So who do you still have left on your schedule?" the dark haired wizard asked.

"Pardon?" Draco popped his head back into the parlor.

"I said, who do you have left for clients?"

Draco went back into the kitchen, looking for Severus' forty-year-old scotch. "Just three. Ginny and two others." The clinking of bottles being moved about punctuated his response. "Lavender was understanding enough to let me get rid of the one who wanted sex months ago and keep the ones who just wanted to talk instead."

He emerged from the kitchen holding the elusive scotch and two fresh glasses. He plopped himself back into the chair, as some of his grace had left him around the fifth round of Firewhisky.

"I hate lying to Ginny, but if certain powers that be go poking around, which it seems just might happen, then at least if Ginny gets interrogated, Lavender won't be in a bind. Another lovely clause to cover her own arse in case Moody takes an interest in our evening jobs. I think that was to cover your arse as well."

Severus grunted in acknowledgment as the last of the pieces had settled back onto their respective squares, ready for his black pieces to trounce Draco's white ones once more. He was brought back to the present by the sound of another round of libation being poured.

"Speaking of clients, when are you due to meet with Mrs. Weasley again?" Draco asked, knowing the question would nettle his mentor.
Victory Day was the one day a year Severus and Draco got together, talked about their clients, their wish for freedom, the most imaginative poisons and curses to hurl at Moody and Fudge, while drinking themselves blind. There was their weekly dinner in which they talked of other things, usually business, but the holiday was a bittersweet day for them. It reminded both men of the promise of a hopeful future taken away from them. Most of all, it represented the exchange of enslavement and servitude for imprisonment and ostracism.

Drinking his measure of scotch quickly, Severus grimaced and gingerly placed the glass down, still sober enough to feel the alcohol burn its way to his stomach.

"Thursday."

"So what does she do?"

One of the unspoken rules between Ginny and Draco was that they never discussed the Golden Trio. It was a verboten subject. However, he didn't mind discussing Mrs. Weasley with Severus, as his old Head of House had held the trio with as much contempt as him.

"I don't know," Severus replied in a low, gravelly voice. "I spent most of the time trying to save your hide and listen to her bemoan about her lousy husband, Mr. Weasley. I do know she is rather disillusioned with her marriage. It seems that she finally realized just what a dull boy she married. What is most interesting is the fact she had no idea about the binding property of bearing children." He directed his king's bishop pawn to advance.

"What?" Draco laughed. "You mean the know-it-all doesn't know everything?" He directed his queen's knight to charge, ignoring the weary looks his pieces were giving him, questioning his moves.

"Yes, rather amusing in a perverse sort of way. I suppose everyone had figured that since she researched everything before doing anything, she would be aware of the magic of children born in wedlock. Though knowing Molly, she probably withheld that information, hoping to trap the woman into an everlasting hell with her vapid son." Severus’ queen's rook advanced.

If Draco didn't know better, he would have guessed his friend felt sorry for the witch. But that would mean he actually cared about the bossy brunette. That would mean Fudge had lifted the Death Eater Decree, it was snowing in Hades, and pigs would replace owls for the postal system.

"So how much did she pay?" he blithely asked, while instructing his king's pawn to move forward.

Severus didn’t answer, choosing instead to study the board before making his next move.

"Well?" Draco prodded him, as a smirk played on his lips.


"I'm sorry. Didn't quite catch that," Draco said, leaning forward with his hand to his ear.

"Seven Galleons."

The loud thump was the sound of Draco hitting the floor as he slid out of his chair, laughing too hard to make any sound. It was becoming a rather annoying habit of the younger wizard to laugh at his old professor. When the cackling began to ring out, Severus gave him a swift boot to the thigh, letting his displeasure over the mockery be known.

Wiping away the tears, Draco climbed back into his chair, ignoring the deathly glares from his
opponent, and the dull ache in his leg where the well polished footwear made contact.

"That's too rich," he gasped between breaths, then started laughing again at his own pun, "or should I say, not very." Stretching his legs out, the cocky wizard didn't notice Severus' queen advance. "Wait till I tell Ginny," he crooned with glee. The only thing missing from his mannerisms were the fly-like villainous rubbing of the hands.

His mentor fixed him with a steely glare. "You'll do no such thing," he sternly commanded.

"And why not?" the blond countered.

"Because if Ginny confronts Hermione about her visit to my abode, without Hermione being the one to confess her actions, then she may feel a need to spite you and end your miserable existence by telling Potter everything. Knowing the temper your lady friend has, it would be best if she were kept in the dark about this. We wouldn't want her to slip in a fit of rage, morally cornering Hermione. And that would lead her to correctly believe I was the one who had told you, thus through association, you and Ginny."

Draco sulked, as if he had been told Christmas was rescheduled to a much later date.

"Besides," Severus continued, "if my intuition serves me, then Hermione may be of use to us and our escape."

The Potions Master did not elaborate on his hunch. His suspicions based on the purple taint on Hermione's fingers led him to believe she was involved with potions or their ingredients in one way or another. If that were the case, her confidence in him should not be marred by the emotional outbursts of a certain redheaded witch. Granted Ginny was very good at lying and being deceptive, courtesy of her tutelage under Tom Riddle, but her temper was not just part of her nature, rather, it was nurtured by her family. If Hermione was the opportunity he and Draco had been seeking, he would have to gain her trust. Only if the plan came to fruition would Ginny be made aware of Hermione's visits.

Draco nudged another pawn forward, seemingly with no interest in the game now.

"You really must work on your subtlety, Draco. It's one of the few things your father was remiss in teaching you. Check and mate," Severus finished, with a coolly superior air about him.

Draco's pieces had had enough, and promptly walked off the board, boycotting any further games until the burning indignation they felt from their repeated losses faded.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Hermione sat between Harry and Ron at the table, though she knew in a short while, she and Harry would trade places so her husband and their friend could continue their discussion about the latest Puddlemere United game without talking around her. She and Ginny had been talking to each other around Harry's back, while the two men talked over her plate of food.

Charlie had his daughter Kayleigh in his lap, trying to feed her some mashed potatoes. She was reluctant to open her mouth as he kept saying, "Here comes the Quaffle, through the hoop." He was encouraging his little 'Sweet Pea' to eat, while he swooped the laden spoon about her face like a Chaser approaching the goal hoops. Angelina was busy making sure their other two children were sitting in their seats, instead of joining their cousins under the table.

The twins' youngest children, Jasper and Jasmine, were both asleep in one of the upstairs bedrooms in their playpen, while their older siblings were crawling on all fours under the table playing a
game of 'troll under the bridge,' with everyone's shoes. Florence and Grace were trying to coax them out and sit in their seats like proper children, as their husbands made no move to help. Fred and George seemed to delight whenever havoc was wrought at these family gatherings.

Bill and Fleur were monopolizing one end of the table with their bickering brood. Fleur had born four children within five years, with her fifth on the way. Hermione secretly wondered how women like her sister-in-law and mother-in-law could have so many children without their uterus falling out. She supposed that women like Fleur and Molly were part rabbit. The mental image of Fleur with long, droopy ears, and Molly with a fluffy, wriggling rabbit tail almost made her choke on her butterbeer.

Percy and Penelope were sitting in the middle of the table with their two children, who behaved so well, Hermione had pondered the idea that Percy had spiked their milks with laudanum. Penelope, despite her ripening midsection, kept her children looking immaculately clean and well pressed.

Molly, and especially Arthur, was sitting at the other end of the table, basking in the joys of an overly full house of children and grandchildren. Arthur had always fancied himself to be some grand patriarch, and found no greater pleasure than letting his grandchildren run roughshod over him in their version of exuberant horseplay.

It was times like this that Hermione was overwhelmed. Growing up as an only child, she had spent many a holiday with just her parents. On a rare occasion, they were joined by the odd Aunt and Uncle and her cousins she saw but every few years. It was times like these that she mentally referred to her in-laws as "The Loud Family." She knew at the end of the day her ears would be ringing from the constant level of noise that assaulted her during her visit to the Burrow. Ron seemed to thrive in this particular environment, but Hermione found it sometimes made her wither under the constant stream of stimuli that barraged all her senses.

Hermione was still talking with Ginny about a mutual acquaintance that worked in the Department of International Magical Cooperation when the brunette witch heard Molly mention in slightly louder than loud tones for the whole table to hear, "I wonder when Ginny and Hermione will have children of their own."

The noise level was immediately cut in half as many were wondering if another row would occur.

With a quick glance to Fleur first, Hermione cleared her throat and casually replied, "Actually, I'm going off potions this month and we'll see what happens."

Fleur's sly wink to Hermione went unnoticed by the rest of the table as the Weasley men began clapping Ron on the back in a manly display of testosterone and solidarity that he might soon join the club of fatherhood. Somehow, the idea of Hermione being the one who would have to bear the brunt of morning sickness, leg cramps, round ligament pain, stretch marks, shortness of breath, emotional outbursts, sleepless nights, heartburn, sore hips and back, Braxton-Hick contractions, swollen feet, and severe impairment to her short term memory for nine months seemed to have escaped the men's attentions. All the other Weasley wives gave Hermione a wistful look, as if to say, "Enjoy your time before the children while you can."

After everyone sat back down, Ron turned to his wife and whispered in her ear, "Really? We can start a family?"

He sounded so hopeful, that Hermione immediately regretted saying anything. She realized she should have warned Ron of her ruse to get his mother off her back.

In an effort to temper his rising hopes, Hermione whispered back in a quiet serious tone, "We'll talk
about this at home."

Ron seemed to have caught part of Hermione's meaning, as the brightness of his smile faded a bit. She could see that he was now forcing his smile a little, as his eye no longer crinkled around the edges.

Feeling guilty for her lack of forethought and Ron's reaction to her pronouncement, she reached under the table and gave his hand a light squeeze. He squeezed back and his eyes didn’t look quite so disappointed.

Looking to her right, Hermione saw Harry and her stomach dropped. The hero of the day was trying to hide a scowl behind a glass of wine, sipping and continuing to hold it in front of his mouth, as if he were contemplating something. She recognized that troubled look and quickly glanced at Ginny, who returned a slightly worried look.

Harry drained his glass in one large swallow and reached for the bottle of Merlot, filling his glass not to the proper and genteel halfway point, but near the lip of the glass.

Hermione wondered if maybe she should have just let Ginny make the announcement instead. It was when she looked at Harry that she saw the jealousy bubbling underneath the surface.

She could almost hear him sulk in her mind, "Everyone else is starting a family, why not me?"

Contemplating if it would help to say anything, she decided Ginny might want to talk to Harry alone and inform him of their plan to get Molly to stop nagging. Maybe then he wouldn't feel so left out.

Just as Harry finished draining his second glass of wine in record time, Ron stood. "Well, I've got to get going to the pub. This is a big day for tips." He made his way around the table, giving everyone hugs and kisses, before heading off.

Hermione walked him to the fireplace in the kitchen.

"So," he paused, contemplating his next words within the relative privacy of the kitchen, "you're not really ready yet, are you?"

Hermione hung her head and shook it. "I'm sorry. Ginny and I should have told you and Harry first. Fleur told us this is what Bill and her did to get your mother to back off until they were ready." She raised her eyes seeking forgiveness.

He pulled her into a great bear hug and kissed the top of her head. "You're right, we're still young. There's plenty of time. Maybe we'll have a house by the time we start trying."

Hermione's heart leapt. It wasn't so much excitement as apprehension; the image of herself standing out in front of a house with a big, fat mortgage payment, a couple of redheaded urchins running around the yard playing with Ron, her body stretched to the limit due to being heavy with child filled her mind. This vision, for some reason she couldn’t comprehend at the moment, frightened her. Somehow, instead of finding it a pleasant thought, an ideal to strive for, she wanted to run away. From what, she did not know. All she was certain of was that she was not ready to have children with Ron.

When Ron stepped away from her side, Hermione felt no urge to reach out and give him one last parting kiss. And after he would Floo away to The Listing Broom, she would not yearn for his physical presence.
Chapter 12 A/N: If you are not familiar with laudanum, it is a tincture of opium. Female factory workers, in Yorkshire woolen mills, who would feed their babies laudanum to keep them quiet while they worked. So of course I had to throw that in somewhere in this tale. Pretty gruesome in some respects.
Chapter Summary

Hermione is back in the quiet of her own home, or at least she thought it was going to be quiet. Severus and Draco are at the end of their binge for the night.

Chapter Thirteen
"The Fun In Dysfunctional"

Disclaimer: Rowling owns it and them, I don't. 'Nuff said.

The silence in Hermione and Ron's flat was golden. It was such a drastic change from the Burrow; the absence of noise was almost ringing in her ears.

Hermione was quite glad to be back home.

Over the years, the twins had abandoned their adolescent methods of physical anarchy, preferring instead the subtler pleasures of emotional and mental chaos. This was often accomplished by bringing up things their other brothers had done over the years that upset Molly. Fortunately for Ron, he had to go to work before they could bring up the flying Ford Anglia event in his and Harry's second year. That always got Molly to beat her dead horse, recalling the whole event with fervent clarity, as if she was living it again.

Someone usually got in the grand matron's hot seat, when the twins decided the party was getting boring. Though the mentioned incident had happened many years ago, that person – be it Bill, Charlie, Ron, or Ginny – was roundly lectured once more for their lack of forethought, insensitivity or brashness. Molly would sometimes go into her usual histrionics about she could never imagine a child of her would do something so foolish before sighing, then saying how it was now ancient history, as if her final word had laid the issue to rest. Hermione was amazed at how that woman could go from hot to cool and calm in the blink of an eye.

Percy, as usual, sat in the holier-than-thou arrogance that he never did anything with such a careless and irresponsible behavior. Sometimes the twins would bring up the rift that occurred in
the year just before the Battle at the Department of Mysteries. It was when Percy would say how he got a big promotion after working for only a year at the Ministry, that he would pointedly ask Hermione why she hadn't been promoted yet, that she felt that Percy deserved to have the twins unleashed on him. Molly's rant at him would usually put him in his proper place.

Purging the less pleasant aspects of the evening out of her mind, she remembered the photographs she browsed through after dinner. She had gone to the study to peruse some of the family photo albums. Two particular things she wanted to do were compare photos of Ginny at her own wedding to Ron, to that of Ginny at the redhead's wedding to Harry. The other was to look at photos of the Order.

Looking at the snapshot of the whole Weasley clan on one side and her own, much smaller family on the other, Hermione was brought back to her own wedding day. She remembered battling what her mother called, “a case of cold feet”. Hermione was told that it was normal to experience feelings of uncertainty when one was about to make a major change in one's life. The odd thing was, she had made many major decisions before, and yet she had never felt so uncertain as when she was about to marry Ron. During the honeymoon and ensuing weeks, her nerves subsided as she and Ron settled into the routine of married life. The pressures of work and the real word quickly ended the honeymoon phase, or so she thought. Reflecting upon it further, Hermione pondered if it was never a honeymoon period, but just a denied case of nerves that she was making a mistake. All the jittery excitement was perhaps her way of panicking, while she tried convincing herself this was what she wanted.

The image of Ginny dressed in her best robes, standing beside her as her bridesmaid, haunted Hermione. In the photo, Ginny looked more excited that Hermione did, as if the world was about to open its doors to her and give her free access to its delights. She remembered Ginny mentioning the previous week that she and Draco were going to tell her family about their relationship the day after the wedding. The Ginny captured in the moment on that August afternoon showed her practically bouncing on the balls of her feet with exuberance, as if she could not contain some great and wonderful secret.

Mentally flipping to another image from a photo she had imprinted in her mind, she recalled the look on Ginny's face from her wedding day to Harry the following spring. There was a resigned quality to Ginny's smile, like the reluctant acceptance of an unwanted outcome. Knowing what she knew now, Hermione could read all the emotions on the redhead's face; the bride's smile in the photograph was devoid of any exuberance and elation. Ginny looked less than thrilled at her own wedding. Hermione's image seemed to be overjoyed at the occasion, as her own image waved wildly. Harry looked overjoyed, as if there was some desperate wish that came true with his marriage to Ginny. He rarely smiled like that anymore.

During her search for photos of the Order, she became frustrated. It seemed that Malfoy and Snape had never had a single picture of them taken by anyone in the Order, or at least none in Arthur's possession. Hermione guessed that if Death Eaters ever raided the Burrow, such a photo would have been life threatening to them both, raising suspicion of their loyalty to Voldemort. There was
one much older picture Arthur had of Snape, but the frame was empty and had been for years. Even the image of Snape did not want to hang around longer than it deemed necessary. She remembered he was the exact same way at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, just before her fifth year.

Hermione did her best to recall what Snape looked like. She had spent seven years in his classroom and seeing him at the Hogwarts Head table, but for some reason, she could only remember a caricature of her old Potions professor. The only traits she could recall were greasy hair, big nose, pale waxy skin and a mean disposition. She could not remember what his eyes looked like; yes, she could remember they looked black, but she couldn't remember their shape. He had fixed her with many stares, as if he was trying to penetrate her mind without Legilimency, somehow knowing she and friends were up to mischief, but still her mind could not remember what they looked like.

Even for the year of working for the Order after graduating Hogwarts, her memories of him were faded, much like the memories of her grandmother that had passed away some years ago. There were fleeting recollections, but the only strong memory of Snape was the color black. His hair, his eyes, his robes and disposition all had the same quality, all light absorbing and nothing reflective. She vaguely wondered if his soul and heart were the same color, as well.

The perplexed witch was lost in thought when she heard the telltale pop of someone Apparating into her living room.

Before she could turn around to see who it was, the brunette witch could hear Ginny give a great huff as she began frantically pacing around the tiny parlor. Hermione furrowed her brow while regarding her friend.

"Wha–"

"That bloody wanker!" Ginny fumed. "He can go shove that broom of his up his arse and fly to the North Pole and back that way!"

Rising from her seat, Hermione asked in slightly exasperated tones, "All right, what's Harry done this time?"

It was a rarity that Ginny came over in a snit like this. Usually she saved her occasional ranting for their weekly luncheons, but it seemed that Mount Saint Genevra was due to blow tonight. It surprised Hermione actually. With a row this big – Hermione guessed it was really big for redhead to come over in this state – Harry would owl her the next day, requesting her input to buy Ginny a present as part of reparations for his transgressions. Now that she thought about it, perhaps
spending money was Harry's way asking forgiveness instead of opening himself up to his wife instead. She wouldn't be surprised that a shrink – should Harry go and seen one – would come to the conclusion that Dudley getting a plethora of presents, and Harry receiving neither love nor material goods, resulted in a complex of Harry expressing love through his pocketbook. Having been emotionally repressed for years as a child, growing up in a household where he could never share a single thought without reprimand, it was easier for him to spend than open himself up to his wife.

But before Ginny could answer, the fireplace roared to life. Out of the green flames step Ginny's husband.

"You didn't answer me!" he roared.

Folding her arms in front of her chest defiantly, Ginny glared back. "I'm not talking to you like this."

Hermione, taken aback by Harry's out of character demeanor, looked at him, then at Ginny, then back to Harry. She noticed the black haired wizard place a slightly uncoordinated hand on the mantle to steady himself as he swayed a little.

"Harry," Hermione asked with great consternation, "are you drunk?!"

"You bet he is!" Ginny replied acidly.

This was not the jovially drunk Harry that Hermione remembered from seventh year, or from post Victory Day celebrations. This was mean-drunk Harry, the one Ginny described encountering once before, but Hermione never believed until this moment.

His eyes blazed as he glowered at his wife with dark regard. Harry's anger towards her smoldered just beneath the surface, ready to rupture just like Ginny, at any given moment. He no longer looked handsome and gentle, but cruel, by the way his mouth was set with a contemptible snarl and his brow furrowed with rage.

"Don't fucking lie to me anymore! Go ahead, she's here! Say it! Say it so I know you're lying!" he screamed.
"What the…” Hermione muttered to no one in particular. Looking at Harry, she addressed him, "What is this all about?” After she spoke the words, she then began to hope this whole row wasn't in regards to the errand she ran for Harry the previous week, but about something else entirely.

"Go ahead! Say it again!” he sneered. "I dare you," he hissed in a low voice.

Hermione turned her head to look at Ginny. The other witch let a malicious grin spread slowly across her face, her features changing from wary anger to snide triumph.

"Fine!” Ginny retorted. "Let me say it again for all to hear. Hermione is NOT going off potions. This is merely a stalling tactic to get my mother off our backs."

A loud silence settled upon the room as Hermione waited for the rest of some startling revelation to come, but Ginny said nothing more.

Turning to look at Harry, the older witch raised her brows as if to say, 'Yes, and…'

Harry's face turned red and he shouted, "Well, she's lying, right??"

"Lying about what, Harry?” Hermione replied, feeling eerily calm despite her two seething friends.

"About… you... going off potions!” he sputtered, as his arms gesticulated wildly to explain what he could not articulate.

Hermione's stomach dropped through the floor. Now she wished she didn't say anything at the family gathering until she and Ginny both spoke to their husbands before hand. But something in the back of Hermione's mind knew that this fight would have taken place regardless, but hopefully while Harry wasn't drunk.

Looking at her oldest friend, Hermione sighed. "She's not lying. I merely said what I did to get Molly to stop pestering us. I'm not ready for children, yet."

She sat in a chair with the heaviness of the situation pressing down on her. 'I may never be ready for kids with Ron,’ she mentally added.
Taking a deep steadying breath, she continued, "Fleur said this is what both she and Angelina did to get Molly to stop nagging about grandchildren." Lifting her face up to look Harry squarely in the eye, she further drove home the point. "You don't get the constant pressure from her, we're the one's who are made the villains for not popping babies out. Do you know what's involved with having children, Harry? Do you?"

Hermione rose from her seat as Harry dropped his head and looked away.

"I want a family of my own," he said sadly.

There was something very pitiful in his dejected manner that made Hermione feel for him.

"Well, I can tell you this," Hermione gently lectured, "children add strain to a marriage, they don't strengthen it. And by what I've seen and heard lately from both of you, this marriage is hanging by a thread. It's not just a matter of you inseminating Ginny and reaping the rewards of baby nine months later; it's a lifestyle change. You have to be there for Ginny, and not just financially, but emotionally and physically too. You two don't talk now. My God! What would happen when a child came along?"

'Not to mention a question of the child's paternity if your wife keeps shagging her gigolo boyfriend, who happens to be Malfoy,' Hermione thought to herself, with the sudden cold realization of another reason why Ginny wasn't ready for children.

She walked towards Harry slowly, hoping her words were sinking in.

"And Ginny's the one who has to carry the child." Recalling all the complaints her sister-in-laws have had over the years she began ticking them off. "There’s the emotional roller coaster, from all the hormones running through you, morning sickness, fatigue, back and hip pain, stretch marks, shortness of breath, poor sleep, and not to mention you can't ride a broom or Apparate, and no Portkeys last trimester. It's walking or Floo, that's it. No alcohol, no potions. And then after the baby comes a year of nursing, sore nipples, mastitis, leaking at the most inappropriate moments, aching breasts, and baby blues, then add on top of that constantly changing nappies until they're toilet trained at about two or three. It's not just children at your convenience, but they're constantly demanding your attention. You both have to be ready. It's a lot of responsibility and if you're at work most of the time, that leaves Ginny to raise them. If she's not ready, she's just not. Ron and I both work, but I know I'm the one who'll have to do most of the work. I'm not ready yet. My mum was almost thirty by the time she had me... and she's a Muggle. I won't hit menopause until I'm about seventy. There is plenty of time for children, Harry."
If anything, her little speech convinced herself she definitely wouldn't be ready for children for some years.

She placed a hand on his shoulder, as she noticed her speech made his body slump with the realization that she was right.

"I know you want children, but…” she trailed off, wanting to say more, but not with Ginny present.

Hermione wanted to say how his lack of trust for his wife was an anchor sinking his marriage, however, she could not bring that up as it might lead her to tell Harry more lies about Ginny. Harry had good reason not to trust his wife, but she promised herself and Ginny she would not tell him. To tell him would shatter what chance they could have to repair the large cracks in their marriage. Harry would make Draco disappear from Ginny's life if he knew, which would lead to Ginny definitely leaving Harry. If she could just get Ginny to love Harry the way Harry loved her. But who was she to think of love? Ron loved Hermione wholeheartedly, and only recently did she, herself, come to realize that her love for her husband was only halfhearted at best.

She wished she’d never known about Ginny's affair, and all that revelation entailed. More than that, Hermione wished she was ignorant of the facts and could continue to be blissfully unaware of Mrs. Potter's activities, therefore never questioning her own life and lack of passion and communication in her own contractual union. Granted, her life had been plodding along at a slow, mind-numbing pace with no stimulation, but at least she’d lived in a deluded state, convinced that it was what she wanted, regardless of her regrets. Now she saw what a wreck Harry and Ginny's marriage was, how unsatisfied she was with her own marriage and life, and the injustice of the Death Eater Decree. Her eyes were wide open, and to look upon the truth hurt her with its harsh glare.

A slow fury was building in Hermione, mostly upon frustration from the situation. Knowledge was not just a powerful tool, but it could make you feel powerless at times. To know that there was no incantation or potion to set everything right, and yet still unable to accept the facts, proved to be a test of her resolve at times. She was crowned the 'Brightest Witch in a Century' at school and yet she could not think of how to fix what lay before her.

"I tried telling him this," Ginny petulantly began, but was cut off by Hermione's harsh glare.

"You," the brunette barked at the younger witch, "be quiet!"
Shocked, Ginny snapped her mouth shut, partly from Hermione’s threatening look and partly from her tone, which had changed from soft and logical moments before, to suddenly agitated and terse.

"Harry. Go home and sober up. If you don’t make an appointment with a psychiatrist and a marriage counselor with the Muggle Alliance tomorrow first thing, I’ll make it for you and drag you to it myself."

The remorseful wizard lifted his head and looked at his wife. "I'm sorry," he started to say, but stopped there. He could not find the words in his still inebriated state.

Before he threw a handful of Floo Powder into the grate to go home, Hermione grabbed Harry’s hand to stop him.

"And no presents," Hermione amended. "No lingerie, no jewelry," she gave Ginny a meaningful look that Harry missed, "and no flowers."

Harry nodded.

"You both need to talk. You both need counseling. No more talk of children until this relationship is on steadier ground and you are both ready."

Harry nodded again and sighed with a whisper, "You're right."

He limply threw the powder, which had been slowly sifting through his hands during Hermione’s parting speech, into the fireplace and went home.

Staring at the dying green flames, the pit of older witch's being began burning with an all too familiar sense of indefinable unsettledness. Part of it was guilt, but part was from frustration heaped upon the state of her life.

"Thank you so much–" Ginny began, but was cut off.

"Shut up!" Hermione growled, rounding on her. "You aren’t to see Malfoy ever again! You are to get your arse to counseling and fix this marriage!"
She knew it was a bit hypocritical to try and force Ginny to love her husband in a way she was not capable of, no more than Hermione could love her own husband, but Ginny was not aware of Hermione's disillusion with her own marriage. Hermione would try her damndest to keep that fact from her now. If Hermione had to live the lie, then so would Ginny. She would be especially careful to keep the fact of her own appointment with her gigolo secret from Ginny. The whole hypocrisy of it all stung and bit at Mrs. Weasley's conscience, like a large welting mosquito bite that bled from too much scratching, but still begged to be itched, only to make it bleed and scar some more. It nettled and vexed her, but she tamped down the wave of guilt by mentally noting that she at least didn't shag her gigolo. And for the reason that she had not done anything in the physical realm of infidelity, she was able to make a self-deluded jump to the morally superior position.

"I will not make any such promise!" Ginny protested adamantly.

"You can and you will!" Hermione threw back at her. "I so much as catch a whiff you're seeing him, even to talk, and I'll spill all to Harry." It was a bluff, but Hermione was feeling short of any generous platitudes. Ginny had ruined her little fantasy world and Hermione felt as if the broken pieces had been left at her feet to repair, but without wand or glue to put it back together again.

Instead of argue or plead, Ginny hung her head and reluctantly agreed.

Unsafe if the younger witch was just placating her by false promise or if she was sincere, Hermione decided that she didn't want to know if Ginny would hold good on her word and not see Malfoy again. She discovered that night that sometimes denial was a fine and dandy way of living at times. It was no longer important to know everything in the world. Ignorance at times could be bliss. And she had been lacking bliss in her life for quite some time.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

There were two types of wizards in the world. Those that could hold their liquor and those that couldn't. Severus and Draco both fell into the former category.

Severus could always tell if someone was a cheap drunk by the ruddy complexion that bloomed across a person's face. It was if the inebriated would turn pale that it would require enough alcohol to be consumed to constitute alcohol poisoning before speech would begin to slur and vision double.

Draco and Severus, both pale to begin with, were as white as freshly bleached, boiled and pressed sheets by the time they killed the fifth and last bottle for the night. They had already gone through five rounds of chess, four games of backgammon, two hours of wizard's poker, three games of arrows, and now both lay sprawled across various pieces of furniture in Severus' room.
The blond wizard, who was draped across the length of the settee, had initiated the latest verbal game of 'can-you-top-that.' The topic was sexual positions.

The elder wizard sat on the floor with his back propped up against his bed, his legs akimbo, arms limp at his sides, head lolling back onto his coverlet, while he stared blankly at his black bed curtains – charmed to be that color when there were no clients. He spoke slowly to avoid sounding drunk, "You know that position…" He lost his train of thought for a moment before he regained it. "The one where they bring their legs up… roll their back so they bring their knees to either side of their head?"

If Severus knew yoga, he would have named it as the Sasangasana Posture.

"Yeah," Draco said, half-listening as the room spun about him like a carnival ride he read about in Muggle Studies years ago.

"Well, take the legs and wrap them about your waist."

Draco was sure he had a much more interesting position than that to beat the other wizard's answer, but could not recall it in his drunken haze. Surely it would come to him in the morning, most probably with a vivid recollection of it involving Ginny screaming out his name, but he decided to let Severus have this round.

"You win this time," he said, his eyes randomly fixed on the prominent Adam's apple the protruded from Severus' neck, his head bent back. "New topic." He had an idea of one he could surely win, though in some ways, it was nothing to brag about. "Fastest a woman made you come."

Severus noted how Draco left out the word 'client' and used the generic term 'woman' instead. He remembered, with unease, his own clumsy loss of his virginity. Thinking back to his youth, he recalled Lucius' impromptu stag party for him, held behind the Three Broomsticks during the last Hogsmeade weekend in his seventh year. She was a witch, probably under the Imperius Curse, but he cared not at the time. She was there for his pleasure, for his "amusement and education," as Draco's father called it at the time. It was more like a guarantee he would not go to his wedding night a virgin.

"Three strokes."
There were times he remembered the warm spring air still holding onto the chill of winter in the cool shadows, the air making the skin on his legs and arse goose-pimple, as his trousers lay rumpled about his ankles. The witch glassy eyed and moaning with mechanical grunts from his few thrusts, her back up against the mossy bricks of the old building, as she had one leg wrapped about his waist. He’d hoped that Lucius had paid for her services, but instinctively knew an Obliviate was cast upon her shortly after he walked away from her.

Tamping down the memory, he would not let his mind eventually wander, in his drunken state, to thoughts of his wife. She was dead and could never be brought back, no matter how much he thought of her, so he avoid all thought of her as much as possible.

Draco did not answer, nor laugh or make any derisive remarks.

"Well?" Severus prompted.

Draco took a deep breath and exhaled. "One kiss."

"What?" The dark haired wizard pulled his head up from the bed and fixed his companion with one eye, keeping the other one closed, as it was easier to see one Draco rather than two sitting on his two couches that periodically blurred back into one before splitting into two again.

"I said, one kiss."

Snorting a half laugh, Severus drawled, "You're joking."

Draco would have shook his head, but that would mean the carny controlling the ride his head was on would had sped up the spinning contraption, resulting in a swift production of pavement pizza on Severus’ prized silk and wool Tabriz rug.

"No," he said rather solemnly.

"Explain. You must have been a virgin," Severus surmised.

"No. I had had half the girls in Slytherin already before that happened," Draco replied. "It was three
days before that fucking decree."

Severus knew who the girl was from that statement.

Draco continued, "We’d kissed for the first time in that silly Muggle cinema the week prior. It was the last time we saw each other before the decree. I still remember the dress she wore."

He hoped Draco wasn't going to get maudlin, but he should have guessed he would have, considering the turn of events over the past week.

"It was this little sundress with straps instead of sleeves and I teased her about getting freckles in patterns that made dirty pictures on her back. I even offered to charm them to move when she spun around and socked me in the stomach… hard. She caught me off guard and I almost bent over double. She caught my face and kissed me hard. In three days time we would tell her family. And that kiss she gave me held so much promise…"

Had he been sober, Severus would have stalked off at the forlorn, romantic ramblings of his friend, instead he was too drunk to move and was forced to listen. Somewhere in a corner of his heart, he felt the slight sting of jealousy that this young man had experienced love on a level he was unable to discover for himself. Long ago he had written off love as a luxury he could not afford. Instead of acknowledging his envy, he subconsciously identified it as irritation and boredom. He could have asked or demanded Draco to stop his sentimental reminiscences, but held his tongue instead. For some reason he could not, nor would not identify, he let him continue.

"In that kiss, I could feel the passion in her for me. In my mind, I could feel her legs wrapping around me, begging me. Not a stitch of clothing came off, no hand up the shirt or down her knickers, just a simple kiss that let me know just how much she wanted me. Arms twined around each other, hair mussed, total and complete loss of time and space. We were breathless and never wanted the kiss to end. I wanted her so badly right there and then. And I just…"

Draco trailed off and never finished his sentence.

Still staring at Draco, he blinked his one open eye to make sure that he was correct in seeing the younger man had not fallen asleep, but was still awake staring off into space. Turning his head, Severus glanced at the clock and noted that it was now midnight. It was time to call an end to their celebrations as Victory Day was now officially over.
"Rise," the darker wizard gently commanded. "Go back to your rooms and sleep. We have much work ahead of us tomorrow and I doubt Miss Brown will give you a reprieve from your day job when she has seen fit to stock our bathrooms with hangover relief potions. It's time for bed."

Draco rose with the last bit of grace he had left, despite his wobbly legs, propelling himself forward towards the egress of Severus' flat.

The younger wizard placed his hand upon the doorknob. Before he turned it, he swiveled his head and considered his mentor. "So, is Mrs. Weasley still going to pay seven Galleons?" There was the faint hint of a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth as he asked his pointedly taunting question.

Severus wasn't sure about Draco's non sequitur, but answered it. "Actually, it's ten Galleons a visit from now on." He let the smug smile spread across Draco's face before delivering the final blow. "But with the forty percent profit sharing from the sex potions we are going to develop – my royalties based on the condition of taking her as a client – it may work out to about… oh… say… fifty-thousand Galleons a visit… or more."

He relished the stunned look that quickly washed over Draco's face. Out of a rare moment of pity, he amended his statement by adding, "The cut rate was probably out of some obligation Miss Brown feels for Hermione. If it weren't for Hermione's efforts, Miss Brown would not have the cheap labor force she now has today. Thus we would not be able to undercut the competition with our prices, nor dominate the market like we do." He finished he statement with a grandiose sweep of his arms.

During the summer after the Golden Trio graduated from Hogwarts, a strategy of creating chaos on the home front of the Death Eaters was hatched. Hermione came up with a plan for fellow member of the Order to discretely slip clothing that had been transfigured into food items, into the shopping baskets of Death Eater's wives. Once the items brought back from market were handed off to the house-elves, the transfigured items would turn back into clothes, thus freeing many house-elves in the employment of Death Eater families. It had gained the Order quite a bit of time to recoup, as many of the Death Eaters had to spend a great deal of time doing tasks they took for granted with their servants, who were now free.

'And all thanks to a know-it-all Gryffindor with an over abundance of righteousness. Perhaps I can make use of that abominable streak and put it to use to get myself out of this deity-forsaken country,' he thought bitterly to himself before he flopped on his bed and passed out.

Draco exited the room without a backward glance at his softly snoring friend, hoping he could make it to his rooms before he resorted to crawling on his hands and knees.
At least the house-elves would come in and tuck Severus into bed, charming him out of his clothes and into his pyjamas after he was properly under the covers, making sure his necessary vial of hangover relief potion was within arms reach, and the heavy drapes were drawn against any offending morning light.

Most of all, the Potions master would not be awake to ponder the twinge of envy in his heart. Of how he had been denied the chance to see if he and his wife could develop a relationship that included love. If only she had not died, if only she had learned to hold her tongue might she still be alive today.

By morning time he would probably forget about it and immerse himself in his daily grind of Potions by day and women at night, leaving him little time to reflect upon the younger wizard's words.
"Pondero of Verum" (Reflection of Truth)

Chapter Summary

Hermione has a hot date. Severus' dream becomes a possibility. There is some Hermione/Severus action, well, kind of... um, sort of... erm, not really. You'll see.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Fourteen
"Pondero of Verum" (Reflection of Truth)

Disclaimer: J.K. Rowling owns the characters, the places, the magical concepts, etc., etc., etc.

Standing in front of the mirror, she smoothed out her blouse and skirt with slightly shaky hands. The twisting nervousness in Hermione's stomach made it almost impossible for her to eat anything during dinner with Ron earlier.

Her husband was blandly unaware of the fact that she barely managed to swallow three bites of food during the whole meal. He had gulped his food down with enthusiastic gusto, then chugged a glass of juice before rising from the table, placing a chaste kiss on the top of his wife's head and charging out the door for his evening shift at the pub. Thursday was a rare night off from the pub for him. She should have enjoyed his company while he was there, as it was a rarity that they ate dinner together on weeknights, but instead found relief that he was finally gone. Now she could prepare for her evening without him there to become suspicious.

"Got a hot date tonight?" the mirror cheekily queried.

Hermione shot the enchanted glass a scathing scowl. "Don't be ridiculous! I'm married," she retorted.

Her own reflection gave her a sly smile. "You liiiiiiiiie, like a ruuuuuuuug," it knowingly drawled in a rising and falling cadence
Becoming irritated with her mirror, Hermione began wondering how much it would cost to replace it with a more obedient one. "Shut it! Remember, the River Thames?"

Hermione wore the same outfit from Victory Day, the same blue outfit that made her look even more pasty, as the color was slowly draining from her face from increasing nervousness.

"Right," she said to herself, giving herself one last look in the sullenly silent mirror. Her hair was brushed and neatly pulled back into a large hair clip at the nape of her neck, but that didn’t stop the stray tendrils near her hairline from framing her face. Peering closer, she used her little finger to wipe away a small smudge of eyeliner.

She really didn't like wearing make-up, as it was highly impractical to wear to work with one's head constantly over steaming cauldrons all day long, but a little kohl around the eyes and a light dab of lipstick always did wonders.

Glancing at the clock, she saw that it was quarter to seven. Hermione took one last steadying breath before picking up her navy blue cloak.

"Right," she said once more to convince herself to head out the door and into the night. "Conversation and that's it," repeating the phrase exactly as she had said it to Lavender a few day prior during the exchange of Galleons.

Walking out the door, she repressed all thoughts of what her gigolo might be wearing tonight.

Everything was being prepared for her visit. Severus had showered, rinsing off the lingering scent of pheromones and thawed Ashwinder eggs from the day's work at the lab. The first few batches of arousal sex potions turned out mixed results. At least Lavender never melted a cauldron or did anything stupid enough to cause an explosion, like what he’d met with on a daily basis while working at Hogwarts, especially during what he mentally referred to as 'The Longbottom Years.'

Standing in his kitchen, he arranged a tray for an after-dinner repast. He could have let the house-elves do it, but cooking for himself was one of the few ways he could legally hone his fading skills with a knife.

Savoring the feel of the knife in his hand, the Potions Master carefully sliced the crusty baguette in even slices to be fanned out decoratively next to the small mountain of hulled strawberries he had placed on the tray. It would have been nice if apples and pears were in season, but he made do with what was seasonably available. A quick check and the Sauterne was coming to room temperature nicely. Before he could make sure the Sauterne was chilled to the proper temperature, his house-
elf, Marf, popped along side him.

"Mister Snape, sir, should let Marf do this, sir," squeaked the diminutive creature.

A long time ago Severus had explained once and only once that cooking for himself was the only way he could still legally wield a knife, grater or sieve. Marf still asked to help, but Severus had learned to ignore the creature when it suited him. It had taken the house-elves at Hogwarts about ten years before they learned not to go into his private quarters to clean. He figured it would be another five or six until Marf learned the same lesson. Perhaps a few missing fingers from a toppled Potions experiment would not be the final lesson to drive home the point this time.

"I will allow you to serve," he instructed Marf. This would result in the tray containing food, wine and glasses to appear at his command, just like the tea service the week before. "You may fetch me the dates, nuts and dried figs."

Marf squeaked for joy at the rare opportunity to help, then returned to Severus’ side quickly with the requested items. With the addition of some fine linen napkins, a nutcracker and two small plates, he was ready to entertain Mrs. Weasley for the evening.

He rarely went through this much bother, with the exception of a few very well paying, high placed clients; women who could prove eventually useful to his ultimate goal of freedom. Perhaps the sight of the slightly emaciated woman the week before had inspired him to provide her with some food in hopes of putting a little weight on the young woman's bones before she left at the end of the night. Hermione was not a high placed client within society, but she could prove to be well placed for his purposes.

If he remembered her personal habits from seven years at Hogwarts correctly, Severus counted on Hermione showing up at least a few minutes early.

Moving to his parlor cum boudoir, he opened his armoire to view his selections of masks. He noted his plumed volto mask was missing. He could only assume Draco had borrowed it for a client. Draco had taken to wearing masks to remain anonymous for similar reasons.

Severus grabbed his plain black Casanova mask, the Bauta matching his hair, but it seemed somewhat pointless, as he would be covering his hair again. However, it did match his black shirt and trousers.
Just as he finished adjusting his accessories, he saw his bed curtains begin to change color. It would be interesting to see what sort of mood Hermione was in this evening.

It was when the bed curtains changed to a dark blue he knew he would have his work cut out for him. Fear was the strongest emotion she was feeling tonight. Fear of him, the situation, the future with her husband, he did not know, but would soon find out.

As expected, Hermione rapped on his door before the stroke of seven.

*Knock-knock. Knock-knock.*

Glancing at himself one last time in the mirror before moving towards the door, he smoothed over his shirt and trousers.

Had Hermione read more Muggle articles on biology and psychology, she would have recognized that she was preening herself. Despite humankind's higher brain functions, ten thousand years of evolution was hard to resist when preparing to interact with a potential mating partner, despite what her conscious mind said otherwise in regards to her mental promise of 'conversation only.'

Her hands stilled themselves when she heard the hardware of the door handle turn and squeak.

"Good evening," her gigolo greeted her graciously with another courtly bow, his voice low and soothing. He swept his arm out to invite her into his rooms. "Please come in and make yourself comfortable."

As Hermione moved past him and into his flat, his eyes swept over her form, taking in all the small details that escaped most men's attentions. The most obvious observation was that she was not an emotional wreck like the week before, and her hair was as-neatly-as-could-be pulled back, but still lacked luster. Her clothes still looked on the slighter side of shabby, but neatly pressed and clean. Mrs. Weasley held herself with greater poise than during their previous meeting, but he could still sense the uncertainty in her movements.

Discreetly inhaling, he could tell that she had bathed before coming, as he could still smell the scent of her soap wafting from her body. It was a variation on the same soap he used to remove the odor of potions from his days in the lab; a combination of sodium bicarbonate, the oil and juice of some citrus fruit, and French clay added to a simple glycerin soap base. He thought that fact was an interesting coincidence.
Sitting down upon the settee in the same spot as before, Hermione smiled nervously at the man who was closing the door and turning the lock.

"Have you eaten dinner?" he inquired.

"Yes," she replied with less confidence than she hoped, "but not much." She began rubbing her palms along the tops of her thighs out of sheer nervousness. "I was a bit too… preoccupied to have much of an appetite tonight. I have to admit, I didn't think I'd be coming back here after last week."

He stood there looking at her, his mask hiding all expressions from her. After years of being a spy, Severus still schooled his features despite his leather veil. The way she kept rubbing her hands nervously unnerved him for reasons he would not identify. This singular habit stirred memories long suppressed, memories he thought he had purged from his mind years ago.

After a pause longer than he intended, he said, "If you are interested, I have a lovely dessert wine, along with fruit and cheese that we could have."

Severus hoped she would accept his offer of food. From the way her clothes hung on her, she definitely needed a good ten pounds on her to bring back her feminine curves. He never could understand why the youth of today was so insistent on idealizing a female form that encouraged bony hips. For all the women he had had sex with over the recent years, he could attest to the fact that bony hips made him consider requiring combat pay when he was shagging them.

"That…" Hermione cleared her throat, which had all of a sudden constricted and become coated with phlegm. "That would be lovely, Mister…" She averted her eyes momentarily before returning them to his covered face. "I'm sorry. I don't even know your name. I feel I must apologize. All last week you heard me ramble on and I never even bothered to ask your name. Especially after you were so kind to listen to me."

Hermione felt a bit awkward about the apology. She had, after all, paid him to listen to her. Still, that didn't excuse rudeness in her mind.

Severus was slightly taken aback. Only a small handful of his clients ever bothered to ask for his name. Most viewed him as a nameless man in which to fulfill their needs without any consideration towards him. She had even begun addressing him with a name of respect, "Mister."
"You may call me whatever you like," he answered with a playful lilt in his voice, hoping his tone would help her relax.

It was a simple answer. The clients that did like to have a name to associate with a face, even though it was masked, picked a name of their own choosing, in some small way fulfilling some fantasy of theirs. Lavender would catalog the name in her book, so when his clients requested 'Tristan,' 'Walter,' 'Adrian,' 'Marcus,' 'Julian,' 'Bob,' or 'Devon,' Lavender would know of whom they were referring to.

"But what would you like me to call you? Surely you are a person with a name. Granted you wear that mask, but you get to choose your mask. Would you not like to choose what I shall call you during this evening?"

He let a smirk spread wide across his face. Only a Gryffindor, only Hermione Weasley would treat a common gigolo with respect. In his biased memory, she was affording him more respect now than when she was a student of his. Of course she always treated him with the utmost respect at Hogwarts, but his skewed point of view did not see it as such. To him, the irony was almost humorous.

Remembering a story his mother once told him long ago, before she died, Severus remembered how she wanted to name him something other than Severus.

"Calleo, you may call me Calleo."

"Calleo. It means 'knowing,' does it not?" she asked.

"It does indeed." He gave her a slight tilt of his head. "And what shall I call you?"

"Hermione," she blurted out, and then momentarily froze, considering her haste. She wondered if it was wise for Calleo to know her true name.

Watching her self-chastisement, he chuckled lightly. "Do not worry. If we were to cross paths in public, you would not know who I was without my mask. Nor would I approach you in public. What is said and occurs within these walls stays here. Beyond these walls, we are but strangers to one another."
It was a small lie. If Hermione Weasley were pertinent towards a means of escape, he would be telling Draco the necessary information required to reach their end goal.

Ducking her head out of embarrassment of her naiveté, Hermione laughed a little in response.

"Please, relax. Drinks are served," he announced.

That was Marf's cue in the kitchens to magic the tray onto the low table in front of the settee.

Hermione gave a slight gasp at the spread before her. It was a simple tray, but elegant and mouthwatering in its selections. The smell of the strawberries made her mouth salivate instantly.

Noting the restrained look of hunger on her face, he said, "Please, help yourself."

Reaching forward, Hermione unfolded the heavy Irish linen napkin and laid it daintily across her lap, then grabbed a small plate with which to laden some of the ripe, red fruit upon.

As Severus poured a measure of a lovely French Sauterne into dessert wine glass, he noticed her bite into a strawberry with an expression that bordered on ecstasy.

"Mmmmmmmmm," she moaned quietly to herself, her eyes closed. "It's been ages since I've had fresh strawberries." Her tongue flicked out to capture a drop of juice that escaped and was hanging precariously from the edge of her lower lip.

His eyes were transfixed on her lips, now stained slightly redder than normal, and the way her closed mouth moved as she chewed the pulpy flesh.

When she opened her eyes to finish the other half of her berry still held between her index finger and thumb, Severus caught himself in his act of acute staring. Hermione, unaware of his scrutiny, gave him a brief warm smile of thanks.

After mentally berating himself for his momentary lapse of control, he remembered her drink was still in his hand.
"Thank you," Hermione said, taking the glass by the stem.

Her fingers brushed against his lightly in the exchange. In an instant, Hermione felt uncomfortably warm. That small bit of contact left an electric tingle on her skin and she did her best to ignore it, despite how she could feel her pulse race.

Severus poured himself a glass of the golden nectar before sitting down on the other end of the settee, giving her the same personal space as he had the previous week.

Remembering Lavender's words in regards to Hermione's request for his services, he said, "So I understand you would enjoy some conversation. What would you like to talk about?" He paused briefly before adding, "And I am curious as to what your course of action was in regards to your... friends that you were so concerned over last week."

Swallowing the last of her second strawberry, Hermione blotted her lips with her napkin before answering. Out of the corner of her eye, she noted all of the lipstick she wore was now smeared all over her napkin and folded her napkin in such a way as to hide it.

"Oh... that... well... um." Hermione still felt anger, resentment and confusion over the whole situation. "I told my male friend that I never saw his wife that afternoon. He still doesn't know about his wife cheating on him." Spurred on by Calleo's statement that whatever was said would stay within his confidence, she added, "Though I have suggested they both go to marriage counseling. Especially after what happened on Victory Day."

Intrigued, only for the reason that it might concern Draco, and in turn, himself, Severus leaned forward with mild interest. "Oh really, what happened?"

"Well," she paused, wondering how to word it all without blurting it all out at once, before she eventually gave him the condensed version: The exchange between her and Fleur, her announcement at the Weasleys, the resulting fight between her friends in her parlor, and her ultimatum to her female friend to cease seeing her lover.

"I see," he said thoughtfully, nodding his head. "They are very lucky to have such a good friend."

She had taken the right precautions to keep the situation at a low simmer for the time being. His praise of her would hopefully encourage her on her course of action. Severus knew a slightly
different version of the events, as told by Draco, who repeated what Ginny had said in her owl, but the facts were the same. Severus knew Ginny was still seeing Draco, but was now aware of Hermione's bluff to spill everything to Potter.

The topic of Hermione's friends was now exhausted. Taking the initiative, Severus asked, "What else would you like to discuss?"

Hermione shifted in her seat, feeling a tad guilty. She was doing this in part to save her marriage. She was seeing this gigolo to stem the lack of intellectual satisfaction she got from her husband.

"Well, I love my husband. I mean, we've been friends for years before we became romantically involved with one another, and I supposed I knew, in some way, what I was getting myself into when I married him." She played with the nap of the fabric on her skirt, noting the texture of the fabric from the way the warp and weft wove over and under each other as a way of distracting her conscience. "He's brilliant at chess, but he's not exactly my intellectual equal."

She looked up, looking slightly ashamed for voicing what she had only repeated to herself in her head and never aloud.

"I got the best grades in school and he barely got by. He's into Quidditch, Quidditch, chess, and oh yes, Quidditch," she said with slight sarcasm. "I suppose the fact that he's on a Quidditch team does have something to do with it, but there's more to life than sports. He never wants to talk about my work, or politics, or Ancient Runes, or Charms, or Transfiguration. I'm just tired of Quidditch talk. My husband is very sweet. He's not dumb--"

Severus bit the inside of his cheek to stop the quick rebuttal from escaping his mouth.

"--And I've met some pretty thick wizards at school. But he's not exactly the brightest wizard either." Hermione furrowed her brow and bent her head. "He's just not an intellectual, bookish type. And with my brainless, vapid coworkers, whose only concerns are fashions, or who is shagging whom, it feels as if my brain is atrophying. I need some interesting conversation, some stimulation of the mind before I go mad with mental boredom."

Hermione lifted her head and looked at him with reluctance, remembering a rather nasty name Ron had called her during one fight. "That doesn't make me an 'intellectual snob,' does it?"

One of the few things Severus was grateful for, during his years of being a professor at Hogwarts,
was his co-workers. During meals he could avoid small talk with them and engage in equally deep and broad conversations regarding their recent research results or new developments in their particular field. Though he loathed Professor Vector on a personal level, he could talk with her at length on Arithmancy equations. Even Professor Flitwick was someone who he would engage in a lively debate with now and then, despite the impish man's overly cheerful presence that irritated Severus like boiling acid on an open wound.

Had he been in a similar situation as she had just described, he would most probably have poisoned the whole lot of them, rationalizing that they all deserved it, as their existence was a waste of valuable space in the universe.

With his nom de guerre, he was still afforded the chance to correspond with others in an exchange of ideas. Even Draco was a bright young man who he could engage in conversation without having to drop his vocabulary so that even a second year Gryffindor could understand him.

He shook his head, sincerely sympathetic to her situation. "No, it does not. It's not your fault if you seek to expand your horizons and broaden your mind. It's admirable."

Severus was pumping her ego a bit. He did still think she was a bit of a know-it-all and was sure that she would revert back to her old endless-talking-in-superior-tones mode that he was so familiar with from her school days. What she did mention previously did bring back something he was intensely curious about, and now found a way to broach the subject.

"Are all your coworkers that uninteresting?" he asked, trying to avoid words that would give him away, like 'insipid,' 'dunderheads,' and 'idiots.' "What do you do for a living?"

Hermione took a sip of the Sauterne before answering, enjoying the sweet flavors on her palate. "I work for the Ministry in the Department of Standards & Regulations."

Severus could feel his heart hammering against his chest and his ears begin to ring from the rushing sound of blood in his ears. Warmth spread itself over his body, starting at his chest and creeping down to his very fingertips and toes. He hadn’t been this excited about anything in years.

"And what exactly do you do?" 'Please let it be, please let it be,' he silently pleaded, for there were a few sections within the department that didn’t deal with potions ingredients, but the stain on her fingers the week before gave evidence of her job.
"I test all the potions ingredients that come into the country before they are distributed to apothecaries throughout Great Britain."

'EUREKA!'

Severus felt almost giddy and had to stifle a rare spontaneous laugh. Granted, the laugh would have come out bordering on hysterical, but he suppressed it, as it would not do to scare the source of his salvation. The fates had finally allowed him a chance at happiness. Here, sitting across from him was the answer to his and Draco's problems.

To calm his nerves that had become spontaneously jittery from the adrenaline coursing through his body at breakneck speed, he took a long sip of wine, hoping the alcohol coupled with the high sugar content would steady his nerves and stop him from shaking from the heady rush he felt.

Not noticing the slight increase in her companion's breathing, she added, "It's not a very interesting job at all. All I do is test one batch of ingredients after another. It's rather mindless and mechanical."

Severus knew exactly how boring her job must be, as he was required to do a two-month internship during the first year of his Potions apprenticeship. He idly wondered if Marge was still there. She had been working at that job since before Albus Dumbledore was born and he wouldn't be surprised if the old crone were still there.

"It sounds like a very important job," he said with some admiration in his voice.

It was a very important job. Important, like a sprocket in a mechanism. Without ingredients being tested, the flow of goods to apothecaries would stop, resulting in a shortage of potions. The job required someone who was honest, as there always was an unscrupulous supplier seeking to get in materials watered down or mixed with filler, like sawdust or sand, with the promise a payoff if they just passed the shipment on through with the Ministry stamp of approval. It was as important and prestigious for the wizarding world, as a dustbin man was to the Muggle world.

"How long have you been working in that position?" he asked, wondering if she recently took the position and why one so lowly.

"Almost four years," Hermione replied casually.
Severus wished he were not in the process of swallowing a piece of baguette with Brie on it when she answered, as he started to choke out of surprise.

A large glass of water instantly appeared on the table, which he quickly picked up and began drinking to help dislodge the small piece of offending food from his throat.

"Four years?!" he thought incredulously.

This was a position that rotated new people in every six months before being promoted to other jobs, or before starting an apprenticeship. This was not a job one stayed in for any length of time, as it was very entry level, especially for a witch of her caliber and N.E.W.T. scores. Why she was not done with an apprenticeship and on to better things baffled him. Here was one of the most academically achieving students he had in years and she was stuck testing potion ingredients in some dinky lab in the basement of the Ministry. If anything, it infuriated him that all his efforts to teach her all those years, all those questions she asked, all that extra credit work, seemed to have gone to waste. And for what?

Evidently, the woman knew nothing about the hierarchy in the Potions world, for this was the lowest position on the totem pole in his world, short of the job title 'cauldron scrubber.' If she did know, she would have demanded to be transferred out of that department ages ago. He knew Marge's reason for staying on all those years was out of some familial tragedy regarding an aunt and some black market ingredients smuggled into the country, due to a naval blockade during the Napoleonic Wars.

However, fate had delivered her into his hands with her working in the one position that could provide him the necessary ingredients to his freedom. And with her years of experience on the job, she would have the trust of her coworkers and superiors.

Severus firmly believed in free will, but with the tableau set before him, he wondered just how much of his life had been colored by destiny.

Hermione, noticing 'Calleo' choking, leaned over and gently patted him on the back. "Are you alright?" she asked, as he began drinking some water.

"Yes," he managed to say in between his coughs. "Just swallowed wrong."

Though Severus had become accustomed to touch over the past few years, rarely had that had not
been of a sexual nature. Of the clients who engaged in conversation only, the physical contact was that of the comforting kind initiated by him alone. Hermione had reached out and placed her hand on his back. He was acutely aware of the shape and pressure of it on his back, and the small circle it made on his shoulder blade before retreating back to her lap. Though he would try and push it out of his mind, he could feel the lingering phantom feeling of her touch.

Regaining his composure, he continued the conversation. "Four years you say." He needed to know how soon he would need to act. "Are you looking to move up or is there a promotion in the works?"

Heaving a great sigh, she said, "Unfortunately no. It seems that very few positions open up for me to advance to." She looked rather glum and dejected as she dropped her head once more, staring at the glass of wine cradled in her hands and the way the evening sun glinted off the glass. "And when they have opened up, they usually interview new people who come in from the outside. I did want to do an apprenticeship once the war was over, but…" she trailed off, wondering if Calleo was a Death Eater or just some wizard down on his luck, perhaps both. Taking a chance, she finished her thought. "… But, it seems that Muggle-borns, like myself, aren't given many opportunities for apprenticeship. There were a few who would have given me an apprenticeship, but they died during the war or shortly afterwards."

Hermione glanced up to gauge his reaction now that she admitted to being a Muggle-born.

Severus tilted his head in what he hoped was perceived to be a sympathetic manner. Why Hermione had been passed over promotion and denied an apprenticeship was an enraging thought he'd have to ponder later. Regardless of her superiors recognizing an extremely apt witch, it was his boon that she had been overlooked and passed over.

Hoping to stem any ideas that may want to make her actively look for a different job, he added, "I'm sure the right thing will come along if you are patient."

Only the gods knew how patient this brooding man had been for so long. Between his long-lasting desire to teach the Dark Arts while stuck in the dungeons teaching Potions, years playing the double spy for Albus, and now the long wait for his deliverance from the Ministry's confining law, Severus Snape was a quintessential example of patience.

Lifting her head, Hermione smiled shyly and nodded.

Some small voice in her told her to trust Calleo. It was a given that he would be a good listener, as she had paid him to do so, but there was something more. Perhaps it was the wine or his
hospitality, but she found herself relaxing just a little bit in his presence.

"Do you enjoy the subject of Arithmancy?" Hermione asked, hoping his answer would be yes.

"Quite a bit," he replied.

It had been a while since he had engaged in conversation that didn’t center on business or his client’s personal lives. Perhaps Hermione would provide a small amount of intellectual stimulation for himself, as well. Maybe she wasn’t quite the same know-it-all he remembered.

"Have you read about the theory recently published that covers aspects of unknowable numbers?" Hermione hoped she hadn’t started with a question that was too out of his depth.

"The one that goes into chaos theory and random number selection?" Severus answered, his eyes smiling from behind his mask.

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Hermione smiled broadly and lazily. As she walked up the three flights of steps to her flat, she swung her arms out wide as if she was gliding, her head tilting to one side then the other, as her walking pattern along the steps and landings mimicked a wavy line, like the pattern of sea swells. Walking to one side of the passageway, then to the other side and back, her eyes closing in momentary dreaminess, she reflected back on the evening. She hummed a nameless tune.

'So this is what it's like to feel happy?' she silently mused. It had been so long since she felt this good; the sensation was euphoric.

This was what she hoped being an adult would be like. Interesting conversation, warm hospitality, and respect. Hermione had gone directly from years of schooling into a war environment. Once the war was over, she felt thrust into the drudgery of adult life without much chance to explore herself, recalling conversations she had with her mother about her university years. There were times she wished there were wizarding universities, and wondered if apprenticeships allowed the sort of self-discovery her mother experienced.

Her brain buzzed and tingled with the pleasant feeling of being taxed. Ron would refer to the feeling as being "brain fried," but she likened it to a runner's high for the mind. Hermione knew the mind was a muscle that would lose strength and agility if not used, and she could tell from her current state that she was mentally out of shape. If she were going to make a weekly habit of this, she would go back to intensive browsing at Flourish and Blotts, as the wizarding world still hadn't
grasped the concept of a public lending library.

Hermione's current mood was far different from earlier that evening. Originally, she was nervous, partially out of fear that she was betraying Ron. Another part of her feared someone she knew might see her enter the building where her gigolo resided. Now she felt no guilt over her visit. She had not done anything untoward with Calleo and he had been a gracious host. Their evening had been spent in discussion about Arithmancy, which led to a debate regarding Ancient Runes. They had promised to pick up the conversation next week where they had left it on the topic of Saxon influence on post Roman Britain.

Opening the door to her flat, she peered into the kitchen at the clock and saw that Ron was still at work. He was fairly regular in coming home at night at a predictable time and would not be home for another hour.

In the bedroom, she quickly stripped down to her underclothes. Looking in the mirror, she appraised herself. Looking at her breasts covered in the beige satin, she noticed her nipples rising to attention from the cool summer air drifting in through an open window. They pressed against the fabric causing a noticeable shadow to fall across her breasts.

In the kitchen, the hand indicating Ron on the clock moved from "At Work" to "Traveling."

Hermione wondered if her gigolo would think she was pretty. Ron said it enough times, but she was curious of another man's opinion, one not so emotionally tied to her.

Closing her eyes, she imagined Calleo in the room with her. In her mind, she saw him in the mirror slip up behind her, bringing his hands slowly around her ribs to splay them flat on her stomach. As her mind filled in the picture, she brought her own hands to her sides and mimicked the movements her fantasy was providing. She tried to imagine what his clothes might feel like brushing up against her, black linen and equally dark summer-weight wool rubbing along her skin. His mask was in her fantasy too, covering all emotions on his face. She dreamily thought he was equally cool and warm at the same time, confident in his movements and certain of her response to him.

'Do you want me?' she heard Calleo say in his deep, velvety voice inside her head.

"Yes," she breathed.

She tilted her head back against her imaginary lover's shoulder as his hands crept up her stomach to
cup the undersides of her breasts. Letting a small sigh escape, she could imagine his hands slowly creeping up and lightly grazing each nipple.

The whole idea of imagining Calleo play with her while watching his seduction of her in a mirror utterly turned her on. Not even Ron had done anything sensuously erotic to her. Her fantasy continued with her gigolo slipping the straps of her bra off her shoulder, his thumbs making lazy circles from the tops of her shoulders down the slopes of her breasts.

Hermione could feel the beginning tingles of arousal in her belly.

Her own hands gently pulled away the satin. Grazing each nipple with the pads of her thumbs, she noticed how the light attentions she was giving herself was much more stimulating than the rough manhandling Ron usually gave them. Her fantasy provided the picture of Calleo's eyes glittering behind the mask as she gasped from his light touch.

She wanted to reach up a hand and entwine it in his hair. Earlier that evening, she had caught a glimpse of the black hair on Calleo's wrist, so in her mind, she filled in a vision of him and gave him raven locks that trailed down his shoulders.

As her left hand continued its feather-touch ministrations on her left nipple, her right hand began trailing back down her belly, slipping stealthily into her knickers, which had become quite damp within the few minutes she had been playing with herself.

"Oh please," she moaned quietly to herself. "Touch me… lower, I need to feel you."

Imagining those long, pale, elegant hands that held her hand while he placed a kiss upon it during their parting, she gasped as her own fingers started to slowly slide along her slippery folds.

Lost within her fantasy, she didn't notice the quiet return of her husband.

Ron slipped inside their flat hoping not to awake Hermione, as she was usually in bed by this time. The whole flat was dark, except for the light coming from underneath the bedroom door. Tentatively, he stopped at the door and heard his wife breathing hard. Confused, as Ron was originally expecting Hermione to be sitting up in bed with a book, he opened the door and gave a light gasp of surprise.
His wife was in the midst of fingering herself in front of the mirror clad only in her silky pink knickers.

Hermione heard Ron's startled response to the sight of her masturbating and quickly turned around. Her state of arousal had colored her cheeks, but her embarrassment only served to further redden her complexion.

In the past, Hermione had questioned Ron's reasons as to why he still masturbated, thinking the act alone was proof that she was not enough for him and she was not satisfying him enough. He had taken great lengths to explain that even if they had sex twice a day, he would still masturbate, as it was a stress reliever, not a result from lack of sexual fulfillment.

Caught in an act that she never performed in front of her husband, she decided to make the most of the situation.

Grabbing her wand, she called out, "Nox."

Advancing on her husband, she felt emboldened in the dark. Hermione was rarely the initiator of sex, but tonight she didn't want to go to bed unsatisfied and frustrated. Before Ron could comment on her activities, she reached up and kissed him passionately. All the desire she felt for her gigolo she projected onto her husband.

If other people fantasized during sex, as she had told Harry, why couldn't she?

Ron was taller than Calleo, so she raised herself up on the balls of her feet to make reality and the fantasy in her mind closer in actuality. She kept her eyes closed so that her mind could imagine it was Calleo kissing her and not her husband.

When she trailed her mouth along Ron's neck, imparting alternating kisses and bites, Ron groaned out, "Oh 'Mione. You are such a turn on."

This would not do. His voice grated on her nerves and was ruining the moment, destroying the illusion. She was tempted to cast a Silencing Charm on her husband, so she could continue seducing Calleo in her mind.

"Shhhh," she gently shushed him, trying to think of a reason why she would want him quiet before
she latched onto an idea. "Let's pretend there's someone else in the next room and we have to be as quiet as church mice."

Ron nodded his head and she went back to her activities of kissing his body, imagining it was Calleo's body under her touch, never looking at her husband's face. Once she stripped him of his clothes, Hermione pointed to the bed.

Once he was laying down face up, Hermione quickly mounted him facing his feet. If she didn't have to look at his face, she could imagine she was riding her gigolo's cock. She wondered if he was bigger than Ron and thought of all the moans and screams she would make from something filling her so completely.

He was obedient in her request to be quiet, the only sound was him panting as he thrust up into her from underneath. Before she could reach completion, Ron let out a strangled groan. Hermione could feel his cock pulse inside her with each spurt. To clamp down the building bitterness in her that he couldn't have waited until she was done, Hermione angrily rode his cock hoping to climax before he went soft. Of the few times she felt she would have climaxed during sex, it seemed Ron was too quick for her once again. Slowing her movements, Hermione knew it was pointless as Ron was already limp.

Ron took her frantic movements over him as a sign that she had reached orgasm.

Sitting up with his wife still straddling him, he reached for her breasts and grabbed at them, tweaking the nipples with too much pressure for her liking.

"Bloody fantastic!" Ron growled into his wife's back.

The whole fantasy was ruined for her now. Not only was she left on the precarious edge of an orgasm, frustrated with wide-eyed agitation and lack of release, Ron had opened his mouth. Ron's tenor voice was abrasive to her ears, not soothing like Calleo's low and melodious voice.

"I'm going to take a shower and clean up," Hermione said, gently easing herself from her husband's grasp. It would not do to snap at him after what Ron surely thought was great sex for them both.

Once inside the sanctuary of the bathroom, Hermione wished she hadn't thrown away all those 'adult novelty' items the twins had sent her and Ron over the years. They had asked Hermione and Ron to 'test' some of the items they had developed for the adult line of Weasleys' Wizarding
Wheeze, to which she had sent them a rather nasty Howler about how she felt insulted by their 'gifts.' Most of them consisted of enchanted dildos, vibrators and "magical fannies." Surely one of those contraptions would have done the job in the shower that Ron had failed to do in bed that night, and many previous nights before; mainly, bring her to orgasm. Now she regretted her prudish notions.

Hermione was so sexually frustrated, feeling like a violin string tightened with one too many turns, that even the doorknob was starting to look good to her. At least that wouldn’t go soft at the wrong moment. Perhaps Ron was already passed out in bed and she could sneak into the kitchen and see if there was a carrot or cucumber that would suit her needs.

Suddenly appalled at the idea of resorting to vegetables for sexual gratification, Hermione jumped into the shower and quickly brought herself to climax before she finally slumped onto the floor, the shower head continuing to spray water over her head.

Contemplating the evening, her gigolo had helped. This was the first time she had been truly aroused in what seemed a long time. Perhaps if she could just get Ron to engage in more foreplay, while she fantasized about her gigolo, she just might be able to reach orgasm before Ron. And all desire to converse with Ron had been satisfied by Calleo.

Yes, this just might be the thing she needed to improve her marriage after all.

 Severus waited a while before strolling down to Draco's flat on the third floor. He needed to think on the evening's revelations before approaching the younger wizard.

One thing he wanted to ponder was why Hermione was still in such a lowly position. He wondered why she had not been promoted before now. She was always over-achieving at school, and the fact that she was still testing ingredients contradicted her ambitious nature. He knew that Hermione had made some very powerful enemies when she hatched the plan to free house-elves from Death Eater families, but all the Death Eaters in the Ministry had been rooted out. There were other things afoot here that must explain why she was doing a low-level job for four years. He had suspicions, which he could confirm when he met with a particular client he had next week.

The other thing he needed to contemplate was how to approach Hermione about getting the ingredients he and Draco needed for their escape. Since the end of the war, Moody had seen fit to strictly regulate certain ingredients, namely, certain ingredients in the Polyjuice Potion. Powdered bicorn horn, boomslang skin and fluxweed picked at full moon were strictly controlled, requiring a potions license to use such ingredients now. These were items that were not frequently used in most potion making. And when said ingredients were purchased, the buyer's name was written down in a registry recording the purchase. It left a paper trail for the Ministry to follow if Polyjuice was illegally used, like in the escape of two Death Eaters from Great Britain.
Lavender could have bought the ingredients for Severus, but when he would have escaped, she would have been under the Ministry’s scrutiny for just cause, as she was listed as his employer in his parole records. And ingredients brought in from out of the country were confiscated through magic, so it would not have been possible for her to make a quick trip to France to bring the items to him. They would have wound up in a customs locker and Lavender would have had a nice long talk with an Auror over smuggling ingredients.

Hermione's position was perfect. She had access to all the ingredients as they came into the county. And as her job required testing of ingredients, she could sneak away just enough of those elusive ingredients so that he could brew the potion. Technically, he couldn’t brew it himself, but Lavender could.

This would mean he would eventually have to reveal himself to Hermione, hoping her Gryffindor righteousness would prod her into helping him in reaching his goals. Severus would need to speak with Ginny about Hermione's feelings, which would lead to revealing Mrs. Weasley's visits to him. He and Draco would have to proceed very carefully from here on out if they were to succeed.

Severus rapped on Draco's door with his own special knock.

_Knock-knock-knock. Knock-knock. Knock._

Half dressed in a dressing gown and trousers, Draco opened the door and smirked. "Come to escape the know-it-all?"

Feeling slightly irked at the statement, Severus swept into Draco's rooms. Despite what he’d thought earlier, Hermione actually proved to be delightful company, even though he would vehemently deny it in his own conscious mind.

He sat himself in one of Draco wing-back chairs by the fire before quirking one brow in mock surprise of Draco's statement.

"Why, Mr. Malfoy. Do you not care for Mrs. Weasley?" he said in false syrupy tones.

The blond wizard snorted at Severus' attempt at sarcasm.
"You should. She's our ticket out of here," Severus said in dead seriousness.

Severus watched as the implications of his statement sink into Draco's mind.

Draco all but fell into the other matching chair, in a state of mild shock. "Bloody hell!"

She had been there all along, meeting with Ginny for lunch every week. His own disdain towards Hermione Weasley, nee Granger, had kept him from inquiring about her. Had he and Ginny talked about her friend, he would have gleaned this information sooner. It was no fault of Ginny, as she had not been included in their plan to use Polyjuice Potion to leave the country. Ginny was probably not aware of the regulation of the key potions ingredients. He fought down the urge to thump his forehead with the heel of his hand. Now was not the time to ponder regrets for avoiding the subject of Hermione Granger during his secret rendezvous with Ginny; it was the time to put plans into action. Draco wondered what sort of job Mrs. Weasley had that would facilitate their escape.

In anticipation to the question he saw forming in Draco’s mind, Severus said, "She works in the Department of Standards and Regulations."

"So it's really going to happen?" Draco asked in almost disbelief, as if this was some perverse dream and he would wake soon.

Severus smiled as he replied, "Sic erat in fatis."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Please give a warm welcome to Horserider, who will be joining Siren in beta'ing my fic.

"Sic erat in fatis" is Latin for "So it was fated."

A "volto" mask is a half mask covering just the eyes and nose.

The Bauta is another name for the Casanova mask I described in a previous chapter. Here is a description: THE BAUTA: The most traditional of Venetian masks, designed to cover all your features and still allow for eating and drinking. The name is derived from the German "behuten" (to protect) or "babau" in Italian, the bad beast who would carry away naughty children.

I'm getting my aura colors for the bed curtains from a variety of web sites that
correspond and sometimes contradict one another. I'm picking from whatever site can identify the emotions Hermione is feeling.

For your information: Dessert wine glasses are about 6 ounces in size versus the normal wine glass which is about 8 to 10 ounces.

When I wrote "magical fannies," I meant it in the British way, as in "magical vaginas," not fannies meaning bottoms in the American way.

B/N: This story is awesome. And I get to read it before the rest of you. Nyah. *sticks out tongue and wiggles it tauntingly at the readers * Seriously, it’s that good. So please leave Betz reviews. She deserves them, truly she does. She’s got kids and she still manages to write something this good. Goodness to Betz!!! Siren

B/N: Great pacing and intrigue! I love how Severus is still the spy, and we get to see him in action! That Hermione is now starting to fantasize about him is icing on some very good cake, that could only be made better by a fanart illustrating Severus in this sensuous mask. Thanks for that link! ~Horserider
“Knowledge Is Power”

Chapter Summary

Take a seat and have some lunch with Severus and Hermione. Poached salmon with
cucumber-dill sauce and a side of plotting is served over on Dorian Loop, while a
major case of indigestion and indignation is on the menu at a Muggle eatery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fifteen
“Knowledge Is Power”

and anyone else who has a huge team of lawyers with a rightful financial stake in this franchise. So
don't think I would even insinuate that I own any concepts written in this story, except those
inspired by a dirty imagination spurred on my hormones.

Draco began to laugh. It sounded as if it were half way between relief and hysteria, much like
Severus had felt earlier upon learning about Hermione's job.

"All that time, and it was right in front of my face," the fairer man muttered to himself distractedly.

"Now is not the time for regrets. Had I been in your position, I would have avoided knowing
anything about her as well," Severus reproved. "When is your next meeting with Ginny?"

Draco gathered himself. "Next Tuesday morning. I haven't seen her since Thursday last week,
when Mrs. Weasley discovered us. We've decided to mix up our meeting times to throw Potter off
the scent if he gets suspicious again."

Severus nodded; that was a prudent action indeed. "We both need to talk with her. Since she has
confessed seeing you to Hermione, perhaps she can tell us more of Hermione's opinion regarding
the decree and its enforcement on us, as she mentioned it in her owl to you. If we play our cards
correctly, I can use the indignation Hermione feels over injustice to our advantage."

"You're going to reveal yourself to her?"

The dark-haired wizard nodded. "It's the only way."

"You know this means we have to tell Ginny about Hermione's visits with you," Draco said with a mirthful predatory smile. "If Mrs. Weasley balks, we can always blackmail her."

"That is a last resort. I would have to take our dealings to a point that would be worthy of blackmail before I can play that hand," Severus said in such a way to insinuate sexual relations. "The woman has a habit of bending – and sometimes breaking – rules to suit her needs when she feels the end justifies the means. No doubt, if she can steal boomslang skin to find out if you are the heir of Slytherin, she will be easily convinced to engage in the theft of a little more."

There was a long pause of silence before Draco spoke. "You know we'll have to tell Ginny and Lavender about our plans now."

Severus snapped his head up, drawn away from his whirring thoughts. "I'm aware of our need to inform Lavender. She has delicately intoned that she would help when the time comes, without implicating herself if interrogated by the Ministry, but we need to keep Ginny in the dark as much as possible."

Standing quickly, Draco strode over to the fireplace and placed one forearm on the mantle. His fists clutched and relaxed as he kept his back towards his mentor. "No, you don't understand, Severus. She must be made fully aware of what we are doing."

"Do you really think that we are actually going to be taking her with us when we go?" Severus asked rhetorically.

Severus knew this would be foolish; Potter would not let his wife go easily without following after her. He figured that the risk of bringing Ginny along would foil their plans. If anything, if Draco loved her, he would let her go. Besides, didn’t Draco want to be free as much as he did?

Spinning around quickly, Draco's eyes flared. "No, you don't understand." Scowling, he continued, "Remember the agreement we made? That if we found a way out you would finally tell me about
your wife and I would tell you the deal I made with Lavender when I signed her contract?"

A heavy weight was pressing against Severus' chest. He would have to think about her, remember her. The only thing Draco knew about Severus' wife was the fact a witch had married him and she was dead now. There was no one alive who knew about her or her name. Albus, Minerva, even Lucius, were all dead now. And with their death was gone the reminder of her when they looked at him. He had caught the rare glimpse of pity from the headmaster and Minerva over the years. When Lucius had looked at him at times, it was with smug satisfaction of the knowledge that he was behind her death in some small way. Perhaps Severus' turning of Draco against his father and the Dark Lord was some small extraction of vengeance against the fellow Death Eater and deceased patriarch of the Malfoy family. Still, it was not enough.

"Yes, I remember," he answered stonily.

"I will tell you now. When the Polyjuice Potion is almost done brewing, you can tell me your story."

Nodding in agreement of the terms, Severus watched Draco begin to pace the floor.

"I never told Ginny of our plan of escape, as a measure of protection for her and us, especially if Potter decided to go diving into her mind. I had every intention of bringing her with us when the time came. When Lavender found me in that alley, I had already bartered away everything except the clothes on my back. I knew that Ginny was married, as I had read about their wedding in a discarded copy of the Daily Prophet a few months earlier. So the promise of money, shelter, food and a job was not enough to convince me to work for her. I wanted to die, because I knew Potter had Ginny in his bed every night." Gracefully flopping back into the chair opposite Severus, Draco explained further. "I told Lavender she had nothing of value to me, so she just might as well bugger off and let me die. And then she looked at me that way, the way she does when she knows things."

Severus was all too familiar with Lavender's sense of intuition.

"So," Draco continued, "she says, 'Oh, but I think I can offer you something you do want. I can get you Ginny and a way out of the country.'"

"Wait!" Severus interrupted. "Ginny didn’t start seeing you again until December 2001. And you started working for her in July 2000. How did she know…"
Severus trailed off. Either Lavender was clairvoyant, or she had hedged some big bets on certain events falling into place just so. Either way, it baffled him that Lavender had known this would happen… or had arranged it so it would happen. Even Dumbledore hadn’t had this sort of foresight, despite his age and power during Severus' tenure at Hogwarts. He had learned during his last years teaching at Hogwarts that Albus' appearance of omnipotence was created by his very own network of spies, namely the portraits and house-elves, who reported to him the gossip and goings on around the castle. It also helped that his image on all those Chocolate Frog trading cards provided a bit of reconnaissance during the war, as well.

"Women's intuition." Draco shrugged. "That and the fact she put the pieces into place. I grilled her on how she knew about Ginny and me. It seems that she remembered when I ordered some custom made soaps for Ginny for Christmas during Lavender's first year in business before the house-elves were freed. She was still taking custom orders at the time. I’d ordered them to be delivered to Ginny directly. Lavender remembered that. She also saw Ginny and me out in Muggle London one time after the end of the war."

Shifting in his seat, Draco ran his hands through his hair. He seemed to sense that Severus, under other circumstances, would have taken him to task for being so careless with his personal activities with rogue Death Eaters still on the lose during that period, but now was not the time.

"So when I told her that Ginny was married and her efforts were pointless, she said in that knowing voice of hers, ‘Oh, I don’t think Ginny is too happy being married to Harry.’ I asked her how she would know and she told me she that just knew. Then she whipped out the clipping from the *Daily Prophet* with a picture of Ginny's wedding. She says, ‘Does this look like a happy bride?’ " Draco gave a great shuddering sigh and swallowed hard. "I was so… upset when I read about it originally, I never bothered to really look at the picture. When Lavender showed it to me, I really looked at it and knew Ginny was unhappy. That gave me hope, enough hope to accept Lavender's offer to work for her… in both capacities."

Black hair hung in a curtain over Severus' face. He felt many emotions at once and nothing at all. Lavender had helped them towards their goal of freedom and, at the same time, used them for her own purposes. She had manipulated people and yet had done nothing much in changing the course of events. The former Head of Slytherin House wasn't sure if she was more cunning than he gave her credit for, or was extremely lucky and noble.

Draco had held up his end of the bargain. He had finally told Severus the terms in which Lavender had gotten him to work for her. One thing still didn't sit well with the older man.

"How did she know that one day Hermione, or someone in her position, would come along?"

Shaking his head, the blond replied, "I don't know. She either was privy to information, had a good
hunch or both. It will be interesting to ask her. I’ll let you do the honors of getting that little tidbit out of her."

Severus wanted to know what other information Lavender had been holding out on. It would be something to ask her when the time was right. Perhaps ‘interrogate’ would be a more appropriate term. However, he could not argue that Lavender had made this opportunity possible through well timed words and suggestions to Ginny and Hermione. Perhaps a nice talk, with some charm thrown in, would loosen her tongue. In all fairness, Lavender was a very equitable employer, and had found a way for him to continue working in Potions – bending the law without breaking it, per se. No, he could not find Lavender with fault, as the plan he and Draco had talked about for years could now come to fruition. Though, it would have been nice if it had happened sooner.

'Perhaps if Miss Brown was sorted today, she would have been placed in Slytherin,' Severus thought to himself as he stared at the fire.

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Blinking at the morning light streaming through the curtains, Hermione awoke feeling more rested than she had in ages. After carefully rising from the bed so as not to wake Ron, she padded into the kitchen to make a quick cup of tea.

Standing in front of the cooker, while lost in thought as the water was brought to a boil, she began humming to herself. Despite Ron's typical less-than-stellar performance in the bedroom, she had a decent enough orgasm in the shower to compensate, due, in no small part, to the fantasy she was having when her husband arrived home early. Mostly though, it was from the mental euphoria she was still riding.

She remembered during her walk home, from the building that she now mentally referred to as The Red Ginseng, her usual evening urge to engage Ron in conversation when he got home later that night had been sated. It seemed as if Calleo was just what Hermione needed to make her happy with this marriage. Calleo would satisfy her mind in a way Ron could not, while stimulating her physically through her fantasies, enough to make sex with Ron more enjoyable.

The thought of marriage counseling had popped into her mind before, but she knew Ron's stance on the idea. His motto was, ‘if it wasn't broke, don’t fix it’. And in Ron's opinion, their marriage wasn't broke at all. A little tense at times, but nothing a good shag and a job with better money couldn’t solve, he surmised.

Hermione smiled secretly. As long as Ron was unaware of her new Thursday evening activities, everything would work out just fine. And if he did become enlightened about her visits with Calleo, she would justify it by honestly stating that nothing happened. They just talked about things in which he had no interest in at all, so what harm was done? Knowing Ron's temper and his fragile ego, it was best if she did her damnedest to keep it from him though.
"You're in a good mood this morning," Ron said from the doorjamb to the kitchen. "Flourish and Blotts start handing out free books?"

For some reason, instead of finding humor in his jibe, it irritated her. There was no way Ron was going to ruin her good mood with an insensitive remark. Instead she gave him a tight smile and jabbed him in the ribs.

"Oi! Watch it there. You and your talon fingers just about took a chunk out of me!" he complained loudly.

Turning back to the now-whistling kettle, she poured water into two mugs.

Before she could pick up the mugs and bring them to the kitchen table, Ron grabbed her arse, giving her a good goose as he passed by. "Maybe there's another reason why you're so happy this morning," he said with a twinkling leer.

'Yes, and you're not the reason,' she mused, her bitter thoughts making her mouth tighten at the corners once more. Hermione hoped he would not bring up the situation in which he had found her last night.

"Do you always do that while I'm away at work?" Ron asked with a nudge and a wink.

Doing her best not to let the exasperation sour her face, she plastered on a shy smile. "No. I just… well," she professed in believable tones, "I just needed to, you know… relax." She hoped he would drop the matter.

Despite Hermione's experience with sex – even if it was limited to one partner – she found the idea of masturbating with Ron watching her embarrassing. She had performed fellatio on him and he had reluctantly performed cunnilingus on her a few times, they had sex in a few interesting positions and rarely did anything adventurous in the bedroom. Once or twice, he had tied her down, yet despite Ron's intimate knowledge of his wife's body, Hermione couldn't bring herself to masturbate while Ron watched. It seemed like a very private and personal thing to do, away from prying eyes. Actually, it was more that the idea of masturbating while Ron watched did not arouse her instead.

"Well, if you ever want to relax again, please… let me know. I'll be more than happy to witness
Hermione wanted to fold her arms over her chest and petulantly tell him no, but instead kept sipping at her tea instead and fought the urge to roll her eyes. Maybe if he would just be quiet and not say a word, she might let him watch sometime. She just hoped she would never call out Calleo’s name in the heat of her own self-induced passion.

After finishing her tea, Hermione made breakfast for them both. It seemed that not only lunch out with the girls would have to go, but her morning scone habit as well. Some egg and toast was much cheaper to prepare. She had lunch with Harry today and needed to find other ways to save every Knut she could for what she would come to think of as her ‘weekly habit.’

Severus was in a better mood than his usual Friday post parole meeting black mood. There was a light at the end of the tunnel, and for once it was not the Hogwarts Express coming his way.

Lavender could tell that Severus' mien was different, but decided to keep her observations to herself. Knowing Severus' private nature, it was best that he brought it up if he wanted to discuss something. There was nothing that irked a Slytherin more than to out-Slytherin him.

It was during lunch that Severus finally talked of something other than Potions. "I had the most interesting conversation with Mrs. Weasley last night."

Lavender lifted her gaze from the plate of poached salmon with cucumber-dill sauce before her. "Hmm? Do tell."

He prodded at a small pile of greens dressed with a light vinaigrette, before spearing it. "Yes, she works at the Department of Standards and Regulations."

"Hmm. Yes, that is interesting." Lavender was not going to take the bait.

Severus threw down his napkin in disgust. "No more subtlety, Miss Brown. Now is the time to come clean with what you know. If you are going to help, then Draco and I need to know what other information you have been withholding if we are going to be successful in our goals. I must know all that you can tell me, as you seem to know much more than you have alluded to. How did you know you could get Draco and Ginny away from here when you didn't even know about Hermione? How is it you promised Draco such a thing?"
Under the Potions master's glare, she set her fork down and dabbed at the corner of her mouth with her napkin before meeting his penetrating gaze. "All right. I'll tell you what I know and when I knew it. When Ginny wed Harry, I knew she was unhappy and figured she was pining for Draco. Before I came across Draco that fateful day in the alley, I already knew that Hermione worked for that particular department. So when I promised Draco a way out, I figured some method of escape would come to light, though I didn’t make the connection to Hermione till later.

"If you had made the same plans that I would have in your situation, I would guess Polyjuice Potion as a means to your goal. Consider your inclusion to Draco's escape a fringe benefit, as our original contract did not include this clause. You have helped my business beyond measure, so if or when a way became possible, I considered it a given that you would go as well."

"So it was a guess? The luck of the draw that the situation presented itself?" he asked.

"Partially. However, I have my own plans afoot. I have certain goals where Hermione is concerned. It was as time went by that I thought of how to use her to help you, Draco, and Ginny."

Severus stared at her for a long moment wondering if he should violate parole and use Legilimency to see if there was anything else she was hiding. "And what are your plans for Hermione?" Perhaps Miss Brown's plans for her would give light to more information.

"That is of a very personal nature," she calmly answered.

"Damn it!" he snarled, leaning over the table set for two. "Considering the personal nature of my night job, I would think a Gryffindor such as yourself would find the exchange of information a way to make things a bit more equitable. You women always love to talk. Tell me!"

Lavender found it quite amusing that Severus would want to know what she had in store for Hermione. A week ago he was reluctant to have anything to do with her, and now he seemed concerned. Then again, if Hermione was his means for escape, she was sure that he wanted to know that her plans would not interfere with his own.

"I assure you, Mr. Snape, what plans I have concerning Hermione will not stop you three from fleeing. As a matter of fact, your flight from the country just may serve my ultimate purpose," she said with a smug smile. "If that answer still does not meet with your satisfaction, then I will eventually tell you what you want to know. Until then, I prefer to keep my own counsel on the matter."
Severus was not wholly satisfied with Miss Brown's answers, but it would suffice for now. It was a combination of luck and insight that directed them all to this point in time. He would have to make use of her natural talents, as he did not want any mishaps in the execution of his plans.

One last question needed to be asked. "Do you know why Hermione is still doing the same job after four years?" He watched her closely, looking for any signs she might be hiding more information.

"Why don’t you ask your Tuesday afternoon client?"

He had already thought to ask Calpurnia, but Miss Brown's statement merely confirmed his suspicions that she was the right person to ask.

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Glancing at her surroundings, Hermione figured that Harry didn’t want to talk about marriage counseling in any wizarding establishment, and that was why she was meeting him in another Muggle restaurant. Any witch or wizard who had an incentive to eavesdrop, namely a reporter from any number of publications, would find the news of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Potter in counseling too good to pass up.

The crisp linens and small vase filled with a couple stems of miniature carnations decorated the table. It seemed a bit posh for Hermione's budget, but if she were going to go out to lunch only when Harry invited her, then she supposed a place like this once in a great while wouldn't stress her budget too much.

Harry strode into the restaurant in Muggle attire and raised a hand in greeting from across the dining area.

"Hi," Harry greeted his friend enthusiastically with a smile.

She returned the smile with one of her own that was equally warm. "Hello, Harry. I take it that all went well last night?"

Giving her a shy smile, he nodded. "I'm sorry that we had to get to this point for us to get into counseling, but at least we're both talking to one another. I guess I haven’t been very fair to Ginny in that I haven’t bothered to get to know her as much as I should have and I’ve taken her for granted in some ways. We also addressed my problems with trust. I'm seeing the same psychiatrist for my personal counseling for Monday night sessions starting next week. He's dealt with a lot of
Vietnam, Falklands, and Gulf War veterans. The circumstances are different, but a lot of the symptoms are the same."

"I'm sorry about having to yell at you like that," Hermione apologized, "but considering the circumstances, if it wound up helping you and Ginny get on the road to patching things up… well, then…" She shrugged, her gesture finishing her unspoken sentiments.

Harry wore a repentant frown. "I guess I was a complete berk the other night, being drunk and all. But after the session last night, I have hope that things will get better. I feel better than I have in a while. We both got quite a lot off our chests last night." His face became more serious, as his voice became slightly choked with emotion. "Some of it stung, but…" He closed his eyes and shook his head, as he gave another weak smile. "Anyway, how have you been this week?"

"Me?" she squeaked.

The only thought that came to mind was the exhilaration she felt after talking with her gigolo, but that would not be proper conversation. Especially since she had told Harry's wife to stop seeing her own gigolo-slash-boyfriend earlier that week. She doubted Harry would understand anymore than her own husband. Ginny would empathize with her reasoning, but considering Hermione’s threat to the redhead witch if she continued seeing Malfoy, it would most likely never come to light that she herself was frequenting a brothel, no matter how innocent her purpose.

"Um," she stammered for a moment, "better. I'm so glad to hear you and Ginny are doing better."

"Yeah, so am I. And it's all thanks to you. You finally got us both into counseling where we need it. Let me buy you lunch today as a sign of my gratitude."

Feeling rather guilty for her own hypocrisy, she shoved the feeling aside and beamed back at him. "You don’t have to, Harry."

"Oh please, Hermione. Just this once," he pleaded with a smile, batting his green eyes at her like he used to when they were at school and he needed a favor.

"Oh… all right," she huffed. "But just this once," she scolded him lightly with a waggle of her finger.
Hermione felt much better indeed. Not only was her resentment towards Ron lessened, but Harry and Ginny's marriage seemed to be getting back on track.

Since this was the first relaxed conversation they'd had since Harry's request for Hermione to spy on his wife, she decided this was the best time to bring up a certain topic and see if she could get any satisfactory answers.

"Harry," Hermione said casually, "I was just remembering about all the other Order members. It was nice to see so many of them on Victory Day." She saw Harry's face darken and quickly went on with her tangent. "I saw Tonks. She was looking quite well, and Dedalus Diggle too. You know he's been doing some security work for Hestia Jones in France."

"Really? I'll have to owl Hestia sometime and catch up. It's been too long."

"Ron and I had a chance to chat with Neville and Luna. They seem to be back on speaking terms with one another, I'm glad that at least they were able to remain friends, especially after she returned his ring."

"I heard Neville was seeing Sprout's niece, some Hufflepuff that graduated a few years ago." Harry looked up at the ceiling as he tried recalling the girl. "Can't remember her name right now, but I think you'd remember her if you saw her."

"Did you get a chance to talk with any of the other Order members on Monday?" she asked, hoping the transition to what she really wanted to ask him would seem smooth.

Harry grimaced slightly. "Unfortunately no. I think next year I'm going to skip the official Ministry function – and avoid the spotlight – and have a party with all the old Order members at the house."

Now was her chance. "Speaking of old Order members, you wouldn't know what happened to Snape and Malfoy, would you?" Hermione hoped it didn't seem to forced and appeared to be spontaneous.

He jerked upright in his seat slightly and blinked at her owlishly before a scowl began creeping across his face. "No I don't," he said rather coldly. "And I don't care. I hope they're miserable suffering under that Death Eater Decree."
Hermione gasped in shock. "Harry! How could you! They were on our side. You can’t mean that!"

"Are you so sure they were on our side? They are both Slytherins," he growled through clenched teeth. "And everyone knows a Slytherin only looks out for himself and no one else. Didn't it ever make you wonder why Albus and Minerva died just before the end of the war? I bet those two had something to do with it. Probably trying to save their own skins by killing off both of them in case I didn't hold up my end of the prophecy. Wouldn’t be surprised if that hooked nose bat poisoned the headmaster; he was a Potions master after all. Could make it look like a nice little accident or maybe just natural causes."

"Harry James Potter! Where did you learn such rubbish? Snape risked his life for you countless times to make sure you lived to defeat Voldemort, and you accuse him of killing Albus! What nonsense," she proclaimed with umbrage. "Albus died of natural causes at the ripe old age of one hundred and fifty-nine. Considering the average life span of a witch or wizard is one hundred and forty, though a few have been known to live until one hundred ninety, Albus lived a rather full life."

"And what about Minerva," he questioned her. "Don't tell me it was coincidence that she died shortly after Albus. And she was only seventy-three. In her prime!"

Memories of her favorite teacher flooded her memories. There were times she had missed her mentor and friend. As her eyes filled with tears, her voice quavered, "You don’t think I miss her? I do! So much! If I could have taken some of those hexes in her stead, I would have. But Snape and Malfoy had nothing to do with that."

"Don't be so sure. Come on Hermione, don’t kid yourself. How else could Death Eaters gotten into the castle unless Snape and Malfoy helped them," he shot back. "How else would Voldemort know about the passage from Honeydukes? Think Hermione! You know they had to be playing both sides so that they could save their own skins no matter which side won."

She was flustered and outraged. "And just who told you this load of tripe? How do you know it was Snape and Malfoy for certain?"

"Moody," Harry bit back. "He told me that Snape and Malfoy were probably the ones who killed the headmaster and Minerva. There was no one else who could have lead the Death Eaters into Hogwarts or get close enough to the headmaster to poison him."

Sitting very still while her mind whirred, Hermione knew Malfoy and Snape had nothing to do with the attack. They had helped defend the castle, while trying to avoid showing their true loyalties to the Order. A few well placed hexes and Obliviates on a group of Death Eaters near Gryffindor Tower had helped them cover their tracks so that no one suspected them as spies. At the
time, no one knew the final battle would be but a few days away. Everyone figured that the war might drag on for a few more years. They did what they could to remain useful in their capacity as spies for the future.

However, something did not sit right with Hermione. She knew she was overlooking a bit of information, something important. Still, she could not sit idly by and let Harry think the two Slytherins betrayed them all.

"Probably? Probably? So he doesn’t know. He's guessing," she said disdainfully.

"He's an Auror and a damn good one. I trust his hunches. I think he's right on this one," Harry asserted.

"So what you're saying is on the presumption of a man who could give conspiracy theorists a run for their money in the paranoia department, you trust what he says? The man won’t even shake my hand!" she fumed. "And I'm a Muggle-born, best friend's with the Boy-Who-Lived, and fellow Order member. It's paranoid delusions!"

"The man got locked in a trunk by a Death Eater for almost a whole year!"

"And don’t you think that did something to him in the long run? He probably needs to get himself into counseling too! As sure as I am about anything, I just know in my heart and my gut that Snape and Malfoy are innocent and had nothing to do with Albus and Minerva’s deaths. I think it's a travesty that they should have this law applied to them. After all they sacrificed, and now this," she declared with a fierce glare.

Harry leaned forward, concerned that his friend was going to get herself into trouble. He lowered his voice, "Hermione, I know what you are thinking. But even if you are right – and I doubt you are this once – don’t go and try and fix this. You'll be labeled a Death Eater sympathizer."

Hermione snorted in disgust. "I highly doubt that. I'm a Muggle-born! You and I are the last people to ever sympathize with the Death Eaters. I think that what they did to them was positively a slap on the wrist. Fudge should have stuck them all in Azkaban; all except Snape and Malfoy."

Shaking his head, Harry said, "How can you feel any sympathy for those two? Snape was horrid to you all those years and Malfoy was even worse. How can you feel the need to clear their names?"
"Because it's the right thing to do, Harry. You know it. If I can prove they are innocent, I want you to make the public declaration. Nobody would dispute you. You're the Man-Who-Killed-Voldemort. Promise me you will," she begged, her brow furrowed with determination.

Exhaling slowly, knowing Hermione's stubborn streak, he relented. "All right. But it has to be really good and solid. Otherwise, Moody will not budge an inch." Someplace, deep down inside, he worried that she just might be right.

"Moody is not the law, just an enforcer of it," she said solemnly. "If Snape and Malfoy are innocent, then they should be released from the decree. If I do find that Moody is right in his assumptions, then I will have no problem with the idea of those two being penalized to the full extent of the law."

The waiter, waiting for their argument to abate, came over to their table. "Good afternoon. Would you like to hear our specials today?" His cheery tone was like a bucket of ice water being poured on both their heads, drastically altering the mood.

Hermione hadn’t even looked at the menu and any appetite she’d had was long since gone.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I can't eat. We'll have lunch another time. I'm just…" She rose from her seat, wiping away a few errant tears and licking her lips which had gone dry during their argument. "I need to go back to work, I'll owl you later, bye."

All but fleeing from the restaurant, she didn’t stop until she reached a spot a few blocks away at the edge of a park. Slumping onto a bench, oblivious to the Muggle children playing in the warm afternoon sunshine, Hermione began to weep.

Chapter End Notes

CHapter 15 A/N: January 2005: The plot seems to be expanding as I write this, and as I've said before, this is my first story I've posted that's a WIP, so I'm trying to set up all the lovely plot points without having to backtrack in the story.

September 2015: Well, trying to set up all the plot points and not write myself into a hole is why I held off posting the rest of the story (beyond chapter 50) when I picked it up in 2014 until it was complete so I didn't have to write myself out of any more holes.
Tempers and temperatures soar, but solace can be found in a familiar place to both Severus and Hermione.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Sixteen
“In the Heat of the Night”

Disclaimer: (Sung to the song, "We Love You, Conrad" from Bye Bye Birdie)

We love you J.K.
Oh, yes we do
When we write fanfics
We think of you
We know you own this
Don’t sue!
Oh J.K., we love you!

Sitting in the VIP box with Harry and Ginny, Hermione still felt a little awkward around both her friends. Ron had sent the Potters tickets for the weekend game against the Falmouth Falcons, and had not informed his wife of his actions till that morning.

The last time Hermione had spoken with either Harry or Ginny, it was a rather tense situation in both instances. She had ordered Ginny to stop seeing Malfoy, then later that week confronted Harry over assumed facts of Snape and Malfoy's participation in the death of Albus and Minerva.

They all smiled uneasily at one another.

The VIP box was located right next to the spouse's box. It was usually referred to as the wives'
box, as there hadn't been a female player on the team in five years. Though Hermione would have preferred to have some more time apart from her two friends until tempers and feelings cooled, she would rather sit with them than in the wives' box having to listen to Christie Kidd and Nicole Stewart prattle on about their husbands' latest endorsement contracts and the money involved, the latest society gossip, and their thinly veiled insults directed at her. They would give Hermione patronizing looks of pity, as she never wore the latest fashion and had to work for a living while her husband sat out most games on the sidelines.

Hermione was in the midst of asking Ginny about Fleur's condition, as she had been put on bed rest a few days prior, when Mrs. Kidd sauntered over to the VIP section with Mrs. Stewart in tow.

"Hello, Hermione," Christie greeted her in a sweet singsong voice that belied the disdain she held for Mrs. Hermione Weasley.

Because Hermione's back was towards the pair as they approached, she had no idea they were behind her until the one spoke. Her back went rigidly straight and her eyes narrowed to discretely tell Ginny and Harry that the two visitors were not welcome.

Hitching a none-too-convincing smile on her face, Hermione turned around. "Oh! Christie, Nicole. I didn’t notice you," she replied with false sincerity worthy of Lucius Malfoy, while letting her actions speak louder than her words.

"Aren't you going to introduce us to your friends?" Nicole asked, while an ungracious, arrogant smirk played across her face.

Hermione felt like she was back at Hogwarts with Pansy Parkinson and Draco Malfoy, the superiority complexes, vain arrogance and derisive attitudes included.

Even though she was involved in the final battle with Voldemort, helping Harry when the time came for the last spell, the press only mentioned Hermione in passing and she was never interested in fame because she saw what the press had done to Harry. So the fact that the two witches had never heard of her before Ron joined the team didn't surprise Hermione. However, she was irritated enough to put these two harpies in their place, and she decided to make the most of the situation, hoping that Harry would play along.

"Christie, Nicole, this is my oldest and dearest friend Harry." She paused for dramatic effect. "Harry Potter."
The effect was priceless, as Christie's and Nicole's faces fell. Both witches' mouths were agape as they looked from Hermione to Harry. It was clearly written across their faces that they didn’t think Hermione had neither the clout nor prestige to be associated with someone as famous as Harry Potter.

Harry, picking up on the situation from Hermione's attitude, and sensing the same elitist arrogance exuding from Christie and Nicole as he had from Malfoy on the train his first year, quickly chimed in. "You know Hermione doesn't like to brag, but if it wasn't for her and Ron's help during the final battle, I don’t think I would have lived to see today. You'd all be kissing Voldemort's robes if it weren't for them."

He hated playing the fame card as well, but having heard before how the two witches had treated Hermione, Harry wanted to put them in their place for good. No one treated his friends like that. Ever.

Christie began to stutter; Harry had said You-Know-Who’s name out loud. "Oh He-Hermione, um, erm, did I mention that we're having a garden party tomorrow. You, Ron and Harry are more than welcome to join us." She beamed an all too brilliant smile at the famous wizard.

At this point Ginny cleared her throat, itching to jump into the fray.

Turing towards her other friend, Hermione said, "And this is another dear friend, Ginny."

Ginny extended her hand out to the twin bints and gave a convincing smile. "Christie, Nicole. I've heard so much about you."

"Ginny," Christie and Nicole replied in unison, the former witch shaking her hand.

"Oh please," Ginny charmingly pleaded, "call me Mrs. Potter."

Words could not describe the looks on Christie’s and Nicole's faces. If a picture were worth a thousand words, then the look on both their faces would have rivaled Agnes Hortensia Bladderpus' semi-autobiographical eighteenth century epic opus, "My Life As A Courtesan Hag: Volumes I through VIII," in terms of length to describe it.

Their eyes darted to the ring on Ginny's finger, then to Harry's left hand for confirmation. They
both grinned broadly at Ginny, through their smiles never reached their eyes.

"Yes, so nice to meet you both," Nicole said in disbelief.

"Yes, we must go. Hope to see you all at our party tomorrow? Ta!" Christie bid the group farewell, noting the chilly reception at what she hoped was an opportunity to further climb the social ladder through association of the famous couple.

Once the two biddies were gone, the three friends burst into gales of laughter not caring if they were heard or seen.

"Oh, Harry! I can’t tell you how long I've wanted to do something like that. Thank you so much. You made my year," Hermione said, as she regained her breath.

"Anything for you," Harry replied with a smile, his hand waving dismissively as if it were nothing. "Your previous descriptions didn't do them justice. They're worse!"

Hermione turned to Ginny. "And you were perfect. I have never seen a blow dealt so deftly. They both looked like you hit them upside the head with a haddock."

"No problem, Hermione. Can't let two stupid cows like that insult our friend now, can we?" the redhead added.

The tension between them had dissipated when faced with a common enemy. Before they could talk further, the announcer's voice boomed throughout the stadium.

"Good afternoon witches, wizards, and children of all ages. Welcome to the Chudley Cannons home game against the Falmouth Falcons!"

A cheer mixed with a few boos rose though the crowd. Hermione, Harry and Ginny sat back down in their seats to watch the players as they flew out onto the pitch.

"It's another lovely afternoon here at Chudley Stadium, so let's introduce the players! Number 13, Chaser for five years, William Kidd!" Another cheer swept through the stadium. "Number 86,
Chaser for the Cannons for six years, Frickard Stewart! Number 99, Chaser on the Chudley team for six years, Richard Bent! Number 36, Beater for four seasons here, Chip Dentille! Number 76, Beater for two seasons, Harry Schtump! Number 9, Seeker for the Cannons for seven years straight, Wally Bristol! And filling in for Randall Bagger, welcome Number 42, Keeper for four years, Ronald Weasley!"

With the announcement of each team member there was a loud cheer, but when Ron's name was called out, the three in the VIP box looked at each other in brief shock before clapping, whistling, and shouting at the top of their lungs as Ron flew a lap around the stadium before taking his place before the goal posts. Ginny placed two fingers to her mouth and let out a shrill whistle that could be heard halfway across the pitch.

'I never could figure out how to whistle like that,' Hermione thought as she stuck a finger in her ear to preserve her eardrum.

When they stopped cheering, Harry turned to Hermione. "Why didn't you tell us Ron got the starting slot for this game?"

"I didn't know till just now," Hermione confessed. 'Guess that explains the smile he was wearing last night and this morning.'

"This is fantastic!" Ginny squealed with delight.

Hermione hugged Ginny back and turned to give one to Harry as well. She wondered if Randall was all right and looked about the wives' box over Harry's shoulder as she hugged him to see if Wendy, Randall's wife, was around. Wendy was one of the few players' wives who was sincerely amicable towards Hermione. As much as she liked the idea of her husband having a chance to prove himself on the field more often, Hermione hoped it was not as a result of the misfortune of others and more on the basis of the team's coach finally seeing Ron's talent.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The Weasleys accepted The Potters' post game invitation to dinner at their house. Hermione spent most of her time in the kitchen with Ginny, fixing dinner. Since the heat wave that had descended upon London the day before made using the cooker in the kitchen a rather unpleasant prospect, they fixed cold items to eat.

As Hermione leaned against the counter with a glass of Sangria in her hand, Ginny was de-seeding the cucumbers and chopping them finely for gazpacho. Since Ginny had never been able to convince Harry to take vacation time off, she'd taken to learning the native food of places she wanted to visit. Her latest culinary obsession was Spanish cuisine.
The men were in the living room reliving the whole match in enthusiastic tones, especially when both of them were talking about the Cannons’ score of 450 to the Falcons’ 290. The volume was kicked up a notch with the addition of a few glasses of the fruity chilled wine.

Hermione listened a moment, making sure the men were still in the other room talking before she spoke to her friend. "Harry says counseling Thursday night went well." She picked up a slice of orange that had been floating in her drink and began nibbling at the wine soaked slice of fruit.

Ginny nodded, not saying a word, instead fixing all her attention on the dicing of various vegetables for the cold summer soup she was preparing.

Turning her ear towards the door that was closed between the kitchen and the living room, Hermione did a final confirmation of Harry and Ron's location to ensure privacy before she spoke once more. "So, have you owled him it's over?"

The steady rhythm of the knife rocking and chopping on the block of wood ceased. Except for the bleeding of Harry and Ron's voices through the closed door, the kitchen became eerily quiet. Hermione held her breath sensing the tension in Ginny's posture and the loud measured breathing through the redhead's nostrils. The younger witch’s gaze remained fixed on the cutting board in front of her.

Swallowing hard, Ginny answered, "Not yet."

"Oh."

The metronomic sound continued once more as Ginny said flatly, "I would appreciate it if you wouldn't bring this subject up in my house when certain people are in the next room." Those people being Harry and the most temperamental of her six brothers.

"Oh. Sorry," Hermione muttered contritely.

Shrugging, Ginny continued chopping away.

Hermione went back to nibbling on her slice of orange, trying to find a delicate way of asking
questions she wasn't sure her friend would answer. She wasn't sure if she could wait until next Wednesday to ask the one burning question in her mind.

"Harry mentioned yesterday that during counseling, there were some things brought up… and he said they stung a bit," she nudged gently, while trying to sound nonchalant.

Ginny sniffed loudly and brought her right arm up so she could wipe away a few tears on her upper arm. Finally stopping, she laid down the knife and looked at Hermione.

"You want to know if I told him about us?" Ginny asked in a whisper, one eye fixed on the door in case her brother and husband suddenly came bounding into the room.

Feeling foolish for not having waited, Hermione gave her a sheepish look and nodded.

"No." It was a definitive answer that told Hermione she never would tell Harry. "Can we drop this topic… please?" She gave another large sniff and used her left arm to wipe away the tears from the left side of her face.

"Why can't I just leave well enough alone,' Hermione chastised herself.

There were times she had wondered if Minerva had lived, if she could have trained her to become an Animagus. In all likelihood, the young witch would have probably been a cat, as her curiosity was by far one of her strongest traits. It was partly her curiosity that had brought her this far. If she had just watched Ginny and reported back to Harry instead of asking Ginny's explanation for her actions, she would not be here watching Ginny mincing green pepper with restrained sorrow and resignation. Then again, Ginny might have just left Harry, holding good on her promise if Draco died by her husband's hand, wand, or word. If Hermione had done things differently, she and Ron might be coaxing Harry out of the bottom of a bottle over the fact his wife left him, and not listening to him excitedly comparing Quidditch techniques Ron used during the game with those used by Keeper on the Puddlemere United team. Maybe it was better that her curiosity drove her to confront Ginny instead. Still, Hermione had told herself before that she wished she were ignorant of certain facts.

At that moment she made a small vow to herself to start minding her own business and not seek answers to questions that did not want to be answered. Hermione would not wonder or try to piece together information revealing who her gigolo might be. He wore a mask for his own reasons, probably to remain anonymous. To try and discover who he was might ruin the precious secret she had with herself and the image she had of this mysterious man. Nor would she ask Ginny any further questions about Malfoy. The one exception to this vow would be to learn why Moody was
so bent on persecuting Snape and Malfoy, and if the things Harry said they had done were true. She was curious about this problem, but more importantly, what was being done to the ex-Death Eaters was wrong, and she wanted to correct the situation.

There were times Severus missed Hogwarts. Despite having to deal with students who constantly threatened to do bodily harm to him and others with ill-prepared potions during class, there were definite benefits to the job.

Besides the extensive library at his disposal, there was the scenery. Though he lived in the dungeons and was viewed as a secluded man who abhorred all things living and bright, that was far from the truth. Well, except for the secluded part.

On March evenings after curfew, he would wander to the semi-tropical greenhouses on the south side of the school to inhale the heady scent of orange blossoms. Their pungently fragrant scent invaded his whole being, reminding him of many things. Their fruit, which was equally sweet and tart, showed how nature must find balance between two opposites. The leaves, glossy and green, reflected the vigor and health of the living things that grew in an ideal environment. Severus wondered at times if he would have been healthier and more vigorous as a lad if his family and school life had been more ideal. Their flowers, which bloomed while fruit hung ripe on the tree, showed abundance and the fertility of life itself. Their flowers, which made a crown for his bride once, reminded him why he did what he must at times and why he would never be a coward again.

The long passageways of Hogwarts provided him his daily exercise, allowing him to stretch his legs after standing in one spot for long periods of time, lecturing to the class or peering into cauldrons. The fresh air helped dissipate the fumes that clung to his clothes and allowed him to regain his sense of smell, which became dull during the day, being constantly exposed to the same odors for hours at a time.

The beauty of the surrounding countryside changed with the season, which gave him a perspective on the passing of time. The living colors of summer would change to the fiery and fleeting hues of autumn, signaling the approach of winter’s sleep to come. The snow and bare branches hid the promise renewed each spring when life returned to the world. There were times he wished the students went home for a week during the middle of spring so that he could go out among the new green grass, bluebells and sun-bright daffodils, and let his bare feet feel the warm living earth without spotty youths laughing at the bitter old man quietly reveling in the simple joys of spring in the afternoon sun. Instead, he would take his nature walks in the early morning hours before the population of the castle would stir and ignore his simple desire to shed his footwear. Severus Snape may have been a cynical and unsentimental man, but that did not mean he still did not hold a sense of wonder for what nature gave each and every year without fail.

He was perceived as a man who had a vacuum where his heart should be, and if there were some small piece of flesh residing where his heart should be, it would be black to match his hair, his
eyes and his robes.

Severus usually wore black robes, giving himself an air of intimidation in the classroom, a tactic to reign control in a room with dangerously toxic substances around, but it hid all manner of stains from ingredients and potions constantly dripping and splashing on him during the school year. After so many years of wearing black, he had continued dressing in a similar fashion. Even with the summer heat, Severus wore black, but not the frock coat he donned to keep warm in the chilly dungeons in Scotland; instead, he wore a light-weight linen shirt under a cool cotton cloak that hid his features as he ventured out into Diagon Alley for a rare jaunt. If the nomadic tribesmen of the Sahara could wear black in the blistering sun, surely he could wear it during a muggy, yet bearable heat wave now that the sun had set.

He had been feeling rather cooped up during the day. Perhaps it was the fact that he could taste freedom. What amazed him even more was how an idea, something abstract, could have such a palpable quality to it. Hope was something he had little to spare of over the years, but now it was a growing seed inside of him, aching to grow and bloom.

His Saturday night client had come and gone quickly, seeking only a quick shag, as she had other plans to meet up with friends later that evening, which meant that Severus was free to take care of some personal and business matters. However, he quickly found he could not concentrate on his correspondences that lay scattered about his desk in his study, and decided a trip to Flourish and Blotts would be in order. A little distraction to clear his mind of Hermione Weasley and her uses was needed before he could go back to his papers.

Business hours in Diagon Alley always ran a little longer during the summer, as people tended to stroll well into the evening, stopping here and there to browse and shop. It was after sunset when Severus ventured outside, as he preferred the cover of night and his cloak to conceal him from passersby. As there were fewer people there than during most times of the day, he found it easy to make his habitual long strides along the cobblestones. His boots were too warm, especially in the balmy evening, and he appreciated the feel of the heels of his summer shoes make contact with the worn stone under his feet, sensing the muscles in his thighs and calves stretch and grow more limber with each step.

There were times he cursed the Ministry for revoking his Apparition license, and this was one of them. Travel via Floo was still available to him, and he could have gone to Hogsmeade instead for a good stretch of his legs, but that would mean jostling through a crowded pub where he was more likely to be seen, resulting in people whispering, pointing, and staring at the known Death Eater. As he was not allowed to have a Floo connection in his own home, that meant he would have to deal with the evening crowds at The Leaky Cauldron and The Three Broomsticks. If he couldn't have a nice long walk, at least he could add a few more books to add to his purchase list for Miss Brown to procure.
Sweeping into the bookstore, he noted the time on the door. He would have almost two hours in which to lose himself before making the short jaunt back to his flat.

The store had a few bibliophiles scattered about the many rows of bookcases, but those few people were so entrenched in the books they were browsing that no one noticed him slip off to the unoccupied aisle where the latest Potions books were shelved.

Hermione and Ron Apparated back to their flat from Number 12 Grimmauld Place and were immediately assaulted by the overbearing heat within their home. Since they had the windows shut during the day, the temperature had risen and remained trapped even though the sun had gone down.

Striding over to the windows, they threw open all the sashes and could immediately feel the cool air beginning to seep into their flat. Being up on the third floor of a walk up had its low point at times, but on evenings like this, they were able to have a steady flow of fresh air unhindered by the neighboring building their window looked out upon, which was only two stories high.

A quick swish of Hermione’s wand and some cooling charms began spreading their effect through the room, aiding the evening breeze. It was still warm outside, but at least it was cooler than the interior of their home by at least ten degrees Fahrenheit. Sitting on the couch, Hermione could feel the heat that had permeated into the very frame and stuffing of the couch. It was too hot to sit or lie anywhere, as many objects, despite the charm, retained the heat of the day.

Sweat began beading on her brow. Looking at the fireplace screen, she contemplated striping down to her bra and knickers… or less while sitting on the couch, as the bedroom had a smaller window with a less direct breeze and would be one of the last rooms to cool down. The fireplace screen could at least give her some momentary privacy and a chance to run and put something on in case someone decided to Floo over unexpectedly.

Needless to say, if she stripped, Ron would take that as a free license to get frisky with her. A bout of slap and tickle with her husband was not exactly what she had on her mind that night, as the mere thought of Ron's sweaty body on top of her in conjunction with the oppressive swelter of their flat made her feel physically overwhelmed from the heat.

Walking about their parlor, Hermione started fanning herself with her own sleeveless blouse, pulling it to and fro like a bellow.

"It's too damn hot," she complained to no one in particular.
"I could run a cold bath?" Ron offered.

As much as she detested cold baths, it was beginning to sound appealing.

The silence in the room seemed almost as oppressive as the heat. Saturday and Sunday were his nights home from his second job at the pub, as sometimes Quidditch games could go on until the wee hours of the morning until the Snitch was caught. So they both stood there with nothing to say to one another as the room cooled too slowly for either of their liking. Hermione cast another round of cooling charms and headed off to the kitchen to see what they had for beverages she could cool for the both of them.

"Care for some juice?" she called out from the kitchen.

"Got any lager? Hear the Yanks take theirs ice cold. Sound right good to me about now," he answered from a spot on the floor in front of the window.

Rummaging around, she saw that they were out. "No, but I've got tonic water and some limes."

"Nah, just some ice water."

A few minutes later she emerged from the kitchen with two beverages, one glass of ice water, the other was chilled tonic water with a whole lime reamed and juiced into her beverage.

Sitting on the floor next to Ron, hoping the breeze would pick up some more, silence descended upon them once more. They both drank and continue to stare out the window.

Earlier in the day, Hermione and Ron had talked with ease while in the company of Harry and Ginny. The conversation between the four had the relaxed quality of when they were back in school, but now that they were alone, it seemed as if they had nothing to say to one another.

Growing uneasy from the quiet, Hermione said, "So how long do you think Randall will be gone?"
Ron had mentioned during their dinner at the Potters’ how had he gotten to play that day instead of sitting on the sidelines.

"Don't know," he answered. "The owl from his mum was rather vague, but he did feel the need to be with his father in case he doesn't make it through. Rotten luck, that poor fellow. It's not his fault he went hiking into an unmarked dragon reserve while on holiday in China."

Hermione shook her head in sympathy. It seemed not every wizarding government held to the same standards, especially when it came to marking the boundaries of a dangerous magical beast habitat.

"What type of Chinese dragon was it?" She was curious and hoping that Ron's interest in dragons could lead to a discussion on the matter.

"I think Wendy mentioned they think it was an Earth dragon, though the details are rather sketchy."

She was hoping he would go on, but he just sat there staring out the window once more.

"So they're not sure." Ron just shook his head and continued staring out into the night. "What are some of the differences in the symptoms between a run in with an Earth dragon and a Treasure dragon?" she asked, hoping to lure Ron into a conversation. Perhaps if they could discuss a subject that he was once interested in, it would ease the growing fear in her mind.

"Don't know really." Ron shrugged. "Charlie's the dragon expert. Maybe you could owl him and he could tell you."

Suppressing the urge to huff in building exasperation, Hermione seized upon another topic. "The new Red Sprite 3000 model is out. Do you know what type of charms they used on the broom?"

She had hoped to talk about something in which their interests crossed paths.

"I just fly the bloody things, I don't make them," he said glibly.

Suddenly the heat of their flat wasn't the only thing she wanted to escape. Despite her sincere efforts to start a friendly conversation, it seemed Ron would rather not talk at all. Any exuberance he used to have regarding topics he used to talk about when he was younger had been replaced by a sort of boredom and disenchantment with the world as he aged. Whereas Hermione still held a
curiosity about her surroundings, Ron seemed to not care, as long as the world kept on working and wasn't broken or out of order. He had not inherited his father's sense of inquisitiveness.

She knew she was being petulant, but it angered her that he was willing to talk at length at Harry and Ginny's, but now that he was at home, he didn't want to talk with his own wife. Maybe it was the heat that made him feel too lethargic to want to have a discussion, but Hermione felt slighted and, as a wife, taken for granted.

'I cook, I clean, I do the laundry, I do every bloody thing it takes to run this house, and I work too. I put up with his halfhearted attempts at shagging me. And all I ask for is a little conversation!' She could have come out and confronted her husband about what she was feeling, but the resentment inside of her that sprung back to life wanted to hoard itself inside of her, so that it would grow and fester.

"Fine." And icy chill pervaded her tone. "If you don't want to talk, I understand." Hermione felt hurt, overlooked and under appreciated.

"Not now, 'Mione," Ron whinged, "it's too hot to talk. Maybe another night. Besides, I'm in the mood to do something else with our mouths other than talk," he said, setting his drink down.

He grabbed an ice cube and ran it up along the back of her arm, then along the top of her shoulder near her neck. Leaning over, he licked the melted water off her skin.

She sat there rigidly, letting him trail the ice over her skin. She hated the feel of the ice on her body; never caring for the shocking cold sensations it left on her epidermis. When he began licking the water left behind, she knew she should have felt a little more appreciative of his gestures, as this was promising to lead to some foreplay, a rarity in the Weasleys' sex life, but instead it irritated her. His hot tongue made it to her pulse point on her neck, and coupled with his leaning into her, made the room seem even more stifling.

"Did you ever think for once that maybe a little conversation would actually put me in the mood?" she said peevishly. Hermione knew saying this just might sabotage a chance for some foreplay before sex, but she was too vexed to care at this point.

Sitting back up and looking at his wife with a frown, Ron said, "What do you mean for once?"

"You always assume I'm in the mood. Didn't you ever think I might need a little coaxing to get me
in the mood?" she retorted.

"I thought you enjoyed sex, but I guess I was severely mistaken!" he said, a little indigantly.

"It's not that I mind sex at all, I just like to be put into the mood once in a while before you pounce on me, stick your willy in and out of me a few times and then come, and leave me unsatisfied," she tartly answered back. "It's different for women. We're not always in the mood to just jump in the sack and fuck at a moment's notice."

Ron's mouth hung open and he looked at her as if he didn't recognize the woman beside him. "Well…"

He was searching for words and Hermione knew then that what she had said hit him below the belt. She could have phrased it more delicately and with sweeter, pleading tones, but the bitterness inside of her demanded she make him feel as hurt as she was.

"Well, a couple nights ago, you seemed to like it. In fact, you were right hot for me. You were in the mood then when I came home and found you finger fucking yourself!"

Hermione blushed hotly at the memory of it, recalling the thoughts of Calleo that had aroused her, and it embarrassed her that Ron would bring it up again. She wanted to strike at the heart of Ron's ego, where his prowess in the bedroom was concerned.

"Yeah, I fucked you and then you had to orgasm just before I could. Thanks a whole lot! You always do this," she ranted, glaring at him. "When you do actually get me in the mood with a little foreplay, once in a great while, you stick it in me and come, not bothering to wait until I get a little satisfaction out of it, leaving me frustrated as hell. For once, for once I'd like to actually have an orgasm while you're pounding your sweaty body into me. Just cause you explode as fast of one of your brothers' Wildfire Whiz-Bang fireworks doesn't mean I can."

Realization of her statement hit home, making him go red. She had just accused him of being a lousy lover, never giving her an orgasm and less.

"So you faked it… all of them!" She nodded defiantly, daring him to refute her statement. "Well, maybe if you weren't so fucking frigid, you'd actually enjoy a good fuck. But I guess that's too much to ask from such a controlling bitch like you!"
She gasped as if he had actually struck her. Sorely tempted, Hermione was on the verge of commenting on his size, but decided if she did say what she was thinking, there would be irreparable damage between them. Eventually they could work out their differences after cooling off, but attacking the size of his manhood would leave a permanent scar. Not that what he said was any less damaging.

Closing her eyes and biting the inside corner of her mouth to stop herself from speaking, she heard him continue to say, "Maybe if I had a wife who could appreciate me instead of finding constant fault with me, maybe that would inspire me to put in the considerable effort it would take to melt an ice queen like you."

Her eyes snapped open and she gave him a look worthy of vengeful Valkyrie. Knowing this argument was spiraling out of control and her restraint was a hair's breadth from snapping, she stood up and threw her drink in his face before storming out of their flat. The only thing she took with her was her wand.

As Ron shouted and complained loudly that the acid from the lime was stinging his eyes, she didn’t bother turning back to see if he was all right.

'Go fucking blind, for all I care right now!'

Staggering out into the hall and slamming the door shut, she made her way down the steps with decreasing speed. By the time she hit the last step at the bottom of the stairs, she slumped down on the tread and began sobbing.

'How is it that my life has become so miserable?' she wondered. The only joy she seemed to have found in a great long while was the company of a gigolo, someone she had paid to be kind to her. 'Bloody terrific,' she thought defeatedly. 'The only happiness in life and I have to pay for it.'

Hermione was a pragmatist who knew you got out of life what you made of it, but it seemed that no matter how hard she tried, there was little satisfaction derived from her efforts.

'Fine! I'll make my own happiness,' she fumed.

If Ron couldn't give her the level of companionship she craved nor the intellectual stimulation she desired, she would find it other ways, namely with her weekly visits to Calleo. But as much as she
wanted sexual fulfillment, she swore to herself that she would not seek the sexual services of her gigolo. Being a woman of strong principle, she would not commit the physical act of adultery with Calleo or any other man. She had taken Ginny to task for carrying on an affair with a man whom she loved. It would be beyond hypocritical of her to shag a man she didn't even love, though she was beginning to wonder if what Ron said was right. Perhaps she was too uptight to enjoy sex with another man, too controlling to let herself go and enjoy the moment.

'No, don’t even go there. Not even to prove him wrong,’ she scolded herself, shoving thoughts of bedding Calleo from her mind. Hermione hoped it was just the fact that Ron was an inconsiderate lover and she was not frigid.

After giving a haphazard swipe at the tears that had finally ceased, she noticed that she’d left her cloak back in their flat. Hermione wasn’t about to go back upstairs and face her husband, only to grab her cloak and leave once more, so she set off into the night.

It was still warm, but she felt naked without her cloak at least draping over her arm. Once Hermione thought about it, her cloaks were all-purpose, neither light for summer or very warm for winter. They would have felt heavy and too warm, even carried on her arm. Looking about, she noticed a few others had left their cloaks at home. As she headed down to Diagon Alley proper, she figured that as long as she didn’t Floo anyplace, she would be fine without her habitual garment.

Gaining distance between herself and Ron, she felt her heart slow down and her breathing calm. She was still furious at her husband, but at least she didn't look like she was ready to hex the next person who would cross her path.

As she passed by Flourish and Blotts, she remembered her thoughts from Thursday night. Hermione was thinking of doing some intensive browsing and now was a good a time as any. Besides, when she was upset, Hermione found the company of a good book always took her mind off of her problems for a while. It was escapism, but what a wonderful way to whittle away some time before having to deal with one's problems once more.

Turning back around and heading for her most favorite shop in the whole world, she squared her shoulders and opened the door. Her nostrils were filled with the familiar scent of paper, ink, leather and paste. She inhaled deeply and closed her eyes. It had been far too long since she had been in the establishment.

Hermione had taken to avoiding the bookstore, as she could not afford to buy the books she browsed lovingly and longed for. To avoid temptation, she made a point of not stopping in and looking at the latest arrivals. To glance through them was equivalent to a hungry child with no pocket money being set free inside of Honeydukes.
Tonight though, she was set to get back into the habit of extensive browsing, mainly reading what she could within an allotted time, gleaning bits of knowledge and information when she could. If the book was interesting enough, she would mentally bookmark it so she could come back another time to read some more.

‘So many books, so little time,’ she silently lamented.

Her eye caught the section sign reading, "Family/Home," and she meandered over to the shelves she never bothered looking at until now. It was not as if she didn't believe Ginny's revelation about marriage, children and divorce in the wizarding world, it's just that she would like to know more about the subject instead of relying on the information second hand, where key details might be left out. Now was her chance to read up on the binding properties of children and divorce between witches and wizards.

The section was towards the back of the shop, and as she passed the Potions section, she caught the faintest traces of a familiar fragrance. Stopping, she inhaled deeply and remembered where she had smelled that cologne before.

The sense of smell was an amazing thing to Hermione, for when she identified the scent, she was taken back to her first night with Calleo. He was wearing some cologne that had haunted her ever since. It was so intoxicating, she wished she had a swatch of cloth with the cologne on it so she could inhaled deeply and privately revel in its heady perfume when Ron wasn't home.
Wondering who smelled so wonderful and thinking about asking the man what the name of his cologne was, she walked back and peered down the aisle; she saw a cloaked figure in black.

Hermione’s eyes fixed on the tall, lean figure, and studied his form in profile. His hood was up obscuring his hair and features, but she saw his hands turn the page of the book he held. They were the same hands she recalled from Thursday night.

‘If we were to cross paths in public, you would not know who I was without my mask. Nor would I approach you in public. Beyond these walls, we are but strangers to one another,’ she recalled his words in her head.

Remembering how her curiosity had made a mess out of things earlier that day, she tempered her impulse to go up to him and turned around to walk away. She would not ruin the one good thing she had in her life right now by approaching a man who was most probably her Calleo.

If she wanted to know the name of that fragrance, she could damn well wait until next Thursday and ask Calleo himself during their appointed time.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The bookshop was a pleasant distraction for him. Severus had quickly found a few tomes he would like to add to his library, and given the fact that it was late, it was unlikely anyone would come in and buy them before he could get Lavender to send one of the house-elves first thing in the morning.

When he had been bartering away his goods one by one before he started working for Lavender, he would come into Flourish and Blotts and look about the shelves longingly, knowing he could not buy anything there, as the store had hung a sign saying "No Trading, Money Only." It seemed that several other Death Eaters had approached the proprietor about bartering, but those first few exchanges had made the owner change the store policy to accept Galleons only and not goods.

Now he had enough money to buy whatever he wanted. Granted he could not pay for them himself directly, but he could make a list and Lavender would make the monetary arrangements so that he had his heart's desire where the printed page was concerned. Severus had promised himself years ago that if he found a way to make decent money under the Death Eater Decree, with its limited job prospects, he would never deny himself any book he wanted.

He was about to close and put back an updated edition of an advanced medical potions book he had in his personal library when he heard light footsteps pass by his aisle. Ever in spy mode when out in public, he pretended to still be reading the book and heard the person stop, then take a few steps back.
The edge of his hood cut down his peripheral vision so he could not see who was standing just at the edge of the aisle, but he could feel their eyes upon him. Before the former spy could turn his head to try and glance who it was, while keeping his face concealed with his hood, the person walked away.

Curious as to who would scrutinize him, he walked to the end of the aisle and peered out. Most of the patrons were towards the front of the store, but there was one woman walking towards the back.

Surmising that it was her who had passed by, he slipped towards the back of the store to an advantage point where he could view her without being seen. Severus peered between the tops of some books on the raising of toads for fun and profit and the bottom of the shelf above. He recognized her hair and thin frame.

'What are you reading Mrs. Weasley?' he asked, watching her pull three books from the bookcase in front of her. He was standing in place where he could not read the sign identifying the section she was in. Despite having spent many an hour in the establishment, he could not recall what type of books were housed in the corner where she was standing.

Hermione scanned the first book quickly and he could tell she did not find the information she was looking for, reshelving it in its proper spot. The second book appeared to have some key information, as he saw her fingers quickly scan the page, going over the same spot two or three times before flipping to another chapter.

As she read, he watched her. Her hair was piled up on top of her head exposing her neck. She was wearing a sleeveless blouse and a simple, flowing, long skirt. He glanced about and noticed she didn't have her cloak with her. Without her cloak on, she looked positively half dressed. He could see the white outline of her bra straps through the thin cotton material and the way her blouse tapered. He could also see the slope of her torso as her shirt dipped towards her waist before flaring out at the hips.

However pleasant her silhouette was from the rear, his eyes kept traveling back to the nape of her neck. A stray tendril had escaped from the bun on top of her head and was tickling her neck. One hand swiped at the errant lock grazing her skin as Hermione continued to read the book held in her other hand.

By the time she swept her hand over the back of her head in order to pull the tendril off her neck a third time, Severus was tempted to tuck the misbehaving lock up in her chignon himself and fasten his lips to the portion of neck the hair kept caressing.
Once he realized where his mind had wandered, Severus physically shook his head to stop where his thoughts were treading.

'This is no time to get attached,' he chided himself. 'You remember what happened the last time that occurred.'

Taking a deep breath, he turned to look to see what time it was. A quick glance towards the front of the store said they would be closing in fifteen minutes. Turning his attentions back to Hermione, he caught her just in time as she was putting the second book back. Mentally making note which book it was on the shelf, he saw her delve into the third book frantically looking for some piece of information. When she seemed to have found it, she gave a great troubled sigh. She read for five minutes more before the chimes sounded that the store would be closing soon.

Watching her put the third book back, Severus saw her make her way to the front of the store and out the door.

Now that she was gone, he strode back there quickly and examined the spines of the books she seemed intent of gleaming some information from.

'Interesting indeed, Hermione.'

His finger ran over the spines of "Marriage and Divorce in the Modern Wizarding Age," and "The Magical Contracts of Marriage and Children."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 16 A/N: “We Love You, Conrad”: Music by Charles Strouse / Lyrics by Lee Adams

A lovely fanart illustration has been done, inspired by this chapter by Lana Manckir, located on both my Tumblr page for this fic: http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/post/129949740780/art-what-could-have-been-by-perselus-and-they
And in the WIKTT archives here:
https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/whenikissedtheteacher/photos/photostream/lightbox/2043255?orderBy=mtime&sortOrder=desc&photoFilter=ALL#zax/2043255027
It shows Hermione and Severus in Flourish & Blotts.
A Red Sprite is a lightning strike that occurs between the tops of thunderclouds and the lower ionosphere in severe storms.

B/N: Arrrrggghhh...so near, and yet so far from her discovering her gigolo’s true identity! You really had me going there, I thought she was really going to find out! Love how her sense of smell is so in keeping with what that of the Potions Master must be like, and I’m just bouncing up and down with tension from this last chapter as I cheer Hermione on for hitting below the belt with Ron! Whoo-hoo, you go, girl!  ~HR

B/N: Wootang! More power and all that. I mean, seriously, what girl hasn’t been there at SOME time in her life? I could tell you a story, hunny. Anyway, c’mon, c’mon. Let’s go. Where’s the next bit?  Siren
"Alone At Midnight"

Chapter Summary

Hermione gets a lot of time to herself to think, Severus meets up with Draco and Ginny at L'appartement de Malfoy for a nice little chat, and revelations on Hermione's career limitations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Seventeen
"Alone At Midnight"

Disclaimer: We all know Rowling owns it all, but let me reiterate once more. J.K. Rowling is a literary goddess and I am unworthy. She owns the whole Harry Potter world and I don't. Oh well, maybe in my next life I'll hit the literary creativity jackpot.

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Before she became fully conscious or opened her eyes, Hermione reached across the bed.

"He's still gone," she thought, as her mind came into focus in the morning light.

Cracking open both eyes to make sure Ron wasn't simply farther away than her reach, Mrs. Weasley visually confirmed that her husband had not returned home in the middle of the night. A growing sense of uneasiness settled in her stomach. Tuesday morning had arrived and she had not seen nor heard from Ron since she stormed out of their flat Saturday night.

After her trip to Flourish and Blotts, then a stop by The Leaky Cauldron for a glass of sherry to kill time before going back home Saturday night, Hermione wasn't surprised to find that Ron had left. There was no note. The only evidence of his departure was the absence of a large duffel bag, some haphazardly strewn clothes – a result of hasty packing – and his missing toothbrush.

"At least he's brushing," she thought idly.
In the past, neither of them asked where the other went for the night. The typical duration of separation was only one night. Ron was the one who usually left, but on a couple of occasions, Hermione had decided to be gone for the night. On such occasions, Ginny and Harry put her up for the night in their guest room; her friends never questioning her reasons for showing up or prying into the details of why she and Ron were fighting. Hermione thanked the fates Ginny and Harry never brought up the issue in conversation, keeping it an unspoken topic between the three of them.

Ron had never mentioned where he went when he disappeared for the night and Hermione never asked. In the past, she always figured he crashed at the Potters or at the house of one of his teammates.

Now he had been gone for three nights in a row. The last time he was gone that long was after a spectacularly horrific fight about a month after Harry and Ginny were married. It took a few months for things to thaw between them after he returned home that time.

Since Ron had not owled his wife since he left, and Hermione had been too upset and full of pride to owl him first, she began to worry that he was all right.

Quickly rising from bed, Hermione padded to the kitchen and pulled out some parchment, ink and a quill.

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Ron,

I am concerned. Please let me know you are all right.

Hermione

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It was short and to the point. There were neither sentimental salutations nor a loving close to the note. She wasn't begging him to come back, but it did let him know she still cared.
Pigwidgeon, nestled on his perch, ruffled his feathers and preened himself a bit, knowing he would have a letter to deliver. The tiny owl had remained at the flat, waiting for his owner. It was this fact that Pig was still there that she knew he would come back, but his prolonged absence still made her worry for her husband.

"Pig, you probably know where he is. Take this to him for me, please. Wait to see if he'll respond. If it's in the middle of the day, you can come to work to deliver his reply to me."

Hooting, Pig took the letter with an admonishing nip at Hermione's fingers. The bird knew when his master was gone, and no doubt blamed his mistress for Ron’s lack of presence.

Once the owl had taken wing, Hermione sank into a kitchen chair, pressing the heels of her hands into her eyes before scrubbing her face with her hands, a habit born of exhaustion and weariness.

Glancing at the cooker, the sleep-deprived witch debated whether or not to bother making breakfast. Last night she hadn't really gotten around to cooking anything, preferring instead to head off to the bookstore and while away the hours. She could use a strong cup of tea to kick start her heart and brain, but she wondered if she had the fortitude to fix something with substance for her stomach.

Hermione had been slowly sliding into a mild depression since Sunday, and one of the side effects was a complete loss of appetite. Just the thought of fixing toast seemed too much of a bother and the idea of preparing a bag lunch to take with her felt like an insurmountable task. At work she would find the energy and drive to analyze everything that needed testing, but preparing a bit of food for herself seemed too much.

As she quickly rose from her chair, she noticed her peripheral vision started to fade to gray and the world became myopically distorted. Grabbing onto the chair for support, as her knees had gone weak and her balance failed, Hermione stood still and waited for her blood pressure and vision to return to normal.

"Sod it all. Just spend the money and buy yourself a scone on the way to work," she convinced herself, before heading off to the shower.

Low blood sugar was definitely not something to trifle with, especially when one needed to be alert when testing ingredients. Passing out, face first, into a cauldron of bubotuber pus would not exactly be the most pleasant way to catch forty winks, not to mention the embarrassment involved with waking up in St. Mungo's after such an accident.
Calpurnia Fudge could have given Lady Macbeth lessons in manipulation and ambition. Cornelius' wife was the quintessential example of "power behind the throne." If she ever read "The Scottish Play" written by Shakespeare, Calpurnia would have called the murderous, conniving character a weak-willed Hufflepuff burdened with a conscience. Why else would she go mad at the end, if not for the fact that she lost her nerve?

It was through her tessellation of friends and interconnections that Calpurnia Fudge got her husband elected Minister of Magic, and through some very deft maneuvering, kept him in office after the Department of Mysteries Battle fiasco. Her husband was convinced Voldemort was not on the rise again and had denied his return for a full year until that fateful June day in 1996. The Slytherin alumni did not share her husband's opinion on that particular matter regarding You-Know-Who, instead waiting to see if claims by the Boy-Who-Lived were true or not before taking any definitive action on the matter. When Voldemort reappeared and the story ran in the Daily Prophet of his return, Mrs. Fudge took immediate steps to ensure that no matter which side won, Cornelius would still be Minister. It was no small coincidence that Calpurnia was friends with the wives of many known Death Eaters, though she did not advertise that little fact.

And with her aggressive networking and many connections, it was no surprise that Calpurnia was introduced to Lavender Brown, which eventually led to a once a month appointment for the Minister's wife to meet with Severus for an afternoon of chess and conversation.

Lavender's knack of knowing the unknowable had lead to an arrangement of Mrs. Fudge showing up on the second Tuesday of each month at one o'clock with a masked gentleman, who was the best chess player she had ever had the pleasure of playing against. It was her skill and cunning in chess and life that made Severus respect the woman as a formidable opponent, and hoped never to cross her. If Calpurnia had bought into the pure-blood propaganda Voldemort spewed and backed the megalomaniac, the wizarding world would have been a far different and darker place.

With the knowledge that he would be spending the afternoon with the woman, Severus spent most of Monday night sifting through a Pensieve full of memories and contemplating how he could deftly ask Mrs. Fudge about Hermione Weasley without seeming too curious about the younger witch. But first, he had to prepare for a meeting with Draco and Ginny.

Once Severus had eaten breakfast, went through his morning correspondences and dressed, he walked to Draco's flat located one floor below his. Arriving at a quarter to ten, he had a few minutes to talk with young Malfoy before his lover showed up.

The dark haired wizard sat in the wing back that faced away from the door, purposefully choosing the seat so he would not be seen when Ginny came through the door.
"Shall I break the news that her best friend is seeing you as a gigolo, Severus, or shall I leave the honors to you?" Draco asked, one brow arched and a sardonic smile forming on his face, as he exuded hubris.

"That depends. Is she the sort of person who shoots the messenger?"

Draco didn't answer, instead turning to walk to the window looking out onto the rooftops and neighboring buildings, his mood suddenly subdued. "We tell her everything," he simply stated. "I reviewed my contract with Lavender. Now that there is a way out, I can tell her about the other women I'm not sleeping with anymore."

"I wouldn't be too hasty," Severus interrupted.

"Hasty? Hasty? I know you are just as anxious as I am to leave this country, turn your back on it and never return. Do you or do you not know if you can get Mrs. Weasley to get us those damn ingredients or not?"

"These things take time," Severus assured the younger man, his fingers steepled in front of him. "A plan poorly executed will only make things worse. I have already begun my plans with Hermione in terms of bringing her around. All we need to do now is ask Ginny a few questions and then I will know how to proceed," he concluded.

No sooner had he mentioned the witch's name than they heard her knock. Draco opened the door only to have Ginny flinging herself at him.

"Oh Draco! I wish I could have seen you last week, but I couldn't get away. I've missed you so much. Kiss me," she entreated.

Draco dipped his head, but did not let his passions take him where they desired. Pulling back from her mouth, he smiled.

Ginny sensed that something was amiss; Draco hadn’t kissed her with his usual passion. She noted the odd look on his face and asked, "What's wrong?"

Severus took this as his cue to clear his throat and peer around the wing of his chair to spy the two lovers still caught in an embrace.
"Severus!" she exclaimed. Leaving Draco's arms, she walked over to her friend, as he rose from his chair. "It's been too long. How have you been?" She gave him a warm smile before leaning forward to give him a dry kiss upon his cheek.

Though he usually abhorred the way Death Eaters' wives greeted him with the same gesture from years before, he did not mind Ginny's warm greeting for he knew the genuine sincerity of her words and gesture. In many ways it was better than Molly's rib cracking hugs he would receive on a rare occasion, as her daughter was less effusive with her emotions, as well.

Once they all sat, Severus in his chair and Ginny and Draco on the settee, the red head asked, "To what do we owe the pleasure of your company this morning?"

Severus and Draco exchanged looks before the elder wizard spoke. "It has come to our attention that your friend, Mrs. Hermione Weasley, works in the Department of Standards and Regulations testing potion ingredients."

Her brow furrowed, Ginny replied hesitantly, "Yes?"

"Draco and I have come upon a plan to get us out of Britain. And according to Draco, 'us' refers to the three of us," Severus delivered slowly with a stony face.

Ginny's face brightened, and her eyes filled with tears, as she turned her face to Draco. "Is it true? Can we really be together?" she whispered, not daring to believe it was true.

"We think so," Draco answered before Ginny hugged him fiercely, burying her face in his shoulder, sobbing with relief.

After a few moments, Ginny righted herself, pulling away from her lover's embrace, but still clasping his hand in hers. "I'm sorry, it's just been a very rough couple of weeks. How does Hermione fit into this?" She wiped at her eyes before Draco produced a handkerchief for her to use and blot away the offending tears.

Draco spoke this time. "We can make a Polyjuice potion to enable us to leave the country. Your friend can get us the ingredients; you’ll brew it under Severus' supervision and we leave the country."
Ginny beamed a huge smile at the both of them before her face fell. "Polyjuice Potion… I never would have thought of that." She buried her head in her hands and started to cry once more. "I'm such a ninny. All this time in front of me and I never thought…" Pulling her tear streaked face from her hands, "I'm so sorry, I should have told you about Hermione or thought of it… I just… I always hoped of finding some way of getting your names cleared so you wouldn't have to flee like common criminals."

"It's not your fault, Ginny," Severus reproved her. "Draco and I have had this plan for a few years at least. We've kept the information from you as a measure to protect yourself and us in the event of your husband or others discovering your association with Draco. No doubt, you might have been slipped Veritaserum or had your thoughts probed in some farce of an investigation. And then our efforts would never come to fruition. All that matters now is that we know about Mrs. Weasley's position within the Ministry."

"Since I never told you, how did you discover this?" she queried.

Draco gave a quick snort, trying to reign in his laughter.

Giving his young friend a pointed glare, Severus said, "Since you find this so amusing, I'll let you inform Ginny of her sister-in-law's extracurricular activities."

Confusion written on her face, Mrs. Potter looked at each wizard searching for some clue about what they were alluding to.

Draco swallowed, trying to regain his composure, but failed. He snickered as he said, "Well, it seems your friend had been getting her intellectual urges satisfied in other pastures.” Glaring at Draco for his use of an unusual metaphor, comprehension began dawning on Ginny’s face. "It seems Mrs. Weasley is seeing Severus on the side."

There was a pause before the silence of the room was pierced by a shrill, "WHAT?!!"

Draco’s gales of laughter didn't help the matter and Severus shook his head at the laughing man, regretting his decision to let Draco break the news less-than-delicately to Ginny that Hermione was seeking the company of another man.

"It's not funny, Draco!" Ginny's head snapped and fixed Severus with a glare that bordered on
murderous.

Before she would begin her tirade on him, Severus calmly explained, "I'm not sleeping with her, I'm just providing a sympathetic ear to her and some scintillating conversation. It would seem Miss Brown came upon Hermione in a bar the night she found you and Draco together. Faced with the decision of confessing everything to your husband, and thus forcing you to leave Mr. Potter if such an action resulted in Draco's untimely demise, or playing the good friend and hoping to get you and your husband to patch things up, I was able to encourage her to take the latter action. She came to me in tears, distraught over the moral conundrum of what to do."

Ginny's face softened considerably and a look of guilty remorse replaced her anger. Looking away, Ginny said, "She caught me right after I left here that Thursday afternoon. She forced me to confess everything or she would go to Harry and tell him all she saw. Evidently, Harry has been suspecting me and so he loaned Hermione his Invisibility Cloak. Seems she spied us through a key hole and has enough graphic evidence for a Pensieve to damn Draco and me."

"What?" Draco interrupted. "You never told me in your owl she watched us!"

"What was I supposed to say in a letter. 'Oh, by the way, besides catching us, she got quite an eyeful of us fucking our brains out?' I figured the details were better left for when I could see you in person," Ginny hotly replied.

Severus waved his hands dismissively. "Enough. We get the point of that she caught you two, despite your attempts not to get caught. We need to know what you told her during your 'confession.'"

Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, Ginny tried to recall everything she said. "First of all, she wanted to know why I was with Draco. So I told her about us during the war and then after Victory Day, before the decree. I explained how Draco and I were going to tell my family about us right after the wedding; how you both disappeared and that... stupid law." She spat out the last few words venomously. "Apparently Hermione was not versed on the finer points of the decree, so I enlightened her."

Leaning forward with interest and resting his arms on his knees, Severus asked evenly, "And what was her reaction?"

"She seemed upset that Moody would betray you. Hermione seems to share my opinion that it's an injustice. We've talked a few times about it and she's even asked about you, Severus."
"Yes," Ginny answered tersely. "I told her I didn't know where you were, because I knew she would go after you, question you about this whole decree and everything. I know you don't want to be found, especially by her. But it seems that she’s found you regardless. Does she know it's you?"

Severus shook his head. "No, when Miss Brown first approached me about taking her as client I was… reluctant. But it seems she had a very strong incentive for me to take your friend on as a new customer. I wore a full-face mask and covered my hair. But… now that we know she is sympathetic to our situation, I shall begin to reveal myself to her slowly. If I remember her sense of curiosity correctly, the question of who I am and what happened to Severus Snape will drive her mad. I don't suppose it will take long for her to realize we are one and the same. Hopefully, she will be more than willing to help us get the necessary ingredients."

"But some of the key ingredients are highly regulated, aren't they?" she asked.

Draco spoke this time, "Yes, but as a tester of said ingredients, she can slip a little extra away for 'testing' purposes."

"Hermione is one for sticking to the rules," Ginny said, worry creeping into her voice that their hope for escape was empty. "She's not about to go breaking the law—"

"That woman broke into my personal stores and stole boomslang skin, set my robes on fire, abused the use of a Time Turner to aid a known criminal to escape, and abandoned Umbridge to the whims of an angry herd of Centaurs. Shall I go on?" the older wizard snarled.

Ginny sat back and frowned a little before the corners of her mouth began to curl into a small smile. "You do have a point, Severus." Her face turned serious once more. "But if Hermione has already talked to you once regarding what to do about telling Harry about Draco and me, what makes you think she'll continue to see you?"

Flashing a rare smile, Severus coolly replied, "I know this may not be news to you and that you will find it unpleasant to hear, but it seems your brother, Ronald, is not the best conversationalist in the world. Hermione has come back to me for a second visit already seeking someone to have long talks with. Your brother seems fixated on talking about two subjects, Quidditch and chess, neither which appeal to her very much and she wants a companion with whom to discuss a wide variety of subjects. The other evening we had a rather nice discussion about Arithmancy, which to my
dismay, I actually enjoyed."

Ginny and Draco exchanged subtle odd looks with each other at Severus' reluctant confession.

Continuing, he said, "It seems your brother called her a rather nasty name once. What was it? Ah yes, an intellectual snob." He articulated the slur. "So she's seeing me as a means of saving her marriage from intellectual boredom. If she can satisfy herself on a mental level with me, then perhaps she can convince herself that her marriage to your brother isn't such an empty future of mindlessness."

"Ron isn't stupid," Ginny grumbled.

"She never said that he was. She merely stated that her husband – your brother – holds no interest in anything she wishes to discuss, be it her work, her interests, politics or anything not pertaining to Quidditch or chess." He watched Ginny slump against Draco defeatedly. "Hermione is trying to save her marriage."

Ginny placed her face in one hand and muttered, "I had a feeling that something like this might happen. And the friendship that we have is such that we don't talk of intellectual pursuits. I'm sorry that she had to go to you to find what she needs. Hermione is a very bright girl and I guess Ron isn't giving her what she needs in that capacity."

"Well, her desire to alleviate her boredom and frustration has led her to us, where she can serve a means to our ends," Draco added, "so there is no need to chastise yourself for something that you have no control over."

Rising from her seat, Ginny began pacing angrily. "I still can’t believe she forced Harry and me into counseling when she's seeing you –" she growled, sweeping an arm at Severus, "who she thinks is a gigolo – on the side. Of all the hypocritical things!" She folded her arms in front of her chest before giving a great huff.

It amazed Severus how much Ginny looked exactly like her mother at that moment, a thinner and younger version, but the facial mannerisms and posture was an exact copy of Molly. "Speaking of which, we need to know what is happening in the counseling session with your husband," Severus interjected. "Since you do intend to leave with us, we should try to bring your husband's line of thinking to heel so that when you do leave him, he will not go after you, but accept it that the marriage is dead."
Ginny nodded. "We have sessions once a week on Thursday nights. Last week was our first appointment. Basically I told him that I loved him, but I'm not in love with him."

Severus was strongly reminded of Hermione's similar confession to him during her first visit with him.

"He was pretty shocked and upset. I told him that I only went out with him because my family was hounding and pressuring me to do so. I couldn't tell him my reluctance was because I was still in love with Draco, pining away for him because he disappeared without a trace." She turned and gave Draco a meaningful look. Still looking into Draco's eyes, she said, "I told him I really never wanted to marry him in the first place." Ginny dabbed at the few tears that were forming once again in her eyes before going to sit back down next to the blond wizard.

Turning his face away from the two lovers, Severus felt his heart lurch in remembrance. Gabrielle once said that to him, that she never wanted to marry him in the first place, but only did so out of an obligation to family and duty. It was during their first real fight as husband and wife. But the major difference was that he shouted the same thing back to her; it was mutual, not like Potter's unrequited love for his wife.

Clearing his head of those memories, he focused once more on the moment at hand. "Good. Never tell your husband about your relationship with Draco prior to yours with your husband, even if you omitted his name; it would only serve to feed his suspicions. Instead, slowly make him realize this marriage is over, so that when you leave, he won't try to win you back. If you feel you must tell him, then do it in a letter after we have safely left the country."

Ginny nodded.

"When will you see Hermione again?" the Potions master asked.

"We have lunch planned tomorrow," the witch answered. "She said she wants to bring her own lunch and that we could eat in the park. I can now only assume, now that I know, that it is her way of saving money for your fees. She and Ron don't have much money at all. I hope you aren't charging her very much," Ginny admonished him.

"Miss Brown set the fee, based on a sliding scale. I can assure you it is well within her budget."

Draco started laughing again. "I'll say it is."
Severus and Ginny both glared at Draco, but the younger wizard ignored their reproving stares and had a good laugh.

Ignoring Draco's chortles, Severus instructed, "Tomorrow when you meet with Hermione, if she asks about the decree or anything to do with Draco or me, divulge nothing. Feign ignorance regarding any additional details. When the time comes for me to divulge my identity to her, I will answer all her questions. We have to lead her to believe that the only moral high ground is to help us. And when you do see her for lunch," he appended, "please see that she eats something. She's positively skin and bones." He turned his face away to scowl at the fire, ignoring the quirk in Draco's brow at his last statement.

"Oh, one more thing," Ginny amended, ignoring the urge to question Severus' sudden concern about her friend's eating habits, "on Victory Day, at the Ministry, I saw Hermione making the rounds talking to old Order members. At one point I saw her speaking with Tonks, which lead to Tonks hauling her off behind a potted palm. I can only assume she is already asking people about you and Draco. I should also mention, when I 'confessed' to Hermione the other day, I told her that I love Draco, but that I just can't bear to leave Harry. I think that's what may have fueled her speculation that she could fix my marriage."

Draco pulled his hand away from hers sharply and turned away from her. "Draco, I didn't mean it," Ginny chided him. "I'd leave him in a heart-beat without a second thought. You're the one who said to wait until the time is right. I said that to keep Hermione from spilling everything to Harry. If she knew there was nothing left, what's to stop her from just telling him to spite you, thinking you broke up my marriage? But she knows that if you leave, I'm going with you."

Draco moved back to her side with the look of a scolded schoolboy. "I'm sorry. It's just that I get so jealous knowing you're with him every night," he petulantly bemoaned with a frown.

"You two can hash out your lover's quarrel later," Severus said snappishly. "Right now we must discuss other things. Ginny, you did well. When the time comes, your departure will not be a surprise, as she has been apprised of your intention to go. The question is, will she make the non-inclusion of you a part of her agreement to help us?"

Ginny smirked, in her best imitation of Draco. "Just make her see reason. If Draco leaves without me, I'll be leaving shortly anyway to join him, so it doesn't matter. What's the point in saving a marriage that's in shambles that I want out of anyway? And to what end? Deny justice for two wronged individuals just to save a failing marriage? I already told her that I'm miserable with Harry and even without Draco, it was only a matter of time before I left him. She still has this silly notion I'm going to tell Draco it's over now that Harry and I are in counseling."
Absorbing Ginny’s words, Severus told her, "If she asks anymore about calling it off with Draco, evade the question for as long as you can. Neither confirm nor deny it. Once we get her to agree, then she will feel some prerogative to complete the task of getting us free. If she asks about counseling, tell her only the negative, none of the perceived positive progress you are making. Paint a picture for her that it really is getting worse."

"Have you or Draco thought about how we’re all to get out of Britain together?" Ginny asked.

"We have some ideas," Draco volunteered, "but nothing solid. Just contingencies for what the situation calls for. Probably something with a Portkey, but everyone has to pick up and use those at the Ministry now. Even international Flooing is done through the Ministry."

"If you two do use Polyjuice potion, I've just thought of a very plausible and easy way out of the country," Ginny offered.

Standing with her head bent over the cauldron, Hermione peered in at the portion of Roc feather floating in the acidic solution base. Just as the liquid started to come to a boil, she knew the batch of Roc quills sitting in the crate next to her were fakes, as the feather started to disintegrate instead of becoming hard as a diamond.

The brunette witch groaned with frustration. 'Damn! The paperwork involved is going to be hell,' she silently grumbled.

Before starting to fill out form 27b/6, Hermione would have to figure out what the offending items were made out of first. A cursory look at the rest of the quill still laying on the chopping block gave her an idea. Quickly returning from the supply cabinet, she poured a few drops of Shrinking Solution on the so-called Roc feather and watched as it returned to its normal size.

"Eagle feathers. Just bloody wonderful," Hermione cursed at no one in particular.

Striding to her office in a huff to get the proper forms, plus one to revoke the importation license of the offending company that sent it, as it was their third offense within a year of sending falsified ingredients, she stopped dead at the doorway to her office.

Pigwidgeon was sitting atop of her desk with a letter attached to his leg. The bird, in a fit of boredom and spitefulness, had begun shredding a Ministry manual that was sitting atop her desk, and the owl had purposefully left droppings on her chair as a final insult.
Resisting the urge to swat at the bird, as it would not do to make her personal postal delivery apparatus upset with her even more, she removed the letter and reluctantly thanked the bird for its delivery.

Hermione sat at her desk and found a half-eaten biscuit in her top drawer to give the owl. With slightly shaky hands, she unfolded the scrap of parchment.

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_Hermione,_

_I'm fine. I'll come back home when I'm ready and wanted._

_Ron_

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Her heart sank. In some way, she was relieved he was all right and not dead in some dark alley as her worried mind had randomly imagined the previous night while she lay alone in their bed, but the tone of his letter told her that he wasn't ready to come home yet. Hermione vaguely wondered how long it would take for things to thaw between them, if ever, once he did return home.

Tearing her eyes away from the letter, she said, "Thanks, Pig."

The owl took that as his cue and took flight, winging its way through the corridors and somehow out of the Ministry building.

As she looked through her drawers for the infamous 27b/6 form, she heard someone clearing their throat from the doorway to her office. "Receiving personal owls while at work is not within Ministry guidelines," Madam Dushka sniffed.

'Aw, hell.' Hermione pasted on her best apologetic face. "I'm sorry, but it was a family emergency,"
she lied in what she hoped was a rather convincing manner. "It's the first and hopefully last one."

"See that it is," her superior snipped at her. Changing the topic, Madam Dushka dictated, "You need to come down to the customs locker. Another smuggled batch of Golden Fleece just arrived. When will these people get it in their heads that Flooing or Apparating into the country with goods not cleared through customs will wind up in our hands?" the sour witch asked rhetorically.

"I'll be there in a few moments after I find a 27b/6," Hermione said.

"Not another batch from the Damocles Brothers?"

Hermione nodded.

"Fine. Be quick about it. The fleece has ticks and it's starting to make the guard at the locker itch," Madam Dushka dictated before she turned and minced back towards her own office, nose stuck high up in the air as if her head really was up her own arse.

"Ruddy bitch," Hermione quietly muttered under her breath, silently amazed at how Ron's colorful language had crept into her own vocabulary.

Everything was set for Calpurnia's arrival. Full tea was prepared and Severus had pulled out his best set of casual summer robes, custom tailored with an elegant bias cut that flowed with the slightest movement, in addition to his standard black trousers and tailored shirt. He would be removing his outer robe soon after she arrived, but it gave the appearance of genteel propriety that he greeted her wearing them. Cooling charms had been placed around the flat, as some of the summer heat wave still lingered. Quickly glancing in his wardrobe, he pulled out a half mask that matched the dark green piping on his trousers and cuffs.

Standing in front of a full-length mirror he scrutinized his appearance. He flashed a brief smile at his reflection in the non-enchanted glass. The tooth whitening solution he developed for Lavender a few year prior didn't make his teeth perfectly white, but at least they didn't have the noticeably yellow, heavily coffee and tea-stained hue they had before. Now they had a more natural color, unlike the blinding neon whiteness of Lockhart's. His teeth were still crooked, but most of the offending dental alignment was on his lower set and at least his upper incisors and canines were somewhat straight or at least passable. One more pass of a comb through his hair and he was ready to accept this guest.
Calpurnia knocked on the door at one o'clock exactly with her usual punctuality.

Opening the door, he gave her a close lipped smile. "Good afternoon, Calpurnia," he greeted her with a bow. "As always, it's a pleasure to see you again. You are looking well."

"Thank you, Richard," she greeted him, gliding into his flat like royalty. She quickly pulled off her white gloves and handed them to him and allowed him to help her remove her cloak. "I can't tell you how I've been looking forward to my visit with you. Cornelius can be such a trial at times," she said haughtily with the air of boredom.

Severus kept his mouth shut and nodded, walking over to the kitchen to allow Marf to take Calpurnia's gloves and cloak, along with his robes as well. Her affectations were a bit nerve grating at times. Granted, she married an easily manipulated fool, but she knew the benefits to such a marriage, such as helping him ascend to the post of Minister and reaping the many benefits that came long with it. At least Calpurnia's monthly visits kept some of the Ministry spotlight on his job away from him and Draco.

"Would you care for some tea now or would you like to start with a game of chess," he asked cordially with a grin.

To watch the two interact with one another, one would think it was a pleasant visit between two friends; however, with both being Slytherin alumni, it was a different matter all together. Each always measured the choice of words and tone involved with each sentence, comment or question. Both were astute enough to realize that each remark would be mentally recorded for use at a future point in time, be it for conversation or their own personal gain. Granted, Calpurnia was seeing a gigolo, but only ever talked and played chess with him. If questioned in the future about the business arrangement of their meetings, she could always claim she knew nothing about his occupation and merely knew him as a friend. Severus would never mention his meetings with her to anyone other than Lavender and Draco, as Calpurnia had enough connections with the right people to cause a great deal of trouble for Severus and Miss Brown, should word of her monthly visits get out.

So it was that they were in a mutual standoff and meted each word with careful consideration while having a seemingly easy volley of conversation.

"A game of chess would be lovely, thank you." She walked toward the chessboard set up for a match.

Being a proper gentleman, he held her chair for her as she set herself in one of the twin wing backs
flanking the chessboard. Mrs. Fudge always played black, as white always moves first. She made sure to see the first move of her opponent before making her own, in chess and in life.

They played their first game in silence, enjoying the skill and concentration required to win against the other. The only three people Severus ever lost a game to were Albus, Calpurnia Fudge and Ronald Weasley. Though he had only ever played two games with the youngest male Weasley during a long summer afternoon while stuck at the Order's headquarters, he was still smarting years later over the fact that a seemingly dim wizard thoroughly trounced him at chess, then gloated over it for months afterwards.

Sensing Calpurnia becoming vexed, as he was getting close to winning, Severus decided to let her have the game; consequently, she would be more companionable during tea. It wouldn't do to have the witch upset over a lost game when he wanted to glean some information from her. When the opportunity came up where he could either move his bishop or his knight, as both were valid moves, he decided to move his knight. If he had calculated correctly it would allow his opponent to win in ten moves.

"Check and mate," Calpurnia announced smugly in nine moves.

"An excellent game," he complimented her. She really didn't play well at all, as Severus could tell her concentration was not exactly on the game, but he was not about to make mention of it. "Would you care for tea now before we have another game?"

"Yes, that would be lovely," she said, her knees creaking as she rose from her seat before walking over to the settee.

Service for two appeared on the low table in front of her, as Severus rose and walked over to a chair opposite her.

Grabbing a few savories for his plate after pouring his guest a cup of tea, Severus sat back and casually asked, "So how has your month been?"

Usually Calpurnia went into a lengthy discussion of some of the backroom political maneuverings that went on, none of which she was involved with, she assured Severus. Other times she would go on about some of the societal gatherings she had attended or charity balls she had gone to recently.

"Actually, many of the cotillions this past month have been rather trying," she started.
"Yes, manipulation and deceit can be so exhausting while enjoying oneself at a garden party,' Severus thought dryly, though he nodded in a very sympathetic manner, and hummed in agreement as he took a sip of tea.

"Just last week, I was at a party being held by Judith and William Weebles. We were all having a lovely time, and many guests had brought their children to the event as well, holding a small party for them in the west garden so they would stay out from under foot. Well, my friend Dolores Umbridget was there and doing quite well, considering her condition," Calpurnia mentioned.

"Oh really? What is her condition? You mentioned she was not well, but never specified exactly what her malady was," Severus politely interrupted her. He had spent most of the previous night going through a Pensieve full of memories to make sure that his client had never mentioned in the past the cause of her friend's condition, as he had his suspicions. After surveying many hours of memories later, he was sure Calpurnia had evaded telling him the specific cause of Umbridget's illness.

"Quite tragic really," she started to explain. "About seven years ago, Dolores was working at Hogwarts as an administrator and while investigating some student mischief, she was led into a herd of angry Centaurs by a malicious student and abandoned to their whims."

"That is definitely not the way it happened and you know it,' he thought bitterly. Upon hearing how Miss Granger had lured the toady witch out into the Forbidden Forest under the guise of revealing a "secret weapon," he thought the young Gryffindor had showed amazing amounts of equal parts cunning and stupidity. In his mind, it was only sheer luck that both she and Potter didn't wind up killed by Grawp, the Centaurs, or anything else that lurked out in the Forbidden Forest.

"So what happened to this student?" he asked, hoping he didn't seemed too interested.

"Well, she had her comeuppance. Some uppity Muggle-born witch. I made sure that no one would give her an apprenticeship under the threat of revoking Ministry grants and funding. There were a few who might have disregarded my requests, but they died in the war anyway, so it doesn't matter. Currently she is languishing in a dead-end job in the Ministry testing ingredients or something like that. Poor Muggle-born has no idea what a lowly position she has. I have a few friends working within her department to make sure she never gets advanced within the Ministry. Hopefully she'll get a clue and quit, and be burdened with a gaggle of children sired by one of those Weasley boys she's married to, Roland, Robert, something like that. But stay or go, that impertinent girl will never amount to anything the way everyone was crowing about, supposedly the smartest witch in a century.” Calpurnia snorted. “If she was so smart, she'd get the idea she'll never get anywhere, go home and be a good little breeder of more Weasley urchins like the rest of the Weasley wives.”
Severus wished he had a full mask on, as it took considerable effort to stop from clenching his teeth out of anger. Calpurnia Fudge was taking out an unfounded grudge on Hermione Weasley, all on the pretense that Dolores Umbridge was the wronged party. Had Severus been able to have a hand in the demise of the phlegmatic harpy, he would have staked her to the ground spread eagle and send out personal invitations to every dark creature lurking within the Forbidden Forest to do their worst upon her, if he didn't poison her first.

Knowing a response was required after her little speech, Severus replied, "Quite right," while making sure his did not clench his fists nor the muscles on the side of his jaw, which were itching to twitch and flex with agitation. "So what happened at the garden party, you were saying?"

"Well it seems the Weebles were not privy to the reason behind Dolores' condition regarding her Equinophobia and had hired a pony ride company for the children's party. When she heard one of the ponies whinny, she took off like she was strapped to a Firebolt. It was quite horrific, screaming about, ripping all those bows from her hair, the poor dear," she said, emoting sympathy from every pore.

Severus wasn't sure if Calpurnia truly felt anything for her so called friend or was rather put out when an ally within the Wizengamot and Ministry had been taken out of commission. Either way, he felt a cold fury course through his veins upon the revelation of Calpurnia's influence on Hermione Weasley's career. This knowledge burned a hole in the pit of his being. He had known what it was like to be overlooked and denied requests to advance in his career at Hogwarts year after year.

Each year the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts professor was dangled in front of him like some golden carrot if he just taught Potions one more year. "But Severus, there is no one as qualified as you to teach our students the subtle art of Potions. However, I will keep you in mind for the position if a worthy candidate comes along to replace you," Albus had told him each year.

Severus knew the only thing he could teach better than Potions was Defense Against the Dark Arts, as he had been there on the other side and knew just what underhanded bastards like himself could do with a well placed hex or curse. Yet, the Headmaster continued to put fools, werewolves, bureaucratic toads, and Voldemort's host into the position, which should have been rightfully his. And now Mrs. Fudge was controlling the career of a promising young witch, someone who had as much potential as he once had before he took the Dark Mark and ruined his future. As much as he would have laughed sardonically at the irony of it, Severus Snape suddenly felt a great deal of empathy for Hermione.


"Unfortunately, orderlies from St. Mungo's were required to subdue and sedate her before taking
The sight of her wading out into the duck pond with her robes hitched up over her head as she thrashed about screaming will haunt me forever." Calpurnia shook her head. "And she had made such good progress over the years; all that therapy gone to waste. They even had to replace one of the healers on rounds in her ward, as his last name was Cheval. Just the mention of his name by the other healers when addressing him sent her into twitching fits."

He shook his head and clucked his tongue in sympathy, resisting the urge to throttle and then hex the woman across from him. "Hopefully she'll make a complete recovery with time," Severus added. "Care for a scone?"

Hermione slowly ambled through Diagon Alley, stopping at the produce shop, the bakery and the butcher before heading home.

Looking at a display case full of meat, Hermione thought about how much to buy. Since Ron wasn't home, nor did she know when he would come home, the grocery bill would be much smaller than usual. Normally a whole chicken would last for two dinners in the Weasley household, but with just Hermione, it could last for five or six dinners, especially if she bought a nice roaster.

"Just one chicken," she said to the butcher behind the counter at Abattoir and Haunchs.

Walking into her flat, Hermione noticed how Ron's smell was starting to fade from the place. Each additional day she spent in their flat alone made it seem like he might never come back. At first, the prospect of being alone had begun to frighten Hermione, but last night after analyzing the last few years, she realized that she was living a life in partial solitude already.

Between her long hours at work, Ron's evening job at the pub, and trips away with the Cannons, it wasn't like they spent all that much time together anyway, except for the weekends. It was just the absence of dirty dishes and laundry piling up, along with the lack of his facial hairs from his morning shave left all over the bathroom vanity counter that drove home the reality he wasn't there. Otherwise, it would have been hard to notice he was gone. There were the late night couplings and a warm body in the bed to wake up next to, but they seemed to be small consolations for the hassle of living with a man who was a better friend than lover or husband. The fights seemed to be happening more frequently, with less and less provocation each time. Granted, the last couple of fights she had instigated, but Ron had his fair share of bickering bouts he had initiated.

After shoving the chicken into the cooker to roast with a few sprigs of rosemary, Hermione went back to the parlor to sink into the couch and rest for a while before making the rest of her dinner.
The witch looked about her flat. "Could I do it?" she asked herself.

It was a question with multiple meanings. Could she afford to live here alone if Ron left her or she him, on her salary alone? Could she stand to live alone? Could she leave Ron? Could she divorce Ron?

Hermione had made multiple trips back to Flourish and Blotts reviewing the book on divorce carefully, making mental notes which she later wrote down once she got home.

Since she and Ron were married in a wedding, as opposed to a hand fasting trial marriage, which lasted only a year and a day unless children were conceived, it was still relatively simple to divorce in the wizarding world; much more simple than in the Muggle world.

A simple incantation done to the marriage certificate, a letter of intent to divorce sent to the Ministry for their records, the return of the wedding band, and the divorce was complete. It only required the desire of one of the party for the marriage to end, no doubt to protect witches who wished to leave abusive husbands or wizards to leave women who plundered their vaults or cheated on their husbands, or the vise versa of each scenario.

She wondered if she could really go through with it. If she did, would Harry and Ginny still speak to her? Would they understand? How would she explain it to her parents?

Her mother once said that marriage was a ninety-ten arrangement. You gave ninety percent of yourself and could only expect ten percent back. But what was implied was that both sides would give of themselves and not expect much in return. The accountant in Hermione's heart calculated that she gave almost one hundred percent and received close to nothing in return, and felt that Ron did not even put up even half of his share towards their relationship.

"It was so much easier when we were friends," Hermione sighed aloud to the empty room.

If or when Ron did come back, did she want him back? A small part of her mind said it was better to be alone for the right reasons than to be together with someone for the wrong reasons. Was she with Ron for the wrong reasons? When he first kissed her years ago, it seemed like the problem threat of spinsterhood, and the entire stigma attached to it, had evaporated. But did agreeing to marry Ron create more problems than dealing with the pitying looks all of her married friends would have given her, knowing that she was still alone with no one significant in her life?
Still, in some small way she missed him, or at least the knowledge that he would come home eventually and crawl into bed next to her.

Hermione pressed her palms together and rested her forehead against her thumbs. She could tell she was spiraling into another fit of depression, and if she didn't get her pathetic arse up off the couch and finish dinner, she'd be going two nights in a row without a proper evening meal.

After a simple dinner of chicken, a roll and a small salad, Hermione stood looking at the bed from the doorway to their room. Too tired to do any house cleaning to take her mind off of the fact Ron would probably not be coming home that night, but not tired enough to crawl into bed, only to spend hours tossing and turning, she grabbed her cloak and headed out the door.

She spent a few hours, until closing time, huddled on a stool in the back of Flourish and Blotts reading a Potions book that she had been lusting over the past few years. When the chime rang out announcing the store was closing, Mrs. Weasley rose and headed out into the night.

The thought of going back to an empty flat didn't quite appeal to her and she resisted the urge to swing by The Listing Broom to just take a quick peek at her husband. Instead she meandered down one of the side streets of Diagon Alley and found a pub called the Blue Raven.

Wandering in, she found the bar and ordered a glass of sherry to slowly nurse for a while before eventually wandering back home to grab a few hours of restless sleep. While sitting in a booth towards the back, she noticed a man sitting at the bar with a glass and a half-filled bottle of Firewhisky.

Half way through her sherry, she noticed the same man later was standing beside her table. A voice broke through her mental ramblings when he said, "Mind if I join you?"

Hermione gave him a half nod of acceptance of his company and motioned with her hand for him to sit down. Looking at him, she could tell he was at least ten years older than her with sandy blond hair and dark eyes, husky build and a heavy mustache.

They sat in silence for a while, both sipping at their drinks before the he spoke. "So, do you come here often?"

She gave him a weak smile, too tired to not wince at the weak pick up line or the idea that this man seemed interested in her. Shaking her head slightly, she said, "No, it's my first time here." Mrs.
Weasley began spinning her wedding band around and round on her finger.

"Does your husband know you're here?" he asked.

Giving another shake of her head, she answered, "No, and I don't know where he is either. We had a fight and he's been gone a few days."

"Oh." The wizard sitting across from her paused before stating, "I guess you're not interested in coming back with me to my room at the Leaky Cauldron then."

Blinking at him in mild shock, Hermione never realized the rapidity in which some men picked up women. To say his proposition was blatant was putting it mildly, but she supposed that when people got older, their hang ups and the formality of getting to know someone before sleeping with them started to slacken with age and experience. Still, she knew a few women at Hogwarts who would meet a boy, and after a few hours of conversation in the library or in a deserted classroom, would shag and move on as if nothing happened. Somehow, Hermione knew even when she was older, she could never go to some stranger's room and shag. There had to be some emotional intimacy between her and the other person. The only two men she had ever shared that sort of closeness to were her husband and Harry. And for some reason, the sexual connection between her and Ron still seemed lacking.

Yet thinking back, she had willingly gone to meet with Calleo that first night after running into Lavender, but at least she knew she controlled the situation and that it would not be a sexual encounter, but one of emotional comfort.

"I'm flattered… really… but," she stammered, trying not to blush, "I'm still very married. Thank you, but… I can't." Downing the last few sips of her drink in one gulp she rose. "Good evening," she whispered before heading out the door.

Walking back home, Hermione reflected on what just happened. It was flattering that another man had wanted to sleep with her, but looking at him, he seemed lonely and most likely would have hit on her regardless of her looks.

'Wonder if Lavender has any witches working for her,' Hermione mused, imagining the blond witch introducing herself to the wizard, whose name she never got.

Once back inside her home, and noticing Pig had still not returned, she looked at the bed once
more. A brief image of the wizard who propositioned her, hovering over her naked as he humped her on the bed flashed into her mind. Hermione shuddered at the thought, slightly repulsed at the vision her mind had produced. Disgusted and disturbed, she sought to replace the image with a much more pleasant one.

It wasn't that the wizard in the pub was unappealing, it was just there was a certain vibe of desperation and total lack of attraction that turned her off.

To fill her mind with the first pleasant thoughts in three days, she undressed and reclined on the bed. Images of Calleo lying next to her, slowly stroking her skin filled her mind as she touched herself. She let out small mewling whimpers thinking of his hands on her breasts, touching them gently instead of twisting them like wireless knobs, as Ron was prone to do.

Too exhausted to bother to finish masturbating, Hermione pulled up the covers and went to sleep, wondering if she could get used to sleeping all alone in a bed once more.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 17 A/N: For those of you who are not familiar with the term, "The Scottish Play," it is supposedly very bad luck to say… Macbeth… in a theater. It is an old superstition with the acting crowd never to say the word in a theater, to do so invites tragedy and misfortune.

For those fans of the movie "Brazil," you should have noted my salute to the movie with "form 27b/6." If you've seen the film, you know what I'm talking about. If you haven't, we'll, you've missed out on one of the finest damn movies.

Cheval is the French word for "horse."

BN: This chapter is the woot. Get to reviewing so’s Betz will be happy and write well!!!
Siren
Chapter Summary

Hermione has lunch with Ginny and dinner with Lavender, while Severus begins the attrition of his clients base.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Eighteen
“The Inner Hunger”

Disclaimer: Supplicates before the shine of J.K. Rowling. "Oh, great author. Inspire me so that I may create something based solely on your characters, which you own. So that I may continue to glorify that which you have created in your fertile imagination. Amen." Lights burning incense, places chewing gum and baby toys on the altar, then bows repeatedly while retreating from shrine.

Ginny was already waiting in the park when Hermione arrived. The grounds near St. James' were filled with children enjoying the summer sun and tourists walking back from Buckingham Palace, with cameras slung around their necks, having watched the changing of the guard.

The red headed witch was dressed in appropriate Muggle wear and sat upon a plaid blanket spread out with a large picnic hamper next to her. Hermione, who had left her cloak back at the office, looked at the small brown paper bag she clutched in her hand containing a meager cold chicken sandwich and a drink.

"Hermione," Ginny called out to her friend, waving her over.

Once Hermione was seated on the blanket next to her, Ginny said, "I hope you don't mind. I brought some extra food. I guess I picked up Mum's habit of cooking for an army."

"Not at all." Hermione shrugged.
Once the hamper was open, Hermione peeked inside and saw it filled with a cupboard’s worth of food. Sandwiches, bags of crisps, piles of strawberries, desserts and beverages were crammed into every nook and cranny of the space-enlargement charmed hamper.

Pulling out a large tray, Hermione was tempted to chuck her own bagged-lunch. The tray was laden with sandwiches: Black Forest ham and brie on raisin pumpernickel rye bread, lamb and chutney on thin slices of rustic Italian bread, pear and Stilton on Challah, and salmon and cream cheese. For the first time in days, Hermione had an appetite and she suddenly felt ravenously hungry just looking at the food.

"May I?" Hermione asked meekly.

"Please tuck in," Ginny offered. "Otherwise I'll have to haul it all back home." Her eyes took in the sight of Hermione, though made no mention that the brunette was looking even thinner.

"Thanks, Ginny," Hermione said before devouring a lamb and mango chutney sandwich in record time, beating Ron's old record.

While Hermione began making up for lost meals, she didn't notice Ginny's hard scrutiny of her, instead focusing on having one of each sandwich that her friend had brought, as there seemed to be a dozen of each type on the tray. The older witch pulled out her drink from her bag lunch, but decided to leave it for later when Ginny offered chilled lemonade, a drink the redhead had recently discovered.

"Ron must be so thrilled about playing starting Keeper. He probably doesn't stop talking about it at home," Ginny said, breaking the silence that was due to Hermione stuffing her face while trying to retain some lady-like table manners.

The brunette stopped chewing her food and frowned momentarily before swallowing the mouthful of Stilton and pear. "I wouldn't know. You'd have to ask him," she commented offhandedly, not meeting Ginny's eyes.

"What do you mean?"

Taking a long sip of the sweet-tart beverage in order to delay having to respond, Hermione's eyes darted guiltily to Ginny before looking away. It seemed Ron had not gone to stay with Harry and Ginny, otherwise her friend would have not phrased her questions as such.
"We had a big fight Saturday night. I stormed out of our flat and when I got back an hour later he was gone. I haven't seen him since." She took another sip to busy her hands, mouth and mind while allowing her statement to sink into Ginny's mind.

There was a long pause while Ginny studied Hermione further. "Care to tell me what the fight was about?" she asked icily.

Hermione put down her sandwich, her appetite gone as quickly as it appeared. Staring at the colors of the plaid blanket beneath her, she contemplated how to phrase what she was about to say.

After inhaling deeply and exhaling, she explained, "It was right after we got back from your place. The flat was hot and so we cast some charms to cool the place off. While we were sitting in front of a window, I tried talking with him. It's been so long since we had a decent conversation. He didn't want to talk at all. No matter what I did he just kept ending the conversation. He started getting all lovey-dovey with me and I snapped. I told him that I needed some conversation to get me into the mood for once." Ginny kept staring at Hermione silently, waiting for her to continue. "Well, it escalated from there and I told him basically how lousy he was in bed, and he had never given me an orgasm. He called me a frigid, controlling bitch. That's when I threw my drink in his face and I left. When I got back, he was gone."

The silence stretched on until Ginny leaned over and gave Hermione a one-armed hug. "I'm so sorry," she said empathetically.

Nodding halfheartedly, Hermione said listlessly, "I owled him yesterday to see if he was all right. He owled back saying he was fine, and would come back when he was ready and wanted." Tears welled in her eyes. "Pig wasn't home when I got back last night," Hermione choked out.

Ginny rubbed her friend's back in a gesture of comfort. "Do you guys fight a lot?" she asked.

Giving a half shrug, Hermione answered, "With more frequency lately. But we haven't had a fight this bad since... since..." She trailed off in thought remembering that horrible fight. "Since a month after your wedding."

Hermione remembered the fight all too clearly. Ron wanted her to quit work and go off potions so they could start a family, just like his mum. Lots of insults were exchanged, including several she had made about Molly. Some of them included words such as "brood mare," "domineering maternal figure," and comparisons to poor Irish-Catholic families who had never heard of birth
control. Ron had his own litany of insults referring to her own family's lack of other children, insinuations to an asexual personality and lack of sex drive, a rather derogatory wizarding term for working witches, and even borrowed the phrase "Know-it-all" from Professor Snape.

The red head sucked air in, quickly remembering how bad that particular fight was, as it was Ginny who'd consoled Hermione afterwards. "Oh, Hermione," was all that she said, continuing to rub her friend's back in a soothing manner.

Looking at the half-eaten sandwich still resting in her hand, the solemn witch realized the lingering taste of the sandwich was gone, and anything else she ate would taste bland and devoid of any flavor. Taking one last sip of lemonade, Hermione contemplated telling Ginny about Calleo. It was just for conversation, but quickly decided against it, as she didn't think her sister-in-law would take too kindly to the news of her seeing a gigolo, even if it was strictly for conversation.

Mrs. Weasley rose from her spot and brushed off her skirt. "I'd better get back to work. Thanks for bringing lunch, it was delicious." Her voice was thick with emotion and subdued.

"Sure, no problem, Hermione. Say, do you want to come over for dinner tonight?" Ginny offered.

Shaking her head, Hermione replied, "No, I think I'd better be home in case Ron comes back tonight." It was a lie. Ron wouldn't be home until well after dinner and she was planning on going out to Flourish and Blotts anyway, instead of sitting around in a lonely, empty flat.

"Aw, come on. I'm fixing Hawaiian pork with a mango-pineapple salsa," Ginny encouraged her friend to accept.

"Given up on Spanish cuisine now?" Hermione ribbed her.

"Harry said if I made Paella one more time, he'd never touch another grain of rice or piece of shellfish ever again," Ginny related with a guilty smile.

Hermione shook her head once more. "No, I think I'll pass this one time. Maybe next time."

"How about tomorrow night?" Ginny asked, a mischievous smirk playing on her lips.
Hermione was about to accept when she remembered that she had her weekly appointment with Calleo. "Uh, tomorrow night doesn't look good," Hermione explained, trying not to stammer. "There are some errands I have to run after work."

"Oh," Ginny said with some finality in her tone and gave Hermione a last scrutinizing glance. "Well, owl me when Ron does come back and we'll meet up and tell me all the gory details. Everything except the sex part. He is my brother after all."

Laughing at Ginny's joke, Hermione felt a tad better. Ginny's invitation reminded her that she had to meet Lavender that night after work anyway, though it would have taken only a few minutes to hand over the money.

Rushing out of the lab, Hermione grabbed her cloak and decided the stairs were a quicker way to reach the main atrium, rather than waiting for the rickety elevator operated by a paroled Death Eater. If she didn't hurry, she would be late for her appointment with Lavender at the Leaky Cauldron.

As she stepped out of the fireplace, Hermione charmed the soot off her cloak before scanning the darker corners of the establishment, searching for her old schoolmate.

The top of a well-coifed blond head beyond a divider could be spotted in the back corner near the stairs. Approaching the cosmetic empress, she saw Lavender rise and walk up the back stairs to the second floor where the rooms were. Hermione followed and saw her walk into room number nine, leaving the door ajar.

Stepping into the room, the brunette witch saw the space appointed with dark Jacobean furniture that was probably original, including the finish.

'If they only knew how much money some of this furniture would fetch in the Muggle antiques market,' Hermione thought.

"Please, have a seat," Lavender offered with an outstretched arm, not yet turning around to face her customer, as she walked to the window.

Settling into a straight-backed chair with ornate turnings and a worn needlepoint seat, Hermione glanced at the dark wood paneling and noticed how Lavender stood out like some pink and blond apparition against the brown-black hues of the room.
"Here," Mrs. Weasley said, setting a small bag of Galleons on the side table next to her chair. The velvet pouch muffled the clink of the gold coins.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lavender glanced at the woman and bag of money sitting across the room. "Keep it." She turned to look back out the window to watch the clouds pass over the waxing gibbous moon still rising in the sky, washed out and pale against the dusky evening light.

"What?"

Lavender kept her back to Hermione. "Keep it."

Perplexed and confused, Hermione asked, "Why? What about Calleo's fee?"

"Don't worry about his fees, he's being more than compensated. Besides, with what I owe to you and more…” Lavender turned to face Hermione. "You know, the reason I'm successful is because of what you did with the house-elves from Death Eater families during the war. Without their cheap labor, I would not have been able to undercut the price on my competitors or gain a foothold in the marketplace. In part, I owe my success to you. So please don't worry about paying Calleo's fees, I'll take care of that."

Glaring at Lavender, Hermione fumed, "I'm not poor. I can afford to pay it."

"Please don't take my gesture as one of pity for your finances. I'm sorry if you construed it that way, but I feel that I am in your debt in many ways," Miss Brown explained.

Hermione watched Lavender slowly pace along the width of the room, noting the less than confident and amicable air that the blond usually radiated.

"You look like you could use a friend this time," Hermione observed. "Man trouble?"

Lavender fixed her with an appraising stare before giving her a tired smile. "Something like that."
"You want to talk about it?" Hermione offered.

Sitting down in the chair near Hermione's, she began to laugh lightly. Giving another glance towards Hermione, Lavender replied, "No, not now. It's a rather sticky situation at the moment. One day I'll tell you if you still want to know, but for now, let's just say it's rather complicated. Time will tell how everything will sort itself out."

Staring at her lap, Hermione felt the same way about herself and Ron. It was a rather sticky situation they were in, avoiding each other after their fight, not knowing when Ron would return home. "I know what you mean," Hermione added.

Rising from her seat with a bit of heaviness removed from her person, Lavender said, "Have you had dinner yet?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, I came here from work."

"Please stay and I'll have some dinner sent in."

"Oh, you don't have to--"

"Please," she pleaded with a wave of her hand towards the table. "It's no bother at all, my treat." She moved to the door.

"Aren't you staying?" Hermione asked.

"No. I would love to stay and talk a while longer, but... I'm expecting company at home. Perhaps another time," Lavender excused herself. "May I suggest the pork loin roast; Tom really out did himself this time."

Before Hermione could protest, Lavender had slipped out the door and a barmaid appeared to ask Hermione what she would like for dinner.

"Um, I hear the pork loin roast is very good?" she said with uncertainty.
The boneless body laid out on the table in front of Severus groaned as he dug the heel of his hand into the rhomboid major knotted beneath his hands.

Nude, with only a sheet draped over her bottom and legs, she mumbled, "Ooooh, a little deeper please."

"You've been slouching at your desk again, Katherine," Severus admonished her.

She growled at the back of her throat as the muscle on her back began to release under the ministrations of his hands. "You know, Muggles have this fantastic invention called electric lights that fully illuminate everything so well. You don't have to bend over your parchments to read in those offices that are way too small for a proper brazier and must suffer with candles alone."

"Hmmm," Severus replied, neither agreeing nor contradicting her assessment of Muggle illumination. He found electric lights too bright and glaring, but he had excellent vision to begin with. Katherine, however, did not fare well with low lighting due to poor night vision, even at her young age of fifty.

"Ooh, too deep" she gritted with a wince as Severus put his body weight behind the rock-hard lump that was once her levator scapulae.

Since the Death Eater Decree and his ban from brewing potions, Severus noticed many things about him had physically changed. His hair was not as limp and weighted down with volatile oils as it once was from working in a room full of simmering cauldrons all day in the Hogwarts dungeons. Nor did his skin have quite the same translucent pallid color now that he had living quarters with natural sunlight and worked in a room with large windows. He was still pale, but his skin did not have the blue cast it once did. The calluses that once adorned his hands, marking him as a man that worked them heavily, were gone, and along with them went his tolerance for handling objects at high temperatures, especially cauldrons that were still cooling or flasks that had recently been filled with boiling potions. The most notable, however, was his waning hand strength.

It was when he was trying to open a jar of gherkins one day that he realized he had to really put some effort in to it. Normally, he would have opened it with minimal effort, but when it took until the third try, he realized he was losing something he had taken for granted. All those years working as a Potions master had given him hand strength rivaled only by some of the best Quidditch players.
So it was that Severus complained rather loudly, as he worked on a batch of pimple purging potion with Lavender a few years ago. She recommended he start offering massages as a way of regaining some of his hand strength. At first he was reluctant, but soon found Miss Brown's idea had some merit. Not only did his clients remain mostly quiet during their visits, giving his sympathetic ear a rest, but he was also able to mentally list the different muscles of the body as he worked on them. As a Potions master, he was once required to learn each and every muscle and the effects of each potion ingredient on each group and type of muscle.

Most people had no idea how hard it was to become a Potions master or mistress. In addition to a firm grasp of Potions, one must be well versed in Herbology, anatomy, the pharmacological effects of each ingredient and combination of ingredients on different parts of the body, and knowing how potions will react in a wizard's body versus a witch's body, in addition to which phase a woman's body was in during her fruitful years. Add the requirement to learn at least five languages, as many of the ancient Potions texts had anti-translations spells, making the task of becoming a master or mistress of the complex and subtle art that much more difficult. It was because of this required large body of knowledge to be learned and memorized that the number of qualified people in the field of Potions was shrinking. Which was why it was such a crime that a man as talented as Severus Snape was forced to work under a pseudonym, yet still not be able to actually practice his art.

"Better?" he asked, as he eased off the pressure of his hands on her upper shoulder.

"Mmmmm, much. Oh," she sighed, "you have the hands of an angel. You have the touch."

"Thank you," he replied.

"I just wish next week wasn't my last visit," she sighed.

"Last visit?"

"Yes," she groaned with resignation. "I'm moving the business to Spain. England just isn't as commerce friendly as it once was. With all this paranoia and precautions over Death Eaters, one just can't get any proper work done with the Ministry regulations and restrictions on trade, tariffs, Portkeys, Flooing, and such."

Severus grumbled in sympathy.
Katherine lifted her head off the table and looked at Severus out of the corner of her eye. "I can't tell you what a port in the storm for me you've been these past few years." She rested her head back down on the table. "If it wasn't for your strength, I would have let my husband's business flounder and fade. You were right. I can't let the death of a loved one stop me from living."

Severus reflected on his own words spoken back to him. They were words he did not exactly follow, but merely words that Albus once told him after the death of his own wife. Severus scoffed at those words years before, but found they gave Katherine comfort and courage to go on when she first came to him.

Katherine Bigelow was the wife of a prominent businessman in the wizarding community, being one of the main importers of rare botanical species from around the world. Bigelow Botanicals was one of the largest wizarding nurseries in Great Britain and Katherine was a personal friend of Professor Sprout, though Severus never mentioned he knew the professor personally as well, keeping his identity secret from all his clients.

When Mrs. Bigelow first met Severus, she was in the midst of a deep depression, as all her children were grown and had moved on to their own lives. She was left to grieve the death of her husband alone with no support. Severus, being a widower himself, was able to say the right things to help her move on with her life, eventually discussing her business with her and talking about the many plants she imported. He gave her a few vague, but helpful pointers regarding the Herbology and Potions trade and she paid Severus very well for her visits with a friendly masked face to talk to, with a bit of business advice thrown in. They had a very companionable relationship and were close enough in age that they could relate to each other well. Though Katherine was an attractive woman, their relationship never became sexual. The woman was still grieving for her husband and would likely do so for the rest of her life.

Severus rubbed his hands over her shoulder one more time and patted her back gently. "How does that feel?"

She inhaled deeply. "Ah, I can breathe again. I no longer have that 'knife stabbing me in the back' muscle spasm pain anymore. Oh, you are a dear."

"I'll retire to the kitchen so you can dress," Severus excused himself.

While he was in the kitchen preparing a pot of genmai cha tea, Katherine dressed and shouted through the door, "I owled that Potions master you told me about the other week, Sebastian Delgado. I can't thank you enough. He's willing to do some consulting work for me."
Severus smirked to himself, as he poured the boiling water over the tea. "It's my pleasure that I could help you," he called back through the door.

He figured if Lavender could deal with this woman as a buyer and in the capacity of a madam, then he could act as gigolo and consultant in a dual capacity as well. Money was money, and Katherine was willing to pay handsomely for advice from the perspective of someone in the Potions trade on the potency of certain sub-varietal species of plants from different regions of the world. He would have told her some of the information she wanted without having her deal with his nom de guerre, but that would have meant revealing too much of himself, as she was probably aware of the Death Eater Potions master Severus Snape through Pomona and by reputation.

"I'm done," she announced.

Severus walked through the door to find her sitting on his settee in her usual attire. "Tea?" he offered.

"Yes, please."

They sat for a moment, both sipping the pale green brew before she spoke once more. "I must say I will miss the friendship we've developed over the past few years."

"As will I," he replied.

"Albert was a good man. I think he would have liked your no nonsense approach."

Severus nodded. He contemplated divulging that he would be making an exit from his current profession as a means of closure to his business relationship with Katherine. Considering the fact that in time he would be illegally fleeing the country, and Aurors might go snooping about, he supposed it was best the he would make no mention of his plans. In an investigation, Katherine's name could possibly come up and it would be best if she were kept out of the loop regarding his future plans. She was loosely tied to the Potions and ingredient trade and might be a person of interest once the Aurors had found that Severus and Draco used Polyjuice Potion to escape.

"I think he would be proud of what you've done with the company since his death," Severus said.

Katherine downed the rest of her cup and stood. As Severus escorted her to the door, she stopped
and grasped his hand in a motherly type fashion. Looking at him with unshed tears in her eyes, she said, "Next week may be a bit crazy with moving the business and all, so I may not be able to see you. In case I don't see you, let me say good bye."

Severus made to speak, but she placed a finger in the air between them to stop his protestations.

"Please," she said. Taking a deep breath, she began, "When Albert died, I wished I’d died with him. I don't think I'll ever get over him being gone, but at least you've helped me so that I can cope and get on with my life. You are a good person. Though I've never learned your name, I've always considered you a friend. I hope someday you can leave this profession behind and pursue your dreams, though you've never told me what they are. I hope you can find the happiness in your life that I had when Albert was in mine, be it with another person or by your reaching your goals. Please take care of yourself."

As a final gesture, Katherine leaned over and gave Severus a chaste kiss on the small lower portion of his cheek that wasn’t covered by his mask.

"Thank you," she whispered, squeezing his hand one last time as a few tears fell before she walked out the door.

The lock on the door clicked shut and Severus grimaced, trying not to let maudlin thoughts of farewells overwhelm him. Though never a man of sentimentality, Severus was touched by her sincere words of farewell for him and his well-being. Of all the clients he’d had over the years, she would be one of only a few that he would miss.

He imagined a large sniff coming from one of the chairs next to the chess table. *That was just so lovely,* he could hear Minerva sobbing with her distinct Scottish brogue.

"Oh shut up," he snarled at the imaginary phantom, the moment ruined by his conscience popping up at the most inopportune time. "Don't you have a tree to go strand yourself in somewhere? Why can't I even have a moment's peace for reflection without you two taking up residence in my mind?"

The mental ghost of Albus gave him a knowing look over those damned half-moon spectacles Severus wanted to snap in half. *My dear boy,* the barmy old fart croaked, *we share her sentiments exactly. We would have wanted you to find your happiness as well. Perhaps if Hermione wasn't married to Ronald Weasley, you would have—*
Severus spun and glared at the empty chair. He knew no ghost was there, as ghosts could not read minds, but his own mind filled in the details of his old headmaster in his chair so perfectly, he could see the threads of his robe and each individual hair of his long white beard.

"Don't go there," Severus snapped.

'But we know you care for the young woman,' the imaginary Headmaster insisted. 'We are manifestations from within your own mind, Severus. There is nothing you can hide from us.'

"You go ahead and think what you like. My interest in Hermione is nothing more than to fulfill my obligation to get my percentage from Miss Brown, and to get those damned ingredients to get out of this forsaken place," Severus ranted at the empty space before him, his black eyes focusing on the twinkling blue ones he envisioned before him.

'You can't tell us you feel nothing for the girl,' Minerva protested.

"What do you think," Severus defiantly challenged, folding his arms in front of him. He really hated the fact that after all these years, he could still clearly hear their voices reproving, chastising, coaxing and encouraging him in his mind. At least his mind refused to allow the image of Albus to offer him a lemon drop.

'Pardon the inappropriate gender usage, but 'me thinks the lady doth protest too much',"Minerva quipped.

Severus snorted and turned his back on the two empty wing back chairs. "If you two will excuse me, I think I'm going to take a bath. I would appreciate it if you both would have the courtesy of staying out of my bathroom and mind while I have a long soak."

As the large tub filled with hot water, Severus stripped, throwing his clothes in a pile for Marf to launder and press. Slipping into the steaming water, he let the heat relax him as his mind drifted.

"Let the attrition begin," he sighed, his voice echoing against the tiles of bathroom.

Katherine was the first client to leave his service since knowledge of Hermione Weasley's job came to his attention. Now all he had to do was either guide the ones who were married back to their husbands or encourage his single clients to move on and find a nice wizard and teach their
man to do with their bodies as he had done. Monday and Wednesday nights were now both open and Miss Brown had been made aware of his refusal to take on any more clients. There were a few monthly clients, but they only came to see him if an opening in his regular schedule opened up when one of his weekly clients couldn't make it.

The only client he could count on for the long term, until he was free, was Hermione Weasley.

Just before Katherine Bigelow arrived earlier that evening, Severus had received an owl from Ginny. He could only surmise that Ginny was filling him in on her lunch with Hermione earlier that day. As he did not have time to read it before Katherine's arrival, he placed it in his study to read first thing in the morning.

Severus was curious at to what Ginny had written in the letter, but figured it would be best to read it fresh in the morning after a good night's sleep.

The image of Hermione Weasley drifted into his mind as he closed his eyes, his arms draped over the side of the tub and his head lolled back. She was wearing that damn dingy blouse with the frayed collar.

'Take it off,' he gently commanded her, tired of remembering that over-washed shirt in his mind.

He could see her peering at him with wide brown eyes, clutching the shirt to the front of her chest before she relented and started unbuttoning her blouse slowly, looking up at him through lowered lashes shyly, trying to keep some semblance of modesty.

In his mind, he could envision the pale skin of her shoulders being bared as she pulled the blouse off, still clutching the shirt to her front.

Severus let a small groan escape from the back of his throat as he wrapped on hand around his stiffening cock.

"Yes," he whispered, as his hand started to move up and down his hard length.

Visions of a bra with tattered lace flashed in his mind. 'This will simply not do,' he imagined himself saying, as his hands slipped the offending brassiere off her shoulders and unclasped it so she could remove it as well.
He hissed as his cock grew even stiffer in his hands, wondering what the shape and lines of her back must look like. In his mind, she was too skinny, as he remembered her from her two visits, but he didn’t seem to mind, at the moment.

Severus enjoyed looking at women, be they tall or short, lithe or voluptuous, blond, brunette, red or raven-haired, he liked the feminine softness about them. The way their hair felt in his hands and the shape of their thighs, be they thin or plump. The only thing he enjoyed more than looking at women was touching them. And to be buried inside of them was heaven on earth. Granted, there was no emotional satisfaction from his many liaisons with his clients, he still reveled in the physical sensuality that came with his job. The sigh of a woman's voice from his touch, the look in her eyes as she glowed in post-orgasmic bliss. The feel of their breasts, large or small, pert or pendulous, areolas that were large or small, colored brown, rose or pink in his hands as he stroked, licked and caressed them. And for those seeking physical pleasure with him, he brought them all joy and satisfaction. Granted it did feed his ego that he could please them thoroughly, but he also took his own pleasure while with them, be it for some cuddling and simple kisses or wild sex.

Until that moment, Severus had avoided thinking of Hermione in a sexual manner, but with the knowledge of his meeting with her tomorrow night looming in his mind, he began wondering what sort of sexual creature she was. Was she timid and reluctant or bold and confident between the sheets?

Knowing that a larger percentage of his married clients he was physically intimate with tended to have Gryffindor or Hufflepuff husbands, he could only assume that Hermione was a woman left unsatisfied by her husband. From the sexual tension emanating off of her in waves from their previous meetings and the arousal he evoked in her from that simple chaste kiss upon her hand, he could only assume she was an untapped geyser of passion waiting to be released.

As he stroked himself faster, he imagined pulling her close to his body before roughly shoving her up against a wall and plunging into her with no preamble. He wondered if she would shriek if taken so roughly or would she moan loudly. Visions of her legs wrapped around his waist as he propped her up against a wall and shoved his length into her over and over, her head tilted back, his head buried at the base of her exposed neck, grunting with each thrust.

His brow furrowed and he growled as he released his seed across his stomach, his hips thrusting up from the water, the tiny waves lapped at the side of the tub before his hand movements slowed. Severus eventually collapsed back into the hot water.

"Like that's ever going to happen," he gasped, tranquil and momentarily drowsy, as his heart hammered against his rib cage.
Severus was not interested in being physically intimate with Hermione. Eventually, he would have to reveal himself to her, and to have physical interaction with a woman who knew him as the greasy dungeon bat of Hogwarts would drive her off, once she learned his identity. He would have to make sure that he would never reciprocate any physical advances she made while she knew him as Calleo. Severus could imagine the humiliation she might feel if she had sex with him, only to learn later it was her old Potions professor. Though from any other woman he would welcome the change from emotional comfort to physical intimacy, he would have to make the exception with her. She was a means to his and Draco's escape and there was no point in ruining it by letting her attraction or repulsion to Severus Snape get in the way.

Thoroughly relaxed, the raven-haired man rose from the tub and dried off, before slipping into bed.

As he lay in the dark, his mind began ticking off things to do in order to set Hermione's mind on the right track. Little things that would begin to hint at his identity without giving the whole game away at once.

Severus smiled, wondering what the look on her face might be when she finally discovered it was he, her old Potions professor and fellow Order member, whom she had been secretly seeing and confessing her heart out to.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 18 A/N: A big round of applause to my fabulous betas, Siren and Horserider. They keep me an honest author by sifting out the crap and fixing my mistakes.

"Me thinks the lady doth protest too much." One of my more favorite lines from Shakespeare, this one from Hamlet.

B/N: Leave Betz reviews please. She works hard and deserves to be praised, since she manages to find the time to write while taking care of kids and so on. Siren
Chapter Nineteen
"Melt Down"

Disclaimer: Rowling owns it all, I don't. Oh well, wish I did.

The Thursday workday seemed to crawl by for Hermione. Where she would normally lose track of
time while mindlessly carrying out each test, she found herself watching the clock intently
throughout the day.

'A watched cauldron never boils,' she reminded herself.

Still, despite her anxiousness to finish for the day, she was almost reluctant to go home. Sitting in
her office, her face in her hands, Hermione muttered, "Oh God, what if Ron's home when I get
there?"

Knowing her recent spate of luck, the one night of the week Hermione had made plans for herself,
Ron would most probably show up, which would result in her having to stay at home and talk with
her husband, rehashing the more unpleasant aspects of their fight. If or when Ron would come back
home, she prayed of all nights, tonight would not be it. She could deal with him returning the
previous night or tomorrow night, but not tonight, as this was her evening with Calleo.

"Just let me have this one thing," she pleaded to God.
Hermione was not a religious person by nature. She associated herself as a member of the Church of England by name alone. Neither she, nor her parents had been to church in years, but she still sent a little prayer that she could at least continue to have this one little bit of happiness in her life. Her years at Hogwarts made her question the existence of God and the possibility of there being more than one God, but she had neither seen nor read enough proof about any other deity to usurp the beliefs she was ingrained with as a child.

A little past five o'clock, Hermione gathered her strength before grabbing her cloak and heading home. Though lost in thought as she stepped into the lift, she did notice Dolohov shifting agitatedly from one foot to another. As she held her wand discretely, Hermione hoped he only needed to use the toilet, but something about his demeanor made her alert and on edge.

As the lift reached the main floor, Hermione bid him a good evening while noticing the small tic in the Death Eater's left eye and his silence. She contemplated going to Level Two to Auror Headquarters to mention Dolohov's slightly odd behavior, then dismissed it.

Sitting alone in her kitchen, Hermione looked about and noticed that it had remained clean. It still seemed odd that she didn't have any of Ron's breakfast dishes to clean up or fix a plate for him to eat before his shift at the pub.

Once dinner was finished and the dishes were washed and put away, she looked about the flat. Was this what life was like for the single witch? An empty flat? Granted, there was the possibility of reading to her hearts content without Ron bugging her for the fourth time in a row to put down her book to listen to him retell a play he had been working on during practice. Perhaps the fact that she was expecting him home at some point in time made the flat seem that much more vacant. If she thought of herself as living alone already instead of waiting for someone to return, would the place seem less desolate? Shoving maudlin thoughts aside, Hermione wandered to the bedroom so she could prepare for her evening with Calleo.

Her clothes for the day sat in a pile by the foot of the bed, reeking of burnt Golden Fleece and other boiled and simmered ingredients from the day's work. Standing in front of the mirror naked, Hermione scrutinized her form in the mirror.

"I hate my breasts," she grumbled out loud.

There were several things Hermione disliked about her appearance. She did not possess the shapely curves that Ginny did. Where Ginny could gain a few pounds and they would pleasantly add to her voluptuous form, Hermione already felt fat. She had the thinner and narrower frame that Ginny had complained once or twice that she wished she had instead.
While Hermione was able to correct her teeth in her fourth year, her hair was still an ongoing battle. Ginny had often suggested she let it grow out to one length and not to get her usual layered cut to just below the shoulder. The redhead had recommended that some length on Hermione's hair might weigh it down and reduce the bushiness on the crown, eventually growing out to a cascade of curves and waves instead of the bushy mass she had suffered with for years.

Still, she hated her breasts. It wasn't the size that bothered her so much as the shape and look of them. During her seventh year when Hermione finally became physically closer to Ron and allowed him to remove her bra the first time, he made a less than complimentary remark her breasts.

"Cor blimey! Those nipples are bigger than a Galleon!" She could remember Ron exclaiming.

She did have large areolas, but Ron’s remark had made her rather self-conscious of her breasts from then on. When she immediately covered herself, after blushing a rather embarrassing red, Ron tried to make amends, but wound up making some rather left-handed compliments about her breasts. Even to this day, she preferred that the lights were out and Ron didn't view her body fully illuminated by candles or daylight.

Hermione had thought of having some permanent alteration charms done to her breasts, to give them that gravity defying look Ginny had, as they tended to hang, but was rather wary of the procedure and put off by the high cost.

Turning sideways in the mirror, she did at least like the fact she had a flat stomach and Ron could no longer gently tease her about the baby fat she didn't finish shedding till after she was married.

Giving her hair one last look, she contemplated dying it to give it some other color than the dark chestnut she was sick of. "Why can't I have at least an interesting hair color to make up for this mess," she complained, while studying a lock of hair. Since reaching adulthood, her hair had turned from the golden brown of her youth to a darker brown.

Silently, she wondered what Ron would say if he came home one day to find that his wife had become a redhead like himself. Hermione always envied Ginny's hair, despite her friend's frequent complaints about its garish color. Perhaps black hair, though she knew that would make her look even paler. Maybe a blond? When it came right down to it, Hermione was not adventuresome enough to do a complete change of color, but did begin seriously thinking of changing her hair to a lighter brown, similar to the shade she had when she was a child.

"Maybe next week," she said to her reflection, as she made a mental note to stop by the apothecary
to check out hair lightening potions over the weekend.

Her reflection said nothing, but kept its silence, having noted the odd ritual its master had started going through each Thursday evening recently. The mirror's owner seemed to be nervous and tense as of late, especially on this particular day of the week. Two weeks ago, its master had been crying and full of despair, and the previous week she had been a fit of nerves. However, today, she still seemed anxious, but in a somewhat excited way. It wondered if had anything to do with the tall redhead man, whom it had not seen in some time. To keep from winding up at the bottom of the Thames, the enchanted glass decided to keep its opinions to itself.

As Hermione dried herself off from her shower, she wondered what to wear tonight. Mentally going thorough her wardrobe, she dismissed several items of clothing.

'No, too warm... no, too dowdy... nuh-uh, absolutely not,' she thought, each top and bottom combination passing through her mind.

Frustrated, she opened her wardrobe and stared at its contents. "I need some new clothes," she sighed.

Remembering Lavender's refusal of her money, she thought of the growing pile of Galleons she had accumulated from making her own breakfast and lunches. Hermione wondered if Ginny would be free the following weekend to accompany her for a little shopping. A new dress, one that would be appropriate for work and outings, would be nice.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Severus would have preferred to be back at his flat preparing a nice tray of assorted fruits and crudités for Hermione, but as he spent all of Tuesday talking with Ginny and Draco or in the company of Calpurnia Fudge, there was much work to make up.

He would have liked to at least supervise and make sure things were to his specifications. As he and Lavender were in the middle of a new batch of lubrication enhancement potions, meant to counter the vaginal drying side effect caused by contraceptive potions while not negating their potency, he trusted Marf to make sure everything was ready for his client. If this batch he was working on did not have any more complications, then he would have just enough time to rush home, shower, change and be ready to greet Hermione at the stroke of seven that night.

As he hurriedly stalked along Diagon Alley at 6:45, taking long strides like he used to during his days at Hogwarts, he prayed he could get the smell from the lab off his person in the short shower he would have before Mrs. Weasley arrived. He glided in between the witches and wizards who ambled along the narrow street, his hooded cloak flaring with his movements, and barely missed
plowing into a young man who stepped outside of Madam Malkin's with a stack of dress boxes so high, the boy could not see over the top of it.

Once inside his flat, he stripped quickly and scrubbed fastidiously with the simple glycerin-citrus soap he habitually used. Once he did a quick toweling of his head, his hair was almost dry. Since the weather cooled down, he could go back to slightly heavier clothes and wear his summer woolen trousers.

Severus caught Hermione's eyes gliding over him that first night and the way she stared at his legs after her trip to the toilet. He put another pair on with a similar cut and threw on his boots. Once his dark wine colored shirt was on, he went over to his armoire. Glancing at his array of masks, he knew it was too soon to wear one of his volto masks, so he picked up his black Casanova mask.

He had debated whether to cover his hair or not and decided to still place the scarf on his head, but to allow a few tendrils of hair to 'escape' out the back to give her a hint. There was enough he was going to do to let his identity slip without being Gryffindor about it and having no subtlety.

After checking to make sure a few of his Potions periodicals were sitting out and that Marf had prepared everything to his liking, he was set. Just as Severus had calmed his breath he heard her familiar knock.

Severus glanced at the bed curtains and saw them shift to a muddied green mixed with swirls of dark red and a few tendrils of purple and pale yellow. He could tell she was insecure, because of the telltale green, and there was some anger foretold by the red, as well. The pale yellow signaled that she was ready for another evening of in-depth conversation; a willingness to new ideas.

*Knock-knock. Knock-knock.*

His stomach tightened for a moment as he wondered how thin she had become. Ginny's letter that morning did not give the best of news, suggesting that Hermione was more vulnerable than before. An absent husband could soon be a forgotten husband during the evening, leaving him an opportunity to worm his way into her heart and conscience even more. Ginny did warn him to be gentle with Hermione and to not cuckold her brother lest he discover first-hand a hex that made the Bat-Bogey one look like a Cheering Charm by comparison.

After patting his head down once more to make sure the few locks of hair were sticking out ever so slightly from the scarf, Severus opened the door.
"Hermione, so good to see you again. Please come in," he said, bowing.

Her face brightened momentarily. "Thank you. I can't tell you how much I've been looking forward to tonight."

"Please, let me take your cloak and have a seat." He offered, while stepping behind her, helping her take off her outer garment.

"Thank you," she whispered over her shoulder.

Severus caught sight of her neck; her hair was swept up into a loose chignon on top of her head, with the same damn tendril trailing down the back of her neck that he’d seen Saturday night. He wondered if she would be sweeping her hand repeatedly over the back of her neck like she had last weekend in the bookstore, trying to cage the untamable lock.

Taking her cloak to the kitchen so Marf put it away, Severus could feel Hermione's eyes travel along his body though he was facing away from her. As he quickly spun around to go back to her, and she sat on the settee, he noticed her eyes quickly dart from his posterior back up to his face.

She gave a quirky smile that barely hid her embarrassment at being caught appraising him like a piece of meat. He wasn't offended, but rather flattered that he’d caught a client appreciating his form.

His eyes glided over her body, noticing she had indeed lost some weight since the previous week, he said, "Have you eaten dinner?"

"Yes, I have."

He wondered just how much she had eaten since he’d read Ginny's letter about how the brunette had inhaled that lamb sandwich, yet barely touched the second one once talk of the fight with her husband came up.

"I've taken the liberty of preparing another small after dinner repast. Perhaps later on you would care for some?" he proposed.
"Oh yes. That sounds wonderful, though I must pass on the wine this week," she countered.

Hermione knew she didn't eat much dinner at all and lunch was another skimpy chicken sandwich. If she drank any alcohol tonight, she wasn't sure she could be held accountable for her actions, because she knew that any alcohol would affect her strongly.

Severus bowed his head to her simple teetotaler request, hoping Marf caught her comment and would have some chilled juice ready for her instead.

"Would you care for some tea now?" he asked politely.

"Yes, please."

He could tell she was beginning to relax a little and scan the flat with her eyes. Once her vision locked on the latest copy of Eccentric Elixirs lying innocently on one of his wing back chairs that was within view of the settee, he knew the bait was hooked. Could he reel her in and catch her?

As the tea tray materialized on the low table in front of them, Severus saw her crane her head to get a better look at the cover from the other side of the room.

"I have a new brew I thought you might like to try," he mentioned. In the back of his mind, he remembered that Miss Brown had decided, without consulting him first, to waive Hermione's fee for him.

He was a little more than irked, but slightly less than furious at Miss Brown's dismissal of his fee. It was upon Miss Brown's explanation of Hermione's precarious financial status, and her reason that Hermione would feel less guilty about visiting him if the sordid issue of coin was cast aside, that he knew she was right. Still, it upset him that Miss Brown had taken the initiative without consulting him first, even though she hadn’t decided to waive the fee until she saw Hermione at the Leaky Cauldron last night.

Why he chose, at that moment, to remember that particular item, he wasn’t able to explain. But it kept him grounded to the moment, instead of fixating on the fact that Hermione's neck looked particularly long and edible, especially with all her hair swept up off of it and that ungovernable tendril of hair was tickling the back of her neck.
"Hmm? I'm sorry, I was distracted," she confessed guiltily.

"Something of interest catch your attention?" he asked, trying not to sound smug or playful, but as innocent as a Slytherin could.

"No, I… um, well yes." Hermione felt like she was prying when she had been trying to curb her curiosity, but the cover of the Potions magazine had really caught her eye. "Is that the latest copy of *Eccentric Elixirs* over there?"

"Yes it is," he replied, waiting for her to make the next move.

"Oh," she replied, licking her lips anxiously.

He knew she was itching to read it and it wasn't on the standard Ministry list of periodical her department subscribed to. The magazine tended to be a little more vanguard in their approach to Potions, which would no doubt not be in line with Ministry standards.

"Would you care to browse through it? Perhaps I could lend it to you and you could bring it back next week and we could discuss some of the articles in it?" Severus asked casually. "I've finished with it." The phrasing of his offer guaranteed that she would come back to him, even if just to return it.

Her eyes darted up and she looked at him. In an instant, her eyes went from wonder and awe for the offer, to delight with the possibility of having something interesting to read, to gratitude for his kind offer, then excitement over the looking forward to more interesting conversation next week.

"Oh yes, please," Hermione answered a little more enthusiastically than she intended. "You mentioned you have a new brew of tea?"

He smiled under his mask. "Yes, a pleasant blend that I find rather relaxing." He poured the pale brew into a cup and offered it to Hermione.

She inhaled deeply, and then exhaled through her nose and mouth. It surprised him that she knew to exhale in that particular fashion, as only someone taught under a Potions apprenticeship had learned that secret of analyzing a potion by scent alone, tasting it as the vapor washed over the tongue as it left the body.
"Lavender, raspberry leaf, green tea," she began to list, her eyes closed as the rising steam from the cup bathed her face, "lovage… valerian… and…” She inhaled deeply once more and exhaled in the same way as before. "… And…”

Severus watched the way her lips remained parted and saw the way the tip of her tongue curled up inside her mouth to taste more of the vapor.

Hermione's eyes snapped open and her brow furrowed. She placed the cup right under her nose and inhaled deeply once more. Still unable to identify the last ingredient, she took a sip, letting it swirl around on her tongue before swallowing and inhaling once more.

Her brow still knitted in confusion, Hermione asked, "Popcorn?"

A low, throaty chuckle rumbled up and filled the space between them. "No," he said a little triumphantly, "but close."

Two weeks ago, Hermione was able to correctly identify the uva-ursi in his special calming brew, so Severus made a new brew, using different herbs in combination with the genmai cha tea that Draco had introduced to him earlier that year. He was hoping to stump her with the elusive ingredient she almost correctly identified.

"Close only counts in Divination and Dementor's Kisses," Hermione shot back, the phrase escaping her lips before her mind even registered it.

Severus did an imperceptible double take, surprised by the use of his own phrase. "That's an odd turn of a phrase," he said, trying not to drawl and sound like his old self when grilling students.

Hermione looked at him and Severus thought for a moment that she could see right through him as well. Her brief penetrating stare left him feeling unmasked before he saw her mentally dismiss the notion in her head, then gave him a small smile in return.

"It's something that was said by someone I knew once… a long time ago," she finished, looking a little wistful and melancholy. Hermione shook her head slightly, snapping herself out of her reverie, and pressed, "So what is it?"
He regarded her for a moment before answering, "Toasted and popped rice."

"Really?" she asked, before leaning forward to lift the lid off the pot and indeed see what looked like tiny kernels of popcorn floating in the pot. "Interesting," she said to herself. Taking one more sip, Hermione added, "I like it. It adds a nice toasted, nutty flavor."

The Potions master suppressed a smile, realizing the fact that he had thought the exact same thing. He was also simultaneously irritated with himself for some indefinable reason he could not name at the moment.

In order to get the more unpleasant aspect of the evening out of the way so that his client would have an appetite later, he decided to steer the conversation in a particular direction and get the probable tears done and over with.

"So, how has your week been?" he queried, his voice not quite as cheerful as it would be with most of his other clients, hoping to draw out the emotions she was currently suppressing.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his bed curtains flare a rather muddied gray from the warring red and green colors mixing.

'I'm really going to have to turn the bed curtains off when she's here for a visit,' he absently thought, hoping she would not notice the charmed textile.

Hermione's attentions were anywhere but the bed curtains at the moment, as her head dropped to her chest for a moment before her body began to silently shake and the torrent of tears began.

Before the first of many big sniffs happened, he had another pressed square of fine Irish linen available for her use to dab, blot and generally mop up the various portions of her face that became moist.

"Here," he kindly offered his handkerchief.

"Thank you," she quietly choked out.
"Care to tell me about it? That's what I'm here for," Severus sat down on the settee and gently encouraged Hermione while stroking one hand on her shoulder blade as a measure of comfort.

"Oh Calleo!" she wailed, before collapsing against him in racking sobs.

Severus was momentarily frozen from her sudden physical contact, remembering her more as a student than as a woman at that moment, but quickly cast that memory aside. His arms encircled her and he drew her closer to his body, cradling her head against his shoulder as her hands clutched desperately at the sleeves and front of his shirt.

"Shh," he soothed her, rocking her slightly. "Come, tell me what has made you so upset. You can trust me," he said in a deep and caressing voice, hoping his own words would not come back to haunt him in the near future.

As a spy during the war, Severus frequently had to think of what to say to neither confirm nor refute what Voldemort or the other Death Eaters said or asked about Dumbledore and the Order. But in this capacity of knowing that one day he would reveal himself to this young woman in his arms, he had to say the right things to maintain the facade of 'Calleo,' while saying nothing that was too damning or contradictory to his true nature as Severus Snape, sour-tempered bastard of Hogwarts.

As her hysterical sobs subsided and she could begin talking in between the involuntary hitching breaths and the wiping of her snotty nose, Hermione pitifully confessed, "My husband and I had a fight last Saturday night. I stormed out and when I got back later he was gone," she sobbed once more, the last word becoming a drawn out wail. "I," she paused to hiccup, "I haven't seen him since."

"Shhhh," Severus lulled her once more, his voice a balm on her soul.

He thought back to Saturday night, remembering her in the back of Flourish and Blotts looking at books regarding divorce. Evidently, she wasn't just researching to see how easily Ginny could leave her husband, but perhaps doing a bit of personal research after her fight. It certainly would explain the great troubled sigh she gave before returning the books to their proper place on the shelves.

Hermione had turned her body and now had her face buried in Severus' chest, her head snugly settled under his chin, still clutching at his shirt, which was now slightly damp from the tears she hadn't blotted away in time.
"Tell me what happened," he softly coaxed her.

Thinking about it, Hermione realized she had never really ever talked about her sex life with anyone. Not in any way that was more than a quick gloss over. Harry was Ron's friend and not interested in a woman's perspective of his friend's bedroom tactics and Ginny was Ron's sister and definitely not interested in hearing about her brother that way. And she was not exactly close to her mother anymore and felt that her sex life was something not to be discussed with her anyway. Who better to discuss her problem with than a semi-stranger who did not know her husband and could give her some advice from a man's perspective?

Taking a deep breath to bolster her courage, she began, "We don't talk anymore. When we were in school and during the war, we had plenty to talk about even though he didn't seem to follow much of what I was saying at times."

Severus bit the inside of his mouth to keep the slew of cutting remarks he could make about Ronald Weasley from escaping.

"It seems we've lost some of the connection we once had," she went on. "Whenever we have sex, he just pounces on me with no foreplay, no talking. It's like he's ready and I'm supposed to flop on my back and automatically get aroused. I don't know. I guess it's always been that way. He was my first and only lover, so for a long time, I thought that was how it was done and that's all there was to it. I wondered if there was something wrong with me because I didn't crow about mind-blowing sex. But after hearing a few other women I know talk, I guess I've become aware of what is lacking... in the bedroom."

As he continued to cradle Hermione in his arms, Severus let his eyes roll in disgust over confirmation of Ron Weasley's lack of sexual skills while restraining the urge to sigh in exasperation.

Hermione's tone changed from despondent to bitter. "So last Saturday night we were in the flat, trying to cool it down as we had been away all day long with the windows shut, and I tried talking to him. I mean I really tried, " she emphasized plaintively. "But no matter what I did, he just kept ending the conversation. So I told him I'd like to talk for once and he says it's too hot to talk, but there's other things he'd like to do with his mouth. So I flat out told him a little conversation might get me in the mood... for once and he got all riled up. I told him that a little talk might help ME get in the mood and he accuses me of hating sex," she huffed.

Sitting up, pulling herself away from Severus, she angrily wiped at her face with his handkerchief. Severus felt the cool air rush against his skin where she had been pressed against him, ignoring the
damp sensation her tears left on his shirt.

Her face twisted into an angry scowl as she continued her tale. "I told him I didn't mind sex, but his methods of seduction left much to be desired, especially since he's never satisfied me… ever. I told him he has never given me an orgasm… which was a revelation to him, since I've always faked it with him," Hermione admitted with an embarrassed blush, realizing she was telling another man of her sexual woes. "And that he has the stamina of a Whiz-bang," she added with a mutter, averting her eyes.

That last statement really tested Severus’ control from letting a sharp hiss escape. That sort of comment could truly damage a man's ego.

Regarding her at arms' length, he saw her face crumple once more as she started sobbing, "Then he said if I wasn't so frigid I might enjoy sex, but that I was a controlling bitch and probably couldn't." It wasn't Ron's exact words, but it felt like he meant it that way. "He then said I was an ice queen and I didn't inspire him to make the… 'considerable effort' to melt me."

She collapsed against Severus with a fresh wave of tears, her body shaking with racking sobs.

Severus mentally shook his head. For those words to be exchanged, a Slytherin would have considered it a challenge to prove they was great in bed, not right away however, but only a Gryffindor would try to refute it with words and not by trying to make the witch or wizard take it back while screaming out his or her name in ecstasy.

He shushed her and started rocking her once more. This sort of action usually brought some sort of calm quickly to the many women he had comforted over the years. Crying women still unhinged him, but he had become accustomed to it so it didn't bother him nearly as much. However, the sight of this once defiantly proud and strong woman reduced to tears from a boy who had no grasp of the feminine mind or appreciation of the woman whom he married angered him somewhat. Severus was convinced it was because he still had little tolerance for dunderheads, which was what this Weasley boy remained after all these years.

Needing some levity and wisdom to diffuse the situation, he pulled her away from his body and looked at her. Slowly, Hermione raised her puffy, red, tear-streaked face, her lips trembling and looked at him with some sort of hope in her eyes that somehow he might make it all better.

Looking her in the eye, he slowly said with a lilt in his voice, "Never fake an orgasm, it only ensures he'll never give you a real one."
A huge grin split across her face and Hermione chuckled lightly, the remaining tears welled in her eyes leaking out of the corners. The forlorn witch then buried her face in her hands, not sure whether to continue laughing or start crying again.

Hermione pulled her face out of her hands and looked guiltily at Calleo. "Well, after that last bit he said, I threw my drink in his face. I imagine tonic and lime is not very pleasant in the eyes. Then I stormed out and he's been gone since."

Severus avoided the obvious question about where her husband had been since usually, in these sorts of instances, the wife knew, or didn’t know. If she didn’t, it would lead to more worrying and postulating of the husband's whereabouts.

"Good girl," he praised her on her dramatic display with her beverage. "He deserved it."

He had no way of knowing if she was frigid and Ronald Weasley was right, but it was better to gain her confidence by agreeing with her wholeheartedly. Secretly, he wished he could have witnessed the scene; images of a furious Hermione throwing the drink in Weasley’s face, quickly followed by the glass itself at the redheaded wizard flashed in his mind. He allowed himself a sly smirk while imagining it, knowing the boy most probably deserved it.

She leaned sideways against him, seeking comfort in her Calleo's arms once more. "I don't know what to do," Hermione whispered shakily. "I'm not sure if I'm glad he's gone or not. I miss him," she admitted, sounding distant, "but with him gone, I'm... I'm not reminded how unhappy I've been with him recently. If he's not around, we can't fight." She breathed in and out evenly for a moment before she added, "I'm really afraid that he might be right, that there is no passion in me."

Severus didn’t dare say a word. To do so might lead her down the path to where anything he would say would lead her to his bed or hurt her even more with rejection of her advances. He was walking the fine line between a source of comfort and a source to refute her husband's claims in his arms. If she were any other witch, the night would most probably end with her in his bed. Hermione would forget about her husband for a while, as he slid his body between her thighs and drove his length into her, making her pain go away for a short while, both lost in the bliss and pleasure of desperate passion. But she was not just any witch; she was Mrs. Hermione Weasley, a means to his long sought-after goal of freedom. In time, she would know his true identity and she would no longer seek his company for comfort, but out of obligation to correct an injustice of the world, perhaps giving her some purpose in life in which to focus and forget her miserable marriage. Either way, as a gigolo or a cause to fight for, he could be a distraction in her disappointing life.

So it was that Severus was thinking about changing the subject back to Potions to cheer her up and
help restore her appetite, as he wiped away one of her tears away with his thumb, that he was caught by surprise when she captured his hand in hers, moving her mouth to kiss the palm of his hand.

A small gasp of surprise mixed with pleasure escaped before Severus could stop it. Frozen, he wanted to stop her, but couldn't bring himself to do it. He could not make his body obey the command his mind sent to gently pull his hand away from her grasp, but curiosity kept his mind and body warring for a while longer.

Hermione's eyes closed when Calleo's thumb tenderly wiped away a tear that remained on her cheek. His body had felt so good to lean against for shelter of her fragile soul. Even though he had not been wearing the same cologne that had haunted her olfactory memory for the past two weeks, he still smelled wonderful, warm and masculine. It felt wondrous and heady to lie in his arms. For a brief moment, Hermione no longer felt the need to be the strong, unflappable, and sensible witch she always felt she had to portray to the world. Calleo was her vessel in which to pour her grief so she could at least no longer be the sole bearer of her heart's burden.

In a moment of weakness, she kissed his hand. It was a simple gesture of affection for the comfort and strength he provided her in her hour of need, but the way his hand felt against her cheek had made her head deliriously drunk from the slurry of emotions roiling inside of her: grief and regret regarding Ron, and the growing affection she had for Calleo.

Letting her mouth graze the skin was the first chink in Hermione's resolve not to become physical with her gigolo. It was just a simple kiss on the palm of his hand, but she soon found she could not remove her lips from his warm and inviting skin. And so the tempted witch let her mouth guide its way by touch alone along the length of his hand, dragging her lips lightly across the skin, noting the smooth texture of Calleo's hands, inhaling the scent of his skin. As her mouth reach the tip of his index finger, she parted her lips.

As her tongue tentatively tasted the pad of his finger, a part of Hermione's mind screamed that she was taking things too far and was heading down a slippery slope, leading to things she might regret. She was married and this could lead to betrayal of Ron, her marriage vows and everything she held sacred, threatening to tear apart the moral fiber of her conscience. But another part of her mind that was desperate and drunk off the hormones coursing through her body was insistent on continuing her actions.

'Ron has never given you the pleasure you deserve. Take this so that you can have something to remember, and to make your soul remember why you are alive and not just existing. Nothing has ever felt so good as this. Why deny what your body craves, just this once?' some foreign and unfamiliar part of her mind demanded.
Hearing no protest from Calleo and taking his silence for acquiescence, Hermione wrapped her mouth around the tip of his finger and slowly drew it into her mouth. Nothing felt quite so sensuous and forbidden as what she was doing at that very moment. She swept her tongue around his finger before beginning to suck lightly on the tip.

Severus' eyes were wide with panic, but her simple suckling of his finger made him shut his eyes tight and grit his teeth, praying… seeking control of his baser instincts. Still immobilized, as if held in a full body bind, he looked once more to see Hermione give his finger all her attention, her brow slightly furrowed from her concentration, eyes still closed. He could feel his chest begin to rise and fall rapidly, his breaths becoming labored and shallow. The feeling of her mouth was unbelievably erotic, hot, wet, and suggestive.

Lost in the moment, Hermione took his finger deeper into her mouth and began laving it with more arduous attention than she had ever given any part of Ron's body. Never in all her couplings with her husband, before or after they were married, had she ever been so turned on as at this very moment. A small whimper came from the back of her throat while Calleo's finger was still inside her mouth. Her sucking and licking of his finger became more intense, and she grasped his hand harder, stroking the back of it, playing with the skin along his knuckles and back of it. Never in the few times she had performed fellatio on Ron has she been this intent of devouring flesh as she was with Calleo's digit.

Hermione's mouth was beginning to slide up and down, performing the slow act of fellatio on Calleo's finger, sucking, licking and nipping at the flesh with her lips.

She had never been enthusiastic about fellatio, as Ron had a rather annoying habit of shoving her head around in the act, but Hermione thought it might be different with Calleo. He might be gentle and allow her control of her actions instead of placing his hand on the back of her head as Ron did, making her gag in the process. The brunette witch actually liked the act of fellatio, but Ron's lack of control regarding his hand and his less than gentle thrusts into her mouth hampered her desire in that respect. The additional factor of Ron's complaint when it came time to reciprocate, complaining he didn't care for the taste of her, made her reluctant to give him head. Why should she feel obliged to give him pleasure when he would not do the same for her? However, the thought of sliding Calleo's cock into her mouth was beginning to take root in her mind.

'This is no ice queen,' Severus randomly thought.

In all his years as a gigolo, no woman ever remotely did anything as to try and seduce him. It was always understood he was paid to be ready for them and he was to seduce them. However, this woman was doing things to make him want to throw her down on the settee and ravish her, tearing off his mask and latching his mouth at the base of her neck while ripping off her clothes as quickly as possible in order to bury himself in her immediately. An image of her mouth wrapped around his cock with his fingers buried in her chestnut mane burned itself in his mind. If this witch could do
the things she was doing to his fingers on other parts of his body, with the same agonizingly languid pace, he would be screaming out her name when he came.

Severus knew now that Hermione Weasley was not frigid. If anything, she was a woman who had never been properly seduced and fucked till boneless with satisfaction. He could only imagine the lame, half-arsed attempts the boy had done to arouse his wife, if he even tried at all. The witch had confessed her husband never really bothered with foreplay, so he could only assume that she had never really had her pump primed for making love before.

Hermione's tongue reached out and ensnared Calleo's middle finger in her ministrations to his hand, running and swirling her soft flesh between the two appendages.

It was the thought of Calleo's nude body laid out on his bed, Hermione settled between his thighs taking his cock deep into her mouth, moaning and licking the rigid purple flesh while stroking the base of his shaft with one hand, cupping his sac with her other hand and wondering if he tasted more sweet than salty that made her pull her head back and release his hand and fingers.

"I'm sorry," she gasped with embarrassment, turning her head away in shame. "I shouldn't have done that."

His mind and body finally unstuck from their paralysis, he tried to regain control of his breathing while responding, "It's not your fault... it was a... natural thing to want to do." Severus frantically scrambled to think of something to say to make sure she would return and not stop seeing him due to humiliation over a moment of weakness while simultaneously relieved it was Hermione who stopped herself. "You are not the first woman to... make such a gesture in a moment of emotional distress. I take no offense."

"No," the mortified woman choked out, "I said I wanted to see you for conversation only, and here I am throwing myself at you."

'Think fast, Severus,' he urged himself trying not to panic. "If it's any consolation, I think your husband was quite mistaken in thinking you are cold and dispassionate," he said carefully, swallowing hard while trying to regain control of his body. "And that's my professional opinion."

Severus wanted to hex himself over the fact that he had let something so corny and cliché escape his lips, but when she turned to him with bright eyes and a hopeful smile, he knew he had said exactly what she wanted to hear.
"Thank you for understanding. I've been under a great deal of stress lately and... it won't happen ever again," Hermione promised, sitting herself at the other end of the settee, her hands folded in her lap in a prim and proper manner to keep them from fidgeting. She gave him one more smile, hoping her face still wasn't flushed with embarrassment.

As she reached for her cup of tea, Severus noticed the slight shaking in her hand and hope the hormones in his body had settled enough so that his did not shake as well.

"So you have an interest in Potions," Severus began, hoping to get the evening back on the track he had planned.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the bed curtains slowly change to yellow. Severus realized he never noticed the bed curtains during Hermione’s erotic attentions on his hand and wondered just how brilliantly purple they were.

It was getting late and the tray in front of them had been cleared of the last of the vegetables over an hour ago. A large pile of strawberry stems sat in the middle of the silver platter next to an empty bowl smeared with the dregs of the artichoke-goat cheese dip Hermione had devoured single-handedly.

Hermione still sat on the other end of the settee, but had relaxed considerably, having been invited to take off her shoes. Her feet were tucked up underneath her legs.

Severus had taken up residence on the other corner, facing her during their discussion of Potions and methods of collecting herbs during different phases of the moon and time of day.

"Yes," Hermione said reluctantly, "I agree that picking them in the morning before the dew has had time to evaporate is the best time to pick them, that is if you want to use them fresh."

"Well, it also works for dried ingredients as well," Severus replied.

"Yes, but what if you want a lower moisture content to begin with when harvesting to prepare them for drying?" she asked.

"I've read somewhere that when you want plants with a higher sugar content, which I've heard is the case in most potions, then morning is best." Severus didn't read that information from
anywhere, but learned it from the mouth of his Potions master who had taught him.

"Really? Where did you read that?" the curious witch queried.

"I can't quite recall at the moment," Severus lied sweetly. "But if I come across it again in my reading, I'll be sure to inform you."

Such information was not contained in a book, but passed down orally from master to apprentice, keeping certain secrets within the private and individual education process.

"And which Potions would you want a lower sugar content in the ingredients?"

Severus was enjoying the debate he was having with Hermione, having been pleasantly surprised by some of her own observations of testing ingredients over the years. During the evening he had to restrain himself from going into further detail about some aspects of Potions brewing, as he didn't want her to identify him as a Potions master, or rather, a particular Potions master yet.

He was somewhat relieved he could evade answering Hermione when she suddenly exclaimed, "Oh my word! Is that the time?"

As she studied her wristwatch, Severus glanced at the clock on his mantle over her shoulder.

"It seems the evening has slipped by," he confessed. "And in such captivating company too. This has been most enjoyable."

Manipulation was always best practiced when infused with the truth, especially liberal amounts of it. He did enjoy the evening, having taken some delight when he challenged Hermione to name every ingredient in the dip she ate. As much as Severus would have been irritated otherwise by her triumphant smile when she succeeded, it did make him smile as well.

"I've enjoyed myself as well, Calleo." She pulled her feet off the couch and slipped her feet into her shoes before giving a small stretch. "This is the happiest I've been in… well, since I was here last week," Hermione admitted, ducking her head and avoiding Calleo's gaze. "Thank you for not taking offense earlier. I was… upset."
"Please, let us not speak of it anymore," Severus replied.

He rose from the couch and offered his hand to help Hermione up from the couch.

Severus had not let go of Hermione's hand as she stood there for a moment before nervously saying, "This is becoming a weekly habit... coming to see you. I guess I'll be back next week to see you again at the same time?"

"You are the only client I have for Thursday evenings, so I look forward to next week at the same time," he said, his voice low and hypnotic.

He retrieved Hermione's cloak and helped her into it, both remaining silent.

The use of the word "client" snapped Hermione back to the reality that Calleo was a gigolo paid to spend his time with her. Granted, Lavender had waived Calleo's fees, but stated that he was still being more than compensated to have Hermione come and visit him. During the evening, Hermione began to see him more as a friend than as a man she had foisted a few Galleons over to, to see. Now as the evening had ended, she was brought back to the harsh reality that there was another world beyond this simple charming flat and the company of a man whom she was beginning to become strongly attracted to.

"Yes, until next week. Seven o'clock then," she said.

Recalling his thoughts earlier in the evening and how Hermione had answered that she had already eaten dinner, while still inhaling most of what was served earlier that evening, Severus said, "If you would care to join me, I can prepare dinner for the both of us. A simple supper, so you would not have to bother with fixing dinner for yourself before you come."

Hermione was unaware that her mouth was hanging open until she blinked. Snapping her mouth shut and feeling slightly flustered, she hastily replied, "You want to cook dinner for me?"

It was precisely what Severus wanted to do, though in his mind, he did not think of it exactly in those terms. The way she phrased it, it almost sounded like... like... like a date. If anything, it was to ensure the young woman ate, which she evidently hadn't been doing lately. Why he was suddenly inspired to invite her to dinner when he had never done so with any other client, the ex-Death Eater automatically dismissed it as another tactic to draw Hermione closer to him in order to gain her confidence.
"Well, if I remember correctly, your husband has already come home and left for his evening job by the time you get home from work. So why not join me and we could both have some company during dinner. Doesn't that sound more pleasant than dining alone?" he persuaded her.

She was rather sick of eating alone for most of her meals and Calleo would certainly provide interesting table conversation, more so than Ron's usual Quidditch talk. "Of course, I would like that very much, Calleo." Giving him a mischievous smile, Hermione added, "May I inquire as to what's on the menu next week?"

"Just a simple cassoulet," he casually replied.

"Cassoulet?" she squeaked.

Hermione had fallen in love with cassoulet ever since her trip to France with her parents one summer when she was younger. She rarely had the time to fix it, as it was time consuming to prepare and Ron usually stuffed it down his gullet without any appreciation of the work it took to make it. If Calleo's recipe were as simple as he intoned, she would have to get a copy of it.

"Nothing fancy, just a dinner between two… people." Severus stopped himself from saying "friends", as they were definitely not.

Mrs. Weasley was a client and an eventual source for Potion ingredients, not a friend. Granted, they did have a pleasant evening, but it was merely to bide his time, dropping small hints until he felt she was ready to discover who he really was.

"Then until next week," Hermione said a little nervously.

"Wait," Severus said before handing her his copy of Eccentric Elixirs.

"Oh! Thank you, I almost forgot. I definitely want to read this, and I promise to bring it back next week."

As he handed the periodical over he grasped Hermione's hand once more, then bent over and kissed it while watching her intently through his mask. "Until next week, Hermione," Severus
purred.

She gave him one last unsteady smile before slipping out the door.

When the door clicked shut, Severus dropped into his chair, lost in thought over the evening’s events. Of the many things that transpired, Hermione's restrained curiosity over his copy of *Eccentric Elixirs* disturbed him the most.

'What happened to the girl who would practically bound out of her seat to read it? Where were the questions about why I would have such a magazine?’ he pondered.

At one point during the evening, he was sure she had figured out who he was by the way that she looked at him, but saw her dismissing the notion immediately. What could have happened to the curious Gryffindor to curb her inquisitiveness so much that he would have to offer the magazine to her? Whatever the answers were, he would have to be a bit more blatant or continue his game of subtle hints for longer than he expected.

Glancing at the clock once more, he noted it was half past eleven. 'Where did the time go?' Severus thought, but didn't bother to answer the question. Instead he got undressed and went to bed, trying to banish the memory of Hermione sucking his fingers wantonly. If he let his mind fixate on such memories, he'd have to manually relieve himself before getting to sleep, and he was in no mood for such activities when he had his parole meeting early in the morning.

Hermione rarely ever walked Diagon Alley this late on a weeknight. The only places open were a few pubs and taverns. Lazily strolling along and regarding the dark storefronts, she considered swinging by The Listing Broom to peek in and see if Ron was still there. She really didn't want to talk to Ron, but at least see him in person without him seeing her, just to make sure he really was all right. Instead, she decided to go straight home and go to bed.

Climbing the stairs, she felt better than she did on her way out to see Calleo earlier that evening. Her gigolo had taken some of the weight off her shoulders with her personal confessions. It felt good to tell someone else of her troubles and know that she wasn't crazy for wondering if she was frigid.

"Welcome home," she mumbled to herself as she unlocked the door.

As she swung the door open, she immediately noticed the sconces and candles were lit. Looking
about, she saw his familiar silhouette standing by the kitchen doorway.

"Hermione!" Ron shouted, rushing towards her. He swept her up into his arms and crushed her in a hug.

Immediately pulling herself out of his embrace, stunned that he had shown up after being gone for almost a week, Hermione looked at her husband. "What are you doing here?"

Hermione didn't mean it to come out sounding that way, but she was flustered by the Ron’s sudden return. She realized that he’d been standing near the kitchen for God knows how long. Hermione didn't think until that moment what the clock in the kitchen might say during her time at Calleo’s. She hoped it just said "visiting."

Ron didn't seem insulted or phased by Hermione standoffish demeanor. Instead, he breathed out in relief, "Thank Merlin you're safe! I came home as soon as I found out. And when you weren't here, I assumed the worst. I saw the clock in the wall never pointed to 'mortal danger,' but I was still worried as hell."

Taken aback by Ron's voice and expression of relief, Hermione asked, "What's going on? What are you talking about?"

"You mean you don't know? I thought you were still stuck at the Ministry for questioning. There was an attack there, Hermione. Dolohov decided to go out in a blaze of glory and started killing anyone in his line of sight. It took three Aurors to subdue him."

Hermione's knees suddenly went weak and she collapsed on the floor right next to Ron.

"Hermione!" He bent down and picked her up, carrying her to the bedroom.

After laying her down on the bed and stroking her hair away from her face, Ron said, "About 5:30, Dolohov pulled out his wand in the atrium and went absolutely mad, casting curses and hexes every which way. I don't know the details, but all I could think of was you there, staying late at work," he explained before pulling her to him in a crushing embrace. "I almost went to St. Mungo's to look for you."

The reality of the situation sunk in. She had been in the elevator with Dolohov at a quarter after
five. His behavior struck her as odd and she was thinking about going up to Level Two to Auror Headquarters to say something about it, but decided against it. Now there were people injured, or worse, dead, because she decided to do nothing about it. Only by the luck of the Fates was she not there at the Ministry when Dolohov snapped.

"Oh God," Hermione cried into Ron's chest, too shocked and guilt ridden to do more than break down in her husband's arms.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 19 A/N: Extra thanks to Siren for helping come up with a chapter title this chapter, as Siren and Horserider frequently give me help in that department (Some of the previous chapter titles are their doing.)

Lavender is an herb that is more frequently used in aromatherapy for relaxation, though I had some wonderful raspberry-lavender iced-tea once that was divine. Raspberry leaf is an herb particularly useful around "that time of the month." Lovage is an herb commonly used in Europe in teas and aids digestion. Valerian is helpful for restful sleep. Some information on the herbs was obtained at http://www.celestialseasonings.com/research/allaboutherbs/index.php

The line, "Never fake an orgasm, it only ensures he'll never give you a real one," is a variation on the lines, "And what did I tell you about faking orgasm?" "It only guarantees that he'll never give me a real one," from Mynuet's Draco/Ginny fic "First Friends" located at http://www.dracoandginny.com/viewstory.php?sid=33 A wonderful Draco/Ginny fic from one of the fic goddesses from the good ship "Fire & Ice." I have her permission to use it in this fic, bless her little ferret soul. May visions of Draco pervade your dreams, Myn.

B/N: Enjoy, ya'll. Yet again, Betz has written another “on the edge of your seat” chapter that requires your full attention, and almost begs that you don’t blink, lest you miss a piece. I like beta-ing for a happy author, so give the gal some feedback, would you? Siren
“So Weary, Yet Miles to Go”

Chapter Summary

How much more can Hermione stand? Not much. Severus isn't fairing that much better.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Twenty
“So Weary, Yet Miles to Go”

Disclaimer:
Rowling, you’re the goddess of our favorite books, it true
You own each character, concept and idea; we'll profess it till we're blue,
You're patient with our mangling of your characters' motives and drive
Our creativity is spurred by yours, under which we thrive,
Your ownership of these ideas, we do not dispute nor usurp your claim,
We just hope you don't think that our loving of Severus Snape is lame.

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Severus wondered what the Twenty-Four Blackbird Bakery had done differently, as his usual brioche seemed extra yeasty and superbly soft and chewy that morning. Silently musing how many more of these parole meetings he would have left until he was free, the ex-Death Eater walked the cobblestone street with the blond wizard keeping pace along side him.

"Knut for your thoughts, Severus," Draco drawled, as he began tearing off bits of his croissant before popping them into his mouth.

Instead of answering Draco immediately, Severus continued walking towards the Leaky Cauldron trying to think of something to say other than what was really on his mind. The younger wizard had already given him a strange look when the topic of Hermione Weasley had come up in conversation earlier that week with Ginny. It would only fuel the younger man's speculations if Severus told him about Hermione's moment of weakness the night before.

Draco needed to be informed of his progress, but details about such things would only find their
way back to Ginny's ears, despite Severus' request for Draco not say anything. He knew that the
two lovers did not keep secrets from one another, as Ginny was already living a life full of lies and
deceit with her husband, friends and family.

"Ingredients Miss Brown will have to prepare immediately once we arrive at work this morning,"
Severus replied testily.

"Meeting went that well last night?" Draco needled him.

Glancing at Draco from around the corner of his hood, Severus scowled and ignored the younger
wizard's vague though accurate perceptions. He instead countered with his own question. "And
how did Ginny's counseling session with her husband go last night?"

"You're no fun sometimes," Draco growled back.

"I cannot afford to be 'fun' right now. Perhaps later when the world is done trying to control my
life, I shall become a bit more jovial. Until then, I have no inspiration for such jocular antics, Mr.
Malfoy," the Potions master rebuked.

"I saw Pansy last night," Draco said solemnly, changing tangents of the conversation.

"Is she still working at Padparadsha?"

"No, she left after one patron ripped off one of her gloves and exposed the Dark Mark. She's
working at The Cerise Cucurbit now. I'd say it's one of the less savory places she could be
working, but at least it's not The Wicked Witch," the younger wizard admitted with a half shrug. "I
left her a hundred Galleons."

"Does she know it's you coming and leaving large anonymous tips each month?"

"No. And I'd prefer it to remain that way. The worst part is, besides every wizard walking in and
seeing her strip down to nothing but her gloves while wiggling her fanny in their faces, I think she's
doing a bit of trade on the side… in the back of the place." They walked a little bit more before
Draco added, "I know Lavender has her reasons why she won't take Pansy in, but I wish there was
something I could do so she wouldn't have to work as a stripper."
"I think if Uther Parkinson was still alive, he’d be thankful you are looking out for his daughter," Severus praised him.

"Granted, one of the side benefits of the Dark Lord falling was the opportunity to get out of my marriage contract to her, as self-immolation was preferable to being married to Pansy, but I am still concerned about her well-being," Draco confessed. "Perhaps Lavender will help arrange some monthly stipend to be allotted to her from my funds, dropped off in the usual manner once our plans are complete."

The "usual manner" consisted of Draco anonymously leaving a small purse of Galleons for Pansy at the strip club she was working at.

"Perhaps," Severus said.

As they entered the Leaky Cauldron, they noticed the usual two or three patrons that frequented the place that early on a Friday morning were absent as an eerie calm hung in the air.

Tom was behind the bar sipping his tea while engrossed in that morning's copy of the Daily Prophet. Normally, he quietly watched the two dark-cloaked wizards enter his place of business like clockwork every Friday morning. Without fail, the men threw a few Sickles into the tin before grabbing a handful of Floo powder and calling out their destination. But this morning's headlines had gripped the barman's attention such that he did not notice their arrival and subsequent departure.

"Ministry of Magic," they both called out.

Severus and Draco both stepped out of the fireplaces in the main atrium of the Ministry of Magic and stood dumbstruck amidst the mayhem of Aurors working over every inch of the place.

As the two cloaked figures emerged, a cadet Auror-in-training with a case of late-adolescent acne stepped up to them and said, "State your business!"

"What is going on here?" Severus asked, using his usual tone of authority.
"You must not have gotten your morning copy of the Daily Prophet yet. There was an attack here last night," the young wizard volunteered. "Now, state your business. Only essential Ministry personnel are required to report to work today and everyone else is asked to stay home until Monday. So unless you have business with someone who is indeed coming to work today, I must ask that you leave and come back on Monday."

Speaking for the both of them, Severus answered, "We have a seven o'clock appointment with Kingsley Shacklebolt, Auror First Class." He emphasized Shacklebolt's title to let the whelp assume it was extremely important business.

"Oh! Well, just a moment. Please wait here, and I'll see if he's around," the spotty youth politely remarked. "He's been rather busy this morning. May I have your names please?"

"He will know who we are. Just tell him his seven o'clock Friday morning appointment is here to see him." Severus did his best not to snap at the boy, as it seemed several pairs of eyes were watching him and Draco with suspicion while the Aurors continued swarming around, flitting from one spot then another.

Draco raised his hand and adjusted the hood of his cloak, making sure his features were still concealed in shadow.

Severus glanced around, peering out from the sheltered hood of his cloak, and saw that scorch marks left by some very powerful curses were marring the gleaming marble. One blast had taken a chunk out of the statue of Dumbledore, who was at the pinnacle of the fountain sculpture. All remains of Potter had been removed from the statue a few weeks prior.

A few moments later, Shacklebolt arrived looking like he hadn't slept at all. "Gentlemen." He greeted the pair.

"Kingsley," Severus returned the salutation then glared at the young Auror-in-training who stood beside his superior.

Kingsley dismissed him. "That will be all, Williams."

The Auror led the two wizards aside before speaking. "You shouldn't have come in this morning," Kingsley said in hushed tones.
"We did not know about what happened here, though we probably would have come anyway just so we would not be in violation of our parole for not showing up, regardless of the circumstances," Severus hissed back.

"Dolohov lost it last night." Kingsley looked Severus in the eye to gauge his reaction.

Severus kept an impassive face while replying, "I'm not surprised. What I am surprised about is that he lasted this long."

"It wasn't pretty," Shacklebolt recounted. "Two were killed last night and four are at St. Mungo's recovering from some rather unpleasant curses. From what we can tell from those we interviewed after the attacks, at about 5:30 last night Dolohov started attacking everyone in the atrium just when people were heading home. Nobody knows if it was planned or if it was spontaneous. We haven't had a chance to interrogate him yet, but Moody is getting some Veritaserum for questioning him this afternoon."

Severus shuddered at the memory of Moody's use of Veritaserum on him after the first time the Dark Lord fell.

"Speaking of which," the hulking Auror added, "be prepared for a visit today at your place of business, which I can only assume is also your residence." Shacklebolt took their silence for confirmation of his assumption. "Moody intends on personally accompanying Braggins and me while we visit every Death Eater. So keep your noses and wands clean and make sure there is nothing incriminating around or would give Alastor cause to investigate you further."

"There was a special emergency session of the Wizengamot last night, so Moody was given access to all the Death Eater files. Whatever Alastor says, don't let him taunt either of you into doing something for which he can haul you off to Azkaban," Kingsley warned them both.

"Lovely," Draco grumbled.

"Just go home and wait. I wish Alastor wasn't going to be there, but count on it. And be prepared for him to insist on using Veritaserum."

There was the muted sound of Severus grinding his teeth as his demeanor turned blacker.
"I'm sorry, but after last night people want some sort of action, even though it would be pointless," the Auror said. "If I can try and reduce the dosage without Alastor being the wiser, I'll try, but he is already suspicious of my treatment of you two as being preferential, so I'll do what I can to help you without hanging myself in the process."

"Thank you for your… warning," Severus replied. Draco nodded in concurrence of the older man’s sentiments.

"Go home for now. I'll see you both later."

Severus and Draco lightly bowed their heads in farewell before going back to the fireplace to return to the Leaky Cauldron.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Hermione stared at the bottom of her cup wishing there were more coffee in it with which to revive herself. Pulling her wand from the sloppily knotted bun atop of her head, she summoned the coffeepot and refilled her mug. After a splash of cream, she began working on her third cup of the morning. The haggard and exhausted witch heard the familiar whoosh of the fireplace coming to life once more.

Ron was in the other room. He’d been answering Floo calls from family members all night long as the news of last night’s events trickled from one Weasley household to the next, each one Flooing to check up on Hermione.

After the third Floo call, Hermione had asked Ron to field the repetition of questions posed from all her brother-in-laws and their wives. Penelope was one of the first to Floo with news that Percy was all right and to check to see if Hermione was as well.

Hermione eventually retired to the bedroom with the door shut in order to get some sleep, but was kept awake from the constant chatter that seeped in from the parlor. Sometime around quarter to five, shortly before sunrise, Hermione gave up on the hope of some sleep and stumbled off to the kitchen in order to brew something strong enough to kick-start her heart and brain.

'At least no one has bothered to ask why I didn't come home until late last night,' she thought, wondering how many times the other Weasleys tried Flooing her earlier that evening only to find no one home to answer the call. She hoped Ron wouldn’t ask her where she was either.

Around seven o'clock, instead of hearing the familiar sound of her in-laws with the latest Floo call,
Hermione was startled when she heard her mother's voice.

"Hang on a second, I'll see—" Ron stopped talking when he turned around and saw his wife emerge from the kitchen, looking anxiously at the green flames that surrounded her mother's head like a halo.

"Mum?" Hermione croaked, rubbing her right eye with the tips of her fingers. By the fifth sweep of her hand over her eye, she had sat down next to the fireplace to talk.

"Hermione, you look awful," Wendy Granger declared. "Did you get any sleep last night?"

"Not really," Hermione confessed while stifling a huge yawn. "Everyone has been Flooing in at all hours of the night to make sure I'm alright."

"We saw this morning's copy of the *Daily Prophet* and were worried you might have been caught in the fight," Mrs. Granger said.

Hermione let a huge yawn overtake her, distending her features, before replying, "I didn't know you still got the paper."

"How else are we going to keep up with your world, sweetheart," her mother gently chided her.

"I'm sorry, Mum. It's been a bit busy as of late and all."

"I understand," Wendy said knowingly. "You're all grown up, married with a life of your own. You have things to do, with your job and all. Your father and I were the same way, so no need to apologize."

The young witch felt rather guilty that she had not been to see her parents since Christmas, as most of her free time was absorbed with familial obligations to Ron's rather large side of the family.

"Ron and I should swing by some Sunday," Hermione suggested.
"Yes, that would be lovely," her mother said. Hermione yawned once more and her mother smiled wearily at her. "You look absolutely knackered. Owl us when you'd like to come over. Maybe you could even stay for dinner. I'll let you go now. Ta, dear."

"Bye, Mum."

Wendy Granger's head disappeared from the flames as the fire died out.

Hermione glanced around to see if the paper arrived and found it still neatly folded up on the floor by the open window. Crawling over the few feet on hands and knees, she flopped back down before reading the *Daily Prophet*.

"DEATH EATER GOES OUT IN A GORY BLAZE OF CARNAGE." screamed the headline next to a picture of several Aurors running in and out of the picture. Hermione caught a glimpse of Harry, Moody, Shacklebolt and a few other Aurors she recognized in the picture among the several dozen Aurors and Ministry officials that came and left the photograph.

"Last night at 5:30 p.m., Antonin Dolohov, a Death Eater parolee, attacked several people in the atrium of the Ministry of Magic with a slew of curses and hexes, killing one witch and one wizard, and injuring four others before being subdued by three Aurors: Nymphadora Tonks, Malphie Waterman, and the famous Harry Potter.

The wizard killed was Mr. Sergei Ipton, an investigator in the Department of Magical Catastrophes. The witch killed during the attack was Madam Marge Mallowton, a Potions ingredients tester in the Department of Standards and Regulation."

Hermione dropped the paper as if it burnt her fingers. A long, slow mournful wail pierced the air before she began sobbing hysterically.

Ron, who had been in the kitchen to give Hermione some privacy to speak with her mother, came bounding into the room and saw his wife crumpled on the floor, her face twisted and grimaced in agonizing sorrow.

"Wha–? What is it?" he asked, folding her up into his arms, consoling her.

"Ma–, Ma–, Marge is d–, de–, dead." Hermione screamed, her breath hiccuping and hitching.
She collapsed against Ron, wailing once more, her puffy eyes hurting from crying too much during the night already. Her head began to pound from a splitting headache, but she didn't care. Hermione let her spirits sink into a quagmire of self-pity and depression from grief, regrets and bitterness that overwhelmed her life at that moment. She wasn't sure how much the human spirit could take, but it seemed she was at the breaking point and her life was being spun and shredded like a leaf in a hurricane.

"Marge?" Ron asked gently.

"M–, m–, m–, my co-, co-worker," she sputtered in between her hitching breaths.

"Oh," Ron said in a small voice, feeling a fool for not remembering Hermione's co-worker's name. "Oh, Hermione, I'm so sorry." He began rocking her back and forth as she lay crumpled against him, curled up in a ball within his long arms and he shushed he with a calming, "Shhhhhhhh."

A strong sense of déjà vu washed over Hermione, remembering how Calleo had comforted her the night before. The situation was too surreal and she felt like laughing at the irony of her life at the moment, but she refused. The night before, she was crying over her husband being gone and here he was comforting her in the same manner, soothing shushes and rocking motion as her gigolo. If she allowed herself to laugh, it would come out sounding hysterical and make Ron think she had really gone nutters. Overwhelmed, exhausted and distraught, Hermione did the only thing she could do to cope.

Forcing part of her mind to shut down, Hermione felt a cold, numb sensation sweep through her body. It was hard to feel hurt when one decided to no longer feel emotions.

'I'm so tired,' she thought. 'I'm tired of knowing the things I know, I'm tired of crying, as I've cried myself to sleep far too many nights now. I don't want to feel. If I don't feel, then I can't sense the pain. I've got to survive and I'm just too tired to fight this now,' she silently rationalized.

Her body suddenly felt lighter, though the heaviness in her chest kept pressing in on her as her body continued to expunge the grief within itself.

In time, Hermione's sobs subsided and Ron guided her to the couch to rest. The redhead picked up the paper and glanced through the article detailing the attack his wife nearly missed.
"I suppose I should get ready to go into work," Hermione muttered mechanically.

"Wait," Ron said before scanning the paper once more. "It says," he said, running a finger down the length of paper, "that only essential Ministry personnel and Aurors are to report into work today."

"Well, I'm essential," she asserted with no conviction.

"'Mione, don't. Stay home," Ron urged her. "It's been a long night and most everyone else is not going in today."

"No, I really should go in," she reiterated listlessly, her eyes glassy and vacant.

"Why don't you owl your boss. If she still wants you to go in, fine. But why bother if you're just going to wind up coming back home?"

Hermione sat there contemplating her next course of action. She was too tired to make any defining decision of whether to go to bed and sleep for a week or keep her mind preoccupied from the nightmares she were sure to come with news of Marge's death and just go into work anyway. The decision was wrest from her when the Floo flared to life once more.

"Who the bloody fuck is it this time?" Ron cursed at the ceiling.

"Hey, Ron," Harry said through the green flames, looking very somber.

"Sorry mate," Ron apologized. "It's been a long night and neither 'Mione or I got any sleep. She just found out about Marge," he said quietly with a nod of his head towards Hermione, who still sat on the couch, looking semi-catatonic.

"I'm the one who should be apologizing," Harry replied. "I need to ask Hermione to come in this morning."

"What?" Hermione said, roused from her stupor.
"I'm sorry, Hermione, but since you were Marge's co-worker, and witnesses report seeing you come out of the elevator shortly before the attack, we need you to come in and answer a few questions," Harry explained.

Hermione's stomach plummeted through the floor. Now everyone, including her husband and Harry, would know she was suspicious about Dolohov and she did nothing. She vaguely wondered if they sent people off to Azkaban for being inadvertent murder accomplices.

"All right," she replied reluctantly. "Let me shower and I'll be right in."

"You take as long as you need," Harry said before the flames died out.

Thankful that she had not gotten around to eating anything that morning yet, as she probably would be running to the bathroom to retch up her breakfast if she had, Hermione stumbled off to the bathroom to shower. She would need the time to gather her courage before having to face her fellow Order members with the knowledge that she could have saved Marge and poor Mr. Ipton from death.

Standing under the scalding spray of water, Hermione felt hollow inside. She wished she could continue to feel this dead inside for as long as she needed until life returned to normal, but what was normal before her life started collapsing in upon itself was not exactly a bed of roses either. Maybe if she couldn't feel and kept her emotions suffocated and repressed, resentment, pain and anger would not have such control over her life. Since she seemed to have no control over her life anyway, maybe shutting off her emotions was the one thing she could have some sort of control over.

It was ironic. During the war, she had never felt more alive, being aware of her own mortality as friends, teachers, classmates and fellow Order members were dying all around her, but at the time, she had felt a purpose for surviving all of the tribulations they had all suffered. Now that such trivial personal tragedies were being thrust upon her, compared to the grave danger and horrors of war, Hermione didn't think she had the strength to go on. That something as simple as a collapsing marriage was testing her mettle, she found herself breaking like a dead, dried twig instead of bending like the supple willow.

As she headed out the door to go to the Ministry, Ron gave her a brief kiss upon her cheek as a show of support and comfort. Hermione could feel no joy over this simple act of affection or guilt from the fact she had almost thrown herself at another man the night before. The single emotion she could feel at the moment was apathy. It was this indifference that kept her feet moving, her heart beating and her eyes dry.
Hermione had frequently wondered how Harry mastered and controlled his emotions after the death of Sirius in order to master Occlumency. Perhaps he had done what she was doing at the moment, denying herself the ability to feel. It would be a simple solution in order to achieve the clearing of the mind to prevent Voldemort from entering it. She knew her problems were small in comparison to what Harry went through during his teenage years with a madman trying to kill him during a time of war, but still, Hermione felt as though she could not bear one more thing upon her narrow shoulders.

A sudden empathy and understanding for Harry's restrained emotions when dealing with Ginny and the world emerged. Now she could understand why Harry avoided conflict and kept his emotions in check. Hermione hoped she would not become permanently cold and distant, but at some point could let herself feel once more.

Though Harry was not cold, he was a changed man after the war. He did not have the same unrestrained spark of life he once had as a boy. She wondered when she had lost her own exuberant flame of youth. Was it slowly extinguished over the years by being married to Ron? Or had the events of the past few weeks suddenly snuffed out the last glimmer of that ephemeral essence that could let her remember what it was like to be a child?

She didn't know.

As a child, Hermione had wondered why some adults looked tired and older beyond their years. She wondered if she looked that way now.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 20 A/N: Padparadsha is a pink lotus, also the name of sapphires that are of a certain rich pink hue, like when a canary diamond is of a certain yellow intensity.

Cucurbite: an alchemist's code word for vagina. I thought that a strip joint called The Cerise Cucurbite in the wizarding world would be about as subtle as one called The Pink Pussycat for the Muggleworld. http://www.sex-is-sacred.org/sexMagick.htm Quote: "At first the role of sexuality in spiritual practice was announced only in highly esoteric formats — e.g. the alchemists' use of "Athanor" and "Cucurbite" as code words for the penis and vagina…"

B/N: Betz, we’re on tenterhooks here… this is almost TOO much anticipation!!! Keep it up, Hun!
To the readers… isn’t this the kind of story you want to print off in its entirety (when
it’s finished, of course) and sit down to read with a tasty drink of some sort?!?!?! Siren
Chapter Summary

The interrogations begin. Tea is served, but pardon Severus if he doesn't offer you a scone or biscuit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-One
“Twenty Questions”

Disclaimer: "Double-Bubble Bubblegum, Wonkle, Ipso-facto, Wagga-Wagga, Fork-Tongued Four-Eyes, Fehzelbarm, Hey-Nonny-Nonny and a Ha-Cha-Cha!" Translated from Dumbledore speak, "J.K. Rowling is the owner of Harry Potter and all concepts. No profit is being made from this piece of fiction."

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"You look awful."

"Thanks, Harry," Hermione replied monotonously without sarcasm.

Mrs. Weasley had stepped out of the fireplace in the atrium of the Ministry of Magic and was escorted by Harry, who had been waiting for her, to Auror Headquarters on Level Two.

There was a hastily scrawled sign posted on the lift that said, "Out of Order."

The smell of charred flesh still hung in the air and it made Hermione's throat close up. That particular smell triggered memories of the war that seemed as fresh and vivid as if the war had ended yesterday.

Even to this day, Hermione could not stand the smell of meat charred or overcooked in a pan, in the oven or on the grill. She had taken up a preference for her steak to be bloody rare.
"Can't somebody open a window," she mumbled distractedly to herself.

"I know what you mean," Harry added empathetically, having a similar reaction to the lingering smell.

"Here," Harry said, as he guided Hermione into an office that was not his. "Kingsley and Alastor wanted to ask you a few things themselves. I'll be joining them, as I offered myself for your moral support."

"Thanks," she whispered.

They sat in silence for a while before Harry said, "Ginny mentioned you and Ron had a fight, and he took off." Hermione didn't answer him, but continued looking out of the office window that had been charmed with a view of the River Thames. "I saw that he was there when I Flooed you earlier."

Hermione sat there in the Ministry issued chair, her shoulders slumped and her eyes downcast.

"You look like hell," he said with concern.

"You already said that."

"Well, you do," Harry stated matter-of-factly. "Do you want me to talk to Ron?" She shook her head. "Do you want to talk with me about it?"

'Ooh yes, Harry. Do you want to hear about my pitiful sex life and how Gryffindor men, based on a poll of two, are lousy in bed? Do you want to hear how eerily similar my disintegrating marriage is to yours? Do you want to know how Ron and I have nothing in common anymore and I'm seeing a gigolo on the side for conversation and companionship? How I almost ripped my clothes off and begged him to fuck me last night so at least I know what a good fuck is instead of being left unsatisfied by an inconsiderate lover with a little prick?'

She didn't think Harry would want to know or hear about such things. A half-shrug and a shake of her head were her answer. As much as it disgusted her, she wanted pity and Ginny would say the
right things to make her feel as if she weren't the only one to suffer such tribulation. The hollow feeling nestled in her chest and the now ever-present weight upon it was sucking out all the energy she had, reducing her to sit as still as a statue as they waited for Harry's superiors to arrive.

It wasn't long before the two senior Aurors strode into the room.

"Hermione," Kingsley greeted Mrs. Weasley with a weary and sympathetic smile.

She nodded in greeting to Shacklebolt and Moody. The top Auror merely nodded to her in return, sitting himself in a chair next to the desk on the other side of the room.

"I'm so sorry to have called you in, but we have a few questions," the black Auror apologized.

A small rush of nervous adrenaline raced through her veins, fueled with apprehension and guilt over her inaction the night before.

"Just answer them the best of your ability. It appears you didn't get much sleep last night, so if there are any details you remember later that you think are important, please be sure to contact us any time," Kingsley said.

Hermione nodded once more, her head feeling like one of those stupid Muggle bobble-head dolls her parents bought as a souvenir on one of their many trips abroad.

Shacklebolt set the Auto-Quotes Quill in motion before he asked, "At what time did you leave last night, Mrs. Weasley?"

As her eyes fixed on a particular pattern in the parquet floor in front of her, Hermione's visual memory flashed to the night before, remembering the clock on the wall as she headed out the door of her office. "It was about a quarter after five, maybe a few minutes earlier than that at most."

"Were you originally in your office?"

"Yes."
"Where did you go when you left your office?"

"The lift." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, realizing once more that she had stood in close proximity with a Death Eater that moments later had gone on a murdering rampage. Her body shuddered.

Harry rubbed his hand on her back noting her physical discomfort.

"What happened next?" Shacklebolt inquired.

Hermione opened her eyes while remembering the exchange. "I got into the lift and... and I recall Dolohov was shifting from one foot to the other."

"Did you think it was strange?" Shacklebolt prompted.

"Yes. But I thought maybe he had to use the loo."

Moody let out a derisive snort.

All three pairs of eyes turned to him. "Well, I think that's pretty telling, don't you?" Moody said defensively.

"Please, Hermione, go on," Kingsley encouraged her, ignoring Alastor's comment.

"I noticed his eye twitched a bit."

"Twitched?" Kingsley asked.

"Yes, like a nervous tic or something."
Shacklebolt and Moody exchanged meaningful glances while Harry grip on her shoulder tightened.

"Go on. Anything else you noticed?"

"Yes, normally he asks me if I want the main floor, as I only really go between that floor and mine in the basement. He didn't say anything. Not even his usual 'have a good evening,'" Hermione stated.

"Have a good evening'?" Moody growled incredulously.

"Yes," she snapped at him. "Normally he would ask, 'main floor?' and I would say, 'yes, please.' Then when we got to my floor he would say 'have a good evening.' It's been that way for as long as he worked here… until last night."

"So you felt some sort of affection for him?" Moody asked suspiciously.

"WHAT?" Hermione and Harry both yelled at him.

"You must have felt something for him if you said 'please' to Death Eater scum like him," Moody accused her.

"HA! That is the biggest load of tripe I've heard since… since..." Hermione's mind flashed back to Harry's recounting of Moody's accusations of Snape and young Malfoy's part in Albus and Minerva's death. However, being accused of such a thing, now was not the time to bring that little bit up. Instead she finished by saying, "… since my second year when Gilderoy Lockhart bragged about all the things he'd done."

Harry and Kingsley chuckled at the memory of the hot-winded braggart of a buffoon.

"Really now, Alastor," Kingsley chided his superior with a chuckle, hoping to diffuse the situation.

"Yes, really!" Hermione jumped in. "Do you really think a witch like me, a Muggle-born, would hold any affection for a Death Eater? One that tried to kill me not once, but twice? Do you not remember that I was in the Order as well? Did you ever think that I was merely exercising common
"It was just a thought, not an accusation," Moody amended with a grumble.

Hermione snorted at his half-arsed apology.

"Please, go on," Kingsley kindly urged her to continue. "You were saying Dolohov said nothing."

"Yes. I thought maybe he was acting strange, but…"

"But what, Mrs. Weasley?" Shacklebolt asked with great interest noting her hesitation, leaning forward in his chair.

Hermione hung her head in shame and quietly confessed, "But I dismissed it."

An oppressive blanket of silence weighted down the room. Finally lifting her head and expecting to see looks of disgust and anger, she saw Harry and Kingsley look at her with sympathetic understanding. She wasn't sure what was worse, the accusations she was expecting or the concerned looks she was getting.

A few tears welled in her eyes as she whispered hoarsely, "Because I did nothing, two people are dead and more are in St. Mungo's."

Harry kneeled next to her and pulled her into a hug. "It's okay," he assured her.

Though Hermione was an only child, if she had a brother, she was sure she would want him to be just like Harry in many ways. The fact that he could comfort her as if he was family made him seem like the brother she never had.

"No, it's not," she protested weakly.

Harry pulled back and looked her in the face, ignoring his two superiors behind him. "There were many other people who rode in the elevator after you did. And after questioning most of them,
some of them said similar things too, but decided to dismiss it as well. Some of them were Aurors too. You have nothing to be ashamed of, Hermione. You did not cause the death of those two people; Dolohov did."

"Yes, but I thought about coming up here and mentioning it to someone, but in my selfish act of wanting to go home, I ignored my instincts and went on my merry way. I'm just as much to blame through my inaction as if I had condoned it," Hermione insisted.

"NO! I will not let you start blaming yourself for things that should or could have been done differently!" Harry shouted. "I went through years of blaming myself for Sirius' death from the single action of insisting on coming to the Ministry to save him based on false images fed to me. It was a great many small actions that lead to his death, including his insistence to come here to help me, and my own fool-hardy actions that lead to it, but in the end it was Bellatrix Lestrange that killed him."

Hermione knew Harry was right, as she had spent time trying to convince him that Sirius' death wasn't his fault, but that didn't quell the guilt that burned like hot acid in her gut.

Turning to his superiors, Harry asked, "Are there any more questions for her?"

"No, I believe that's all we wanted to know. Alastor? Did you have any other questions?" Shacklebolt asked, glancing at the battle-scarred wizard.

"No," Moody answered gruffly. "But I would like to add that you should keep constant vigilance, young lady."

Closing her eyes, she silently counted to ten. That damned phrase had not done a damn bit of good to keep her co-worker alive and was the backing philosophy behind the conspiracy to convict Snape and the younger Malfoy.

Her mind suddenly remembered Snape and Malfoy. 'Shit.' How long had it been since Hermione learned of the reasoning behind their false convictions? And she had done no research into freeing them yet? 'I have my own problems to deal with before tackling others' right now,' she reasoned. When the dust settled from the latest tragedy in her life, she would preoccupy her time with freeing them. Now, however, she had to deal with her own crumbling marriage and the death of someone she knew.
"Has Marge's family decided on when to hold her funeral?" Hermione asked, hoping the subject
would cool the sudden disdain she felt towards Moody.

"Sunday," Kingsley said.

Hermione nodded.

Harry helped his friend up from her chair and walked with her to the atrium.

As Hermione's heels clicked on the floor echoing down the hall, Harry said, "Since you'll be back
to work on Monday, how about I take you out to lunch that day?"

"Won't you be busy will all… this?" she said, gesturing vaguely at the atrium they just entered.

"I'll be working the weekend probably, getting the paperwork done and all. I should be free on
Monday for lunch. We never did get to have our lunch last week."

Hermione decided to ignore the subject of their fight, considering how tired she felt. She was in no
mood to fight with Harry over semantics of the term Death Eater versus ex-Death Eater. "That
would be nice, Harry."

"Meet me here in the atrium at noon?"

"Sure," Hermione replied listlessly.

"Go home," Harry gently ordered her as he walked her to the fireplace. "Sleep."

For a moment, Hermione contemplated the pros and cons of Apparating versus Flooing home. One
was instant and did not involve soot, but it ran the risk of splinching if the person Apparating was
not fully alert, which Hermione definitely wasn't.

'Sod it all,' Hermione thought. 'I'll take a shower before I go to sleep.'
Once back in the familiar surrounding of her abode, she looked for Ron. There was no sign of him except for a large duffel bag stuffed with his clothes by the wardrobe and a note left on the table next to the bed.

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Hermione,

*I had to leave for practice, but I'll be home before I have to leave again for the pub. We'll talk later today.*

Love,

Ron

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"Aw… bloody hell," Hermione muttered to herself.

Some small part of her was hoping they could avoid the inevitable talk that was to come. She had silently hoped that he would just come back and they could go on as if the fight never happened, but that was the easy out, the coward's way.

'Some Gryffindor you are.'

She ignored the need to bathe and stripped her clothes of and crawled into bed. Hermione was asleep before her mind could start imagining the things her husband would say to her upon his return.

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Severus paced the length of his Tabriz rug, disconcerted with his uncertain future.
'At least a condemned man knows that the ax will fall,' he thought darkly.

It had been an hour since he’d returned home. His house-elf, Marf, had cleaned his study of any incriminating evidence that might give Moody cause to haul his cursed arse off to Azkaban. All Potions journals and books purchased since the beginning of his semi-incarceration and any evidence of Sebastian Delgado had been spirited away to a location that even he was not aware of. It was a preventative measure to keep the location secret, lest Moody use too much Veritaserum and Severus wound up "volunteering" too much information when questioned. Once that task was complete, he sent Marf off with a note to Miss Brown outlining the reason for his delay that morning.

Hoping Shacklebolt and Moody would show up soon, so that he could get over fretting like a nervous virgin witch on her wedding night who didn’t know what to expect, he began the mental task of going through the ingredients and steps required to brew the Beam of the Red Oak Potion. It was an old potion he had found in one of his more arcane Potions tomes that he had accrued over the years. The potion would serve as a starting point for the male "performance enhancing" potion Miss Brown suggested they start working on this week, since the natural lubrication potions seemed complete and was now entering the testing phase.

'Cactus fruit for endurance, cayenne and raw crimini mushroom for opening up the capillaries, increasing energy and enhancing blood flow, saw palmetto, Peruvian grown maca, julienned dragon spleen…'

Miss Brown wanted to add Tilia for conjugal affection, but Severus reminded her that many wizards wanted to enhance their performance in the bedroom, and not suffer the side effects of an ingredient commonly used in love potions.

Reflecting upon Hermione’s complaints about her husband’s lack of stamina in the bedroom, he considered adding an infusion of cornel tree bark for duration. Of course he wouldn’t add it to the first test batch, but it would be an ingredient worth looking into for a variation of the performance potion. Perhaps if he could create an odorless, tasteless version, it might increase the marketability to witches who secretly wished their husbands or lovers would last longer before climaxing. That singular addition of cornel tree bark, based on his own personal knowledge of percentage of witches who complained about their husbands and lovers climaxing long before they could reach one themselves, would guarantee a huge customer base.

A few hours later, Severus was still waiting. He wondered if the whole day would be a waste of waiting patiently like some silly first year left out in the hall and forgotten about when showing up for detention.

'A perfectly good day of work shot to hell while waiting for my judge, jury and possible executioner
'to arrive,' he thought with a sour disposition.

His ears picked up the far off echoing sound of heavy footsteps tromping up the stone steps of the inner atrium just outside his door. As Severus was normally at work in the lab at this hour on a weekday, he wondered if it was one of Blaise’s clients that had come for a visit.

That notion was dispelled when he heard a fist banging on Macnair's door downstairs. "Open up Macnair. It's Shacklebolt."

Severus cracked his door open a bit to listen better and to peek to see if the whole Auror division had descended upon the building or if it was just Shacklebolt and Moody, as his parole officer had told him that morning.

The ex-Death Eater couldn't see Macnair's door, as it was directly beneath his, two floors down, but he could see a small contingent of Aurors waiting just outside the entrance to the building, hanging about the alley. Moody had probably brought them convinced there would be trouble and of a possible need for back up.

"Constant vigilance," Severus quietly sneered to himself.

He could hear the squealing hinges of Macnair's door when he opened it. "What do you want? I already had my weekly parole meeting and my monthly work place check," Macnair yelled, his voice reverberating along the stone, tile and metal interior of the atrium as it rose up to Severus' ears.

Of the other inhabitants in the building, Severus only dealt with Draco, choosing not to have anything to do with Mr. Zabini or Mr. Macnair. The two loyal Death Eaters had kept to themselves and rarely ventured out into public. When crossing paths in the building's atrium or on the stairs, Macnair and Zabini merely nodded to Severus and said nothing, each wizard silent in the awkward shame of the knowledge that the others would know why they were there.

"This is a surprise inspection, Macnair. Step aside, we have a few questions for you." Moody's voice took on a sinister tone as it echoed.

There was a sharp crack of a door being slammed shut followed by a few spells being cast to open the door. A few shouts of voices later and silence descended upon the building once more. It was only a matter of time before Aurors would be knocking on his door seeking entrance to "ask a few
questions."

Half an hour later, Macnair's door opened and Severus pressed his ear against his own door to listen. The only sound he could make out was Shacklebolt and Moody talking as they ascended another floor.

Once certain that they were on the landing of the third floor and could no longer see his door, Severus quietly opened it once more. Peering through the crack between the door and the jamb, he saw Macnair quietly being led away by some junior Aurors. His pondering on why and where the Death Eater was going ceased abruptly when he heard one of the two Aurors knock on Draco's door.

"Good morning gentlemen. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" Severus heard Draco's voice drift up. His voice sounded carefully neutral, neither bitter nor amused.

"Mr. Malfoy, we need to come in and ask you a few questions," Shacklebolt replied.

"Fine," Draco said with resignation.

Draco's door shut and Severus was left to wait once more to learn of his and Draco's fate. An hour passed by before Draco's door opened again.

"Now, that wasn't so bad now, was it?" Moody said lightly.

Severus hoped Draco's house-elf, Dheef, got every last scrap of parchment that might otherwise indicate that Draco was doing something other than entertaining ladies for work. If the Ministry ever got wind of Draco's work in marketing and advertising for Miss Brown, that would prove to be most inconvenient to all parties involved, especially him and Draco.

"Thank you for being cooperative, Mr. Malfoy. It shall reflect on your record," Kingsley offered as small compensation.

"Good day," Draco said through clenched teeth before closing the door.
Severus ran from the door into the kitchen. "Marf! They are coming. Remember your cue."

"Yes, Mr. Snape, sir. I knows just what's to do as you told me, sir," the house elf added while bobbing on the balls of his feet, wringing the corner of his pillowcase draped over his knobby body.

Severus gave a nod to the slight creature as the knock at the door came.

_Bang-bang-bang._

Straightening his shoulders, Severus walked to the door and opened it quickly.

"Yes?" Severus asked sharply.

"Mr. Snape. We are here to ask you a few questions," Shacklebolt announced.

"Well then, come in. Pardon me if I don't invite you to make yourselves at home," Severus countered.

"Ever the snide bastard," Moody growled as the two Aurors entered the ex-Death Eater's flat.

Severus retorted, "If I wasn't, that would probably make you even more suspicious than you are now."

The senior Auror grumbled while sitting himself down in a wing back chair, his eyes gliding over his surroundings, looking for anything amiss or dubious.

"Quite a nice little place you have here," Moody said nonchalantly. "Especially for someone who is, let's see," he paused, while producing a folder Severus recognized as his parole file, "ah, yes, a 'male escort.'" A low chuckle rose up in the gnarled wizard's throat. "My! How the proud and not-so-mighty have fallen. And not very far at that," he derisively ridiculed Severus.

Severus continued to glare at Moody, forewarned by Shacklebolt not to react to his possible
"Sit down," Moody ordered, "so that we can get out of this den of iniquity as soon as possible."

"I would prefer to stand during this… interrogation, if you don’t mind" Severus hissed with challenging contempt.

Shacklebolt stood behind Moody, giving no expression to tip his hat to either party, as he knew his superior's magical eye could see him at any moment.

"Fine. Either way, we'll find out what we want to know. Now go fetch a cup of tea or whatever the libation of your choosing is in order to take your Veritaserum," Moody ordered.

When Severus clapped twice, a tea service set for three appeared on the table in front of them.

"Tea, gentlemen?" the suspect offered with no sincerity.

"I'll pour," the black Auror said.

"No sugar or cream, if you don't mind," Severus requested. "I would prefer to see if the Veritaserum has expired before I set my lips upon it. If it has, it will have a definite smell and color instead of being odorless and colorless."

As the clear, dark brown liquid poured gracefully from the teapot's spout, Severus watched the patterns and waves in the stream move and dance. Shacklebolt produced the clear vial and showed it at arms length to Severus before uncorking the vial.

'Gods above and below, please don't fail me now,' Severus silently prayed. If things didn't go as planned, he would be forced to drink his tea with the full three drops of Veritaserum, leaving him to the complete mercy of Moody's questions with little hope of keeping his plan to escape secret, if the right questions were asked. He wondered how much Draco divulged under his interrogation and if Shacklebolt was able to get away with pretending to put three drops of the potion in the younger wizard's tea.
Shacklebolt held the vial delicately above Severus' cup and began to count. "One." The surface rippled from the single drop.

**CRASH!**

Moody's head spun quickly to the kitchen door.

"Two," Kingsley continued his count, watching a distracted Moody from the corner of his eye, while not dispensing the second drop.

Marf burst through the door wailing and sobbing, "MARF IS A BAD HOUSE ELF! MARF MUST BE PUNISHED!" The pitiful creature cried loudly.

Moody, startled, pulled out his wand while jumping to his feet.

"Three," the junior Auror finished his count, quickly corking the vial and stashing it in his cloak pocket while lightly touching the tea with his little finger to give the effect of having added the last drop.

Once realizing he was no longer in mortal danger, Moody turned back to see Kingsley putting away the Veritaserum and the subtle ripples on the surface of the tea subside.

"What have you done this time?" Severus barked.

"Mister Snape, sir. Marf is most deeply sorry, sir. Marf was putting away the breakfast dishes when--"

"I didn't ask for every last detail, just what happened!" he snapped.

"Marf broke your favorite tea jar," Marf sobbed. "Bad elf!" He began hitting himself in the head repeatedly.

"Go back to the kitchen, fix it, and then punish yourself." Severus sneered down his long nose at
Marf. "I'm busy and I can't be bothered with such trivialities right now."

"Yes, Mister Snape," the house-elf said in between hiccups, bowing as he left.

Inwardly, Severus gave a great sigh of relief as he saw that Kingsley was able to get away with only one drop. He wished that he would have to ingest none of the potion, but Moody would know better from Severus’ voice and the dilation of his eyes. As a Potions master, Severus knew how different dosages affected the drinker. At one drop, the recipient would be compelled to tell the truth, but could be done with simple yes or no answers. Two drops and the person would feel their tongue loosen and their resolve not to volunteer further information slip. Three drops and every last deep dark secret would come spilling out without even being asked for the details.

He would have to ask Miss Brown to double Marf’s weekly ration of butterbeer for playing his part so well.

"Well," Snape said, turning on the spot to face the two Aurors, "let's get this done and over with."

Severus took the proffered cup and saucer from Kingsley. Holding it by its delicate handle, he looked into the cup then sniffed at it. "It seems to be good, though if I keel over and purple boils begin erupting all over my body, you'll know that your batch was tainted. Get me to St. Mungo's immediately and tell whoever is running the Potion and Plant ward to give me the antidote for tainted Veritaserum, NOT an antidote to an overdose of Veritaserum—"

"All right! We get the point, stop delaying," Moody grumbled.

"Seems your concern not to kill your prisoners during interrogations has waned a bit." Severus took a tentative sip.

"All of it," Moody warned.

"Patience," Severus coolly replied, then downed the rest of the cup in three large gulps.

He felt the effects immediately, like a numb fuzzy sensation in the brain while feeling completely relaxed. Knowing he had to play the part, he pasted on a vacant stare and let his mouth hang slack. Fortunately, even with just one drop, his eyes would dilate enough to make Alastor think he had taken the full dosage.
Plopping down in the wing back opposite, Severus prayed he could keep his wits about him and not divulge too much information, while still seeming believable.

Moody rose and inspected Severus pupils for dilation. As Severus' eyes were black to begin with, he would have already looked the part without the potion.

"That's a good boy," Moody said. "Now let's begin." He sat back down into his chair while Shacklebolt had an Auto-Quotes Quill ready.

"Let the record show that on July 11th, 2003, Aurors First Class Kingsley Shacklebolt and Alastor Moody are here to question Severus Snape at," he paused while glancing at the clock, "11:24 a.m." The quill began scratching notes across the parchment set on the table next to the tea.

"State your name for the record," Shacklebolt commanded.

"Severus Sebastian Snape."

"Have you, Severus Snape, brewed any potions, hexed or cursed anyone, or performed any prohibited charms, spells, or transfigurations under the law, according to the Death Eater Decree?"

"No--"

"All right, all right," Moody interrupted testily. "He thinks he's been a good little Death Eater, so let me get down to the right questions."

The weather-beaten wizard asked, "Did you consort or socialize with Antonin Dolohov?"

Severus did his best to not snap at Moody, but kept his features slack and hoped his eyes looked glassy enough. He felt the compulsion to tell the truth and decided it was best to let himself elaborate on the details. "No, not since I rejected Voldemort as my master when I was 20 years old."
Moody growled, seemingly unsatisfied with his answer. "Did you have any foreknowledge that Dolohov was going to kill or harm anyone last night or any night since the end of the war?"

"No, no idea at all," Severus answered in a trance-like state.

"Do you know of any other Death Eaters who want to kill or harm anyone now or in the future?"

"Yes," Severus answered, unable to stop himself. "I'd like to hex you and Fudge to oblivion for my false incarceration."

Moody actually began to chuckle. "Yes, I'm quite sure someone such as you feels the need to hurt people, even though the law forbids it and the threat of a Dementor's Kiss is the only thing stopping you. Figures that only cowardice is the only thing that keeps you lot in line." He rephrased the question. "Are you aware of any Death Eaters who are planning on harming or killing anyone?"

"No, though if I was I'd inform Shacklebolt of the threat immediately," Severus answered truthfully.

Each answer Severus gave only seem to irritate Moody further, as if each answer was stalemating his attempt to catch Severus in the act of doing something evil and illegal.

"Tell me, Snape, what sort of client comes to 'visit' a thing such as yourself," Moody asked, taunting the raven-haired wizard. "You certainly aren't anything to look at. I can understand women coming to fuck that pretty young abomination Lucius Malfoy produced, if they were unaware of his past and family history, but what would make a woman even want to be in the same room as you?"

Severus did his best to think of women who came to him for things other than sexual relations, in order to delay admitting the inevitable truth. "They come to me to play chess, to have someone listen to the woes of their miserable marriages and bleak lives, to have a sympathetic ear to talk to. I give them pleasure when their husbands can not or haven't bothered to for years, to teach them the art of seduction to later practice on their incompetent lovers, to—"

"Enough! Tell me who some of your clients are," Moody demanded.

"No! You don’t have to answer that Severus. I order you not to answer that." Kingsley intervened.
His command was the only thing stopping from Severus to begin naming his clients.

Moody gave a mirthless smile. "What? Why stop when this is becoming so interesting? The thought of this bastard actually forced into bedding women, degrading him to be nothing more than a chancred whore is most amusing. What would drive a woman to fuck a man who looks like that, I'm most interested in knowing."

"No!" The black Auror insisted. "No names. To give names would not only betray his client confidentiality, but could prove to be very embarrassing to many well-heeled people in society, including family of those on the Wizengamot and in the Ministry."

Severus had never given names nor hinted at the sort of clientele who frequented him, so he could only assume Kingsley was improvising or knew that many respectable witches made visits to people such as himself.

"We will have to give a full report to the Wizengamot, and I don’t think they would look too kindly upon you, Alastor, for revealing it if some of them, their wives, daughters, or other family members frequented a place such as this," Shacklebolt rationalized, emphasizing the need to keep this above the board, yet discreet.

"Point taken," Moody acquiesced. "Fine, the questions are done with, but we still need to look around and make sure you aren't hiding anything around here."

Half an hour later, Moody was still not satisfied, but he had not turned up anything incriminating against Severus. The grizzled Auror did discover Severus' collection of masks. Upon grilling Severus on their purpose, he found more fodder in which to taunt the former spy for the Order, remarking that no woman would want to shag a man with a face like Severus'. The senior Auror went on to question the Potions master while he was still under the influence of Veritaserum about every pot, knife, utensil and the worn cutting board he used to prepare his own meals with. Once Severus had blabbered in detail about the variety of vegetables, fruits, breads, culinary herbs, and hunks of meats he had cut, sliced, diced, minced and julienned, Moody went on to other parts of the flat, seeming irritated he had not caught Severus in a confession about brewing Potions on the sly. A thorough examination of the study for damning evidence that Severus was still a practicing dark wizard turned up nothing. The rest of the flat yielded nothing of interest either. Finally, Moody performed a Priori Incantatem on Severus’ wand only to find the usual limited litany of spells and charms that were allowed to a wizard of his standing.

"Fine!" Moody shouted. "But don't think I won’t be keeping a close eye on you. You should feel lucky you're not in Azkaban with the rest of your twisted kind, like you truly deserve."
"Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage, nor Dementors needed to rob one's soul," Severus retorted, feeling the effect of the truth serum waning. Though he lived in a light and spacious flat and not in a dank cell, it was still his own prison of the Ministry's making.

Shacklebolt interrupted the conversation. "Thank you for being cooperative, Severus. This will reflect well on your record. So will the fact that everything here was in order."

Severus gave a brief nod of acknowledgment to the younger Auror. "Please don't be offended if I don't walk you out."

Moody harrumphed and left quickly, followed by Shacklebolt, who gave Severus a knowing look that this would be discussed at his next parole meeting.

Once the two Aurors were gone, Severus collapsed into a chair feeling so entirely exhausted that he was tempted to take a nap before heading off to work, but was so offended and indignant over what he had gone through for the past hour that he knew he would not sleep.

A quick sweep of his wand over his flat to make sure Moody had not left any spying devices behind and Severus was finally able to relax.

"Work is the best thing to keep my mind busy," he said out loud to himself before heading out the door.

As he passed by a cluster of junior Aurors hanging out in front of his building, he noticed how their eyes followed him, though he had the hood of his cloak raised, obscuring his face in shadows of the midday sun. With some amusement, he could tell he was being trailed by one of the young Aurors, no doubt instructed to follow him, as his clopping, clumsy feet gave him away, echoing down the narrow alleyways as Severus made his way towards work.

Deciding he had enough of this little game of cat and mouse, he headed into the Twenty-Four Blackbird Bakery and went right up to one of the witches behind the counter.

"Excuse me, but it's a bit of an emergency. May I use your Floo? You can add the cost of your troubles to Miss Lavender Brown's weekly tab." Before the witch could agree or protest, Severus made his way behind the counter. He noted the little Auror was still waiting outside, thinking that he could continue following Severus once the cloaked man had made his purchase.
"Lovely Lavender's Headquarters," Severus announced quietly so the witch who still stood in shock at Severus' brazen imposition couldn't hear.

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A tapping noise woke Hermione from her restless sleep. Shielding her eyes from the afternoon sun streaming in through the windows, she saw Hedwig perched on the windowsill outside her bedroom.

Flopping back down on the bed, she reached over for her wand and spelled the window open. The snowy owl walked across the window threshold before taking short wing to Hermione's bedside table.

Still bleary-eyed, it took a few tries before she successfully removed the letter from the bird's leg then croaked, "Thanks, Hedwig."

The bird didn't bother sticking around for a treat and took wing straight from the table, out the window and into the hazy summer sky. The bedside table rattled and wobbled a bit before settling, a few knickknacks and items being knocked over from the bird's effort to take flight.

Hermione rubbed her eyes so they could focus before reading the note.

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Dear Hermione,

I can't tell you how relieved Harry and I were to know that you are all right. From Harry's owl during lunch, it sounds like you could use some company.

We are not taking no for an answer. Harry and I will be over tonight at about six o'clock. Don't bother cooking, I'll take care of that.

See you tonight.

Ginny
Groaning from exhaustion and the insistence of her friends, the weary witch rolled over and went back to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 21 A/N: I know, I know, Rowling posted around May 2005 info on Veritaserum, but that came out after I already posted chapter 21 in April 2005. Oh well. If we all changed out fanfiction after each book or tidbit of information that came out after it was written, when canon was still open, there would be a ton of fanfiction what would need rewriting.

Crimini mushrooms are noted for a high content of niacin, a nutrient that helps with circulation, energy production, and other metabolic functions.

"Beam of the Red Oak" seemed like a very alchemy-like phrase for a potion to give a man a big, hard erection, based on the notes from the web site used as reference for Cucurbite from the previous chapter: "e.g. the alchemists' use of "Athanor" and "Cucurbite" as code words for the penis and vagina, or "Blood of the Red Lion" for semen and "Gluten of the White Eagle" for menstrual blood (though a few think, perhaps wrongly, that this particular phrase means female sexual fluids instead)."

Catus, Tilia and Cornel Tree for potion ingredient uses are taken from the symbolic meaning of flowers from the web site:

I've been itching to use that phrase "chancred whore" from the movie/play "The Lion In Winter." Chancre is the primary sore of syphilis and occurs at the site of entry of the infection. This lesion is also known as a hard, Hunterian or true chancre.

"Stone walls do not a prison make, Nor iron bars a cage, Minds innocent and quiet take That for an hermitage." From To Althea, from Prison (IV) by Richard Lovelace.

Three cheers for my fabulous betas, Siren and Horserider.
"Catch Me If I Fall" or "In Vino Veritas"

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Ron talk, and she gives him an ultimatum. Severus considers making Hasenpfeffer.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Two
"Catch Me If I Fall" or "In Vino Veritas"

Disclaimer: See Jo K. Rowling write about Harry Potter. Write Jo, write. See the bevy of lawyers protect Jo's intellectual property. Protect lawyers, protect. See Betz write Harry Potter fan fiction based on Jo's characters and concepts. Write Betz, write. See Betz disclaim any ownership over Jo's intellectual property. Disclaim Betz, disclaim. See Betz hope the lawyers are satisfied by her disclaimers. Hope Betz, hope.

 Severus stepped into the lobby of Lovely Lavender's headquarters, robes billowing. With a sneer set firmly upon his face and seething hot rage bubbling beneath his icy exterior, he strode through the building.

The few house-elves that served as receptionists at the front desk squeaked and ducked for cover upon seeing the Potions master in an exceptionally foul mood.

Instead of taking the lift up the four flights to Miss Brown's office, he took the stairs, two and three steps at a time with his long legs; the exercise giving him the chance to consume a small amount of the adrenaline fueled anger that coursed through his body. By the time Severus entered her office without so much as a knock, he did feel a bit more collected.

Draco was already there, having just finished his recounting of his forced interrogation.

"Did they find anything out?" Severus asked Draco with no preamble.
The younger wizard shook his head; his mouth was set in a thin line.

"Good," Severus said sharply. "They didn't find anything of interest with me, though I did have to lose some snot nosed Auror who tailed me on the way out of the building."

Draco growled. "Same here."

"I think, gentlemen, that it would be best if you kept all your business work here from now on. I don't need to get dragged into a Ministry inquiry as to why I have two ex-Death Eaters working for me in a non-sanctioned capacity," Lavender warned them with apparent irritation.

"Severus," Lavender continued, "all your work and materials that Marf brought here from your study are in a new room I had the house-elves set up for you. I ask that all owls for Sebastian Delgado are sent here from now on as well."

The older wizard nodded in agreement. "Well, let's get to work," Severus barked.

"I think you'll want to see the *Daily Prophet* first," Draco said carefully, edging a copy of the newspaper along Lavender's desk towards his colleague.

Severus scanned the newspaper reading the account of the attack, he face growing grimmer with each paragraph. "Oh, bloody fucking hell!" he exclaimed.

"Tell me," Lavender said through gritted teeth.

"Is there going to be a problem with Mrs. Weasley?" Draco asked, keeping his question as vague as possible.

His face scrunched up in aggravation, Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. With the death of Hermione's co-worker, on top of the fact she was in such fragile shape over the state of her miserable marriage, he wondered what sort of condition she could be in at the moment.
Severus bit down on the inside corner of mouth. It was a nervous habit that no one could notice. "Well, it's not like I can just pop up on her doorstep and say, 'Hey, it's your gigolo, mind if I come in and make you a spot of tea for your troubles?' I think not!"

"No… but you could send her an owl," Lavender sing-songed sweetly, her mood suddenly lifted.

She began smiling for the first time that morning before tipping back in her chair, setting it to spin round and round, her arms waving in the air as if conducting an invisible orchestra. "Dear Hermione… I am so very sorry to hear about the loss of your co-worker. I read the paper this morning and thought of you, remembering you telling me about your work. I do hope you are all right, even though your name was not mentioned in the Daily Prophet as one of the many injured. I do hope this letter finds you well. I look forward with anticipation to our next meeting… No, scratch that… Next Thursday evening. Kindest regards…” Lavender stopped her chair to look at older wizard. "What was the name she gave you again?"

"She let me pick the name," Severus replied with his arms folded in front of his chest looking petulant, but slightly relieved by Miss Brown's idea.

"And?"

"Calleo."

Draco snorted.

"Think that name's funny, do you?" Severus bristled at Draco's reaction. "My mother almost named me that." He frowned, daring the blond wizard to laugh at his mother.

"Sorry," Draco said with no remorse, "You'll always be Severus to me. Anything else would just not be… you."

Ignoring Draco's non-apology, Severus thought out loud. "Yes, the idea does have some merit. It will make her think I actually care for her and will help gain her trust."

He silently realized that it would be another way of dropping a subtle hint about his identity. The young witch would probably remember the handwriting of her old Potions teacher.
"Good. I think it's time we get to work now," Lavender said firmly. "Severus, I'll show you where your new office is."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The first thing Hermione saw when her eyes suddenly snapped open was a bright ray of sunshine streaming into the bedroom. It lit up the dust motes as they lazily swirled in the air, finding convection currents in which to ride and dance their random paths across her field of vision. Hypnotized by the inanimate ballet performed for her alone, she didn't notice the far off sounds of someone in the kitchen.

The sound of a glass shattering on the tile floor in said kitchen rousted the witch from her trance.

"Bloody hell." She could hear Ron swear in the distance.

Hermione closed her eyes and winced. 'Just get it done and over with,' she tried to convince herself.

Summoning some of that famous Gryffindor courage that she was beginning to think she was no longer in possession of, Mrs. Weasley rose from the bed. A quick glance in the mirror reminded her that she had fallen asleep in her clothes and she looked quite pitifully rumpled and bedraggled. A major case of bed-head added to her woeful look.

A trip to the loo confirmed that her monthly cycle had begun while she was asleep. Hermione gave a quick and silent prayer of thanks that she was not pregnant, as contraceptive potions had a very small margin of failure, slightly less than women who used The Pill correctly. Grabbing one of her weekly Potion vials, she downed it like all good witches did on the first day of their cycle and did so once a week, every week. Looking at her bathroom cabinet supplies, she added contraceptive potions to her mental list of things to pick up at the apothecary that weekend.

Reaching for her jar of Lovely Lavender's Puffy Poof Eye Crème, she noted there was only enough left for one more application. Once the jar was empty, she placed it in the glass-recycling basket. The basket was beginning to look quite full and would need to be brought in to the apothecary for recycling.

It amazed Hermione when she thought about it, but most of the jar and vials used for potions were routinely recycled as the prospect of having new glass containers blown and manufactured would eventually make the price of potions fairly costly. The wizarding world also tended to frown on waste. Wizarding glass manufacturers kept making new vials, jars and bottles, but most everyone reused the containers for other things or their own homemade potions and concoctions. There were
standard sizes, colors and shapes, but for the most part, people looked at the label more than the container itself when making purchases.

'Aunt Christina would have a cow if she had to live in my world,' she thought briefly. Hermione's aunt was a vice president of a large international advertising and marketing agency. During Christmas dinners the woman would go on at length about some big launch of a product she was in charge of and how much work was done in the product design and customer research phase.

Hermione flushed the toilet knowing the sound would alert her husband that she was awake.

Walking through the flat, she found Ron in the kitchen casting a Reparo on the glass she heard shatter earlier. She studied his profile for a moment and noticed the slightly grim set of his mouth and the way his clothes hung on his frame.

'At least he looks like he's been eating.' Leaning against the door jam, she finally said, "Hi."

Ron's head snapped to look at her once he realized she was there. His expression turned from surprise to uncomfortable acknowledgment. "Hi."

Both of them looked at each other awkwardly before averting their gazes to other parts of the kitchen. Neither could look at the other at the moment. Hermione studied the crown molding, finally noticing it was in need of a good cleaning, as a thick layer of grime had begun to form, giving the glossy painted strip of wood a dull and yellowish cast.

After shifting from one foot to the other, Hermione finally walked into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of juice to quench her parched throat that had begun to constrict once she had laid eyes on Ron.

She seated herself at the table, silently waiting for Ron to make the first move. In chess Ron always preferred to play black so he could see which move his opponent made first. The nervous witch wondered if he was using the same tactic, waiting to see what she said first before opening his mouth for once.

The silence stretched between them like a thread of spider's silk. At some point the tension would be too great and it would break.
Despite how much she had dreaded this moment for the past week, Hermione felt rather calm. She wondered if it was just the fact she had decided that morning to no longer feel anything and this numbness allowed her to approach the situation with an eerie remoteness she didn’t think possible. No matter the reason and however much she felt emotionally disconnected, Hermione blinked first.

"Are you still playing first string Keeper?" It was a safe question to break the ice that spanned between them.

"Yeah," Ron answered, his voice tight and stilted.

Out of the corner of her eye Hermione saw him stand stiffly with his back to her, his hands braced against the edge of the chipped tile counter. She sat with her back to him as she sipped her juice once more, staring out the kitchen window.

Curious as to how long Ron would be first string, Hermione asked, "How much longer will Randall be on leave?"

"Dunno."

She could tell Ron was still really upset, now that the harrowing events of last night had faded and he was certain his wife was safe. The memories of last Saturday night rose between them and choked the air they breathed. Hermione was still upset too, but no longer seemed to care. Her newfound dispassionate nature forged ahead, apathetic and indifferent to the consequences of whatever might be said.

'Alright, let's get this over with.' She inhaled before speaking. "Well?"

"Well what?" Ron shot back tersely.

"Well, you still sound upset." Hermione glanced over her shoulder and saw Pigwidgeon back on his perch. "Have you come back to apologize, expect me to apologize, or are we going to talk about this and try and decide who's at fault for this argument? Or we could do what we always do and say we're both at fault, then kiss and make-up while pretending that we can fuck away the problem and try to forget the real reason why we fight so much."

If Hermione had not been so devoid of emotion at that moment, she would have been stunned by
her own words. Even to herself, she sounded cold and callous, almost calculating.

Hermione turned her head to look at her husband. Ron stood there, his mouth agape, ogling at her like some bizarre and grotesque creature. For some strange reason, it gave her peace to not feel any shame from her words.

Tired of tiptoeing around the growing discord between them and pretending it didn't exist, Hermione blithely stated, "I can see our marriage going one of two ways, Ron. Either we can get a divorce or we can go into counseling. Which is it going to be?"

"Wait! What? Divorce? You must be in shock to even suggest a thing like that, 'Mione!' Ron could be right, she could be in shock, which was why she couldn't feel a thing, either emotionally or physically. "I think you're tired and you're talking nonsense. Sure we have a few rocky spots, but nothing that we couldn't work out ourselves."

"So you think this marriage is salvageable?" Normally by this point she would be screaming at Ron, but she just couldn't find the energy to get upset.

Ron sputtered, "Wh--, well YES! Don't you?"

Hermione wasn't sure. Yes, the idea of being alone earlier in the week frightened her, but now she could not think of any reason why she should be scared. There were lots of divorced young women in the Muggle world making it on their own with crappy dead-end jobs all the time. Why couldn't she? She was a Muggle-born after all. It didn't seem like such an adverse idea, really. But one thought came back to her time and time again. Did she really want to divorce Ron? Maybe their relationship just had to come to a point like this before both parties were willing to change in order to make it work.

The part of Hermione that was raised to never quit or give up demanded she earnestly try and make her marriage work. The voice of her mother reminding her that marriage is not all roses came to the forefront of her mind along with a myriad of other issues. Divorce was a final step to take when all avenues had been exhausted and so far neither of them had really tried to work things out.

As she contemplated silently, Ron began to get nervous. He worried that his wife might disagree and refute him claiming there was nothing left between them worth saving. Kneeling next to Hermione, Ron took her hands in his and looked up into her eyes while searching for some glimmer of emotion on her stoically blank face, studying her face for an answer before she gave it.
Hermione sat there, looking into his eyes. She could feel no passion for him. But didn't most marriages after a while lose that elusive and fleeting sizzle and spark between two people before settling into a warm glow of contentment? Could she be content with Ron? She wasn't sure any more, but was willing at that moment to try and learn if she could be satisfied with the well-worn friendship she had developed with her husband, despite its periodic disappointments.

"I guess so, Ron."

Gathering his wife into his arms, Ron hugged her fiercely. "Oh 'Mione. I shouldn't have been away for so long. I should never have made you doubt us," Ron began rambling into her hair.

She could only sit there limply, feeling his arms crushing her to his chest. She did nothing but surrender to the suffocating feeling that came with resignation and acceptance.

After a while, Ron released Hermione from his embrace.

Checking the clock, Hermione casually mentioned that Harry and Ginny were coming over at six and his sister offered to cook.

Ron's face instantly brightened. "That'll be great. Just the four of us for dinner. Why don't you go take a shower and I'll get everything ready."

Hermione was grateful for his sweet and thoughtful gesture. Then she thought about how long it would be before they both slipped into old habits and he took her for granted once more while she became even more bitter and cynical about their relationship.

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The conversation she had with Ron before Harry and Ginny showed up played over and over in her mind.

"We don't need counseling, 'Mione. That's for nutters and hopeless cases.' His voice droned in her head like a broken record. 'I will not go and have my private thoughts analyzed for faults by someone who doesn't even know us.' Hermione poked at her steak with her fork while his voice kept coming unbidden in her mind. 'Counselors are for Muggles, not for people like us. Besides, what would my family say if they found out? I don't want my mother going on about how she has failed as a parent if her son has to go see some Muggle mind healer to fix his marriage. You know how most other wizards think about things like that.'
Finally sick of stewing over the argument they’d had earlier, Hermione lifted her head and announced to Harry and Ginny, "I want to go into marriage counseling, but Ron seems to think it's not a good idea. What do you two think about it?" Lifting her glass up to her lips, Hermione took a long sip and imagined the critique Calleo would give towards this light and fruity red wine Ginny had brought over.

The air was thick with tension and uncertainty. Hermione had never made mention to Ron or anyone else that Harry and Ginny were both going to a Muggle marriage counselor. The Potters knew she would keep their confidence, as all three were aware of what the wizarding world thought of psychiatrists, especially Muggle ones, on a whole. It was this attitude that had prevented Ginny from getting the proper help she needed after the Chamber of Secrets and caused her deep emotional scar years later.

Harry spoke first. "If you two are having problems, then I think it's a great idea."

"But—" Ron protested.

"Yes," Ginny agreed, interrupting her brother. "If you both are having problems, then it can definitely help to have an objective third person to look at what's wrong and help you both solve your issues."

Ron was turning a deep red from embarrassment that Hermione mentioned the seemingly taboo subject in front of Harry and his sister, and from indignation that they would agree with Hermione so quickly.

"But, but, but..." Ron stammered trying to find a cohesive thought. "It's no one's business what happens between us, but 'Mione and me! Besides, what do these Muggle counselors know about marriage? Hermione and I are doing just fine! We don't need counseling."

"Which is why she's been sitting alone in this apartment for most the week after you took off after that fight!" Harry thundered at his friend. He stood suddenly, throwing down his napkin in disgust. "What's so wrong with seeing a Muggle over something like this?"

"You just don't know if they know what they are doing or not!" Ron bellowed back.

"What? Like being a wizard makes you an instant expert? Case and point, Gilderoy Lockhart," Harry shot back. "Muggles do have some clue as to what they are doing, even though you may not
understand the process."

"Has Hermione told you about her idea to go to a marriage counselor so you could talk me into it?" the redheaded wizard asked in accusatory tones.

"No! Harry and I are in marriage counseling," Ginny replied hotly.

There. It was out there now, and Hermione had kept her mouth shut about it leaving it to Harry and Ginny to divulge that little bit of information.

"What?!?" Ron shrieked. "What's so wrong between you two that you need someone else to tell you how to run your marriage?"

"Harry and I have been having problems for a while," the younger witch admitted reluctantly. "We didn’t want to tell you because you would either accuse Harry of being a bad husband to your little sister and threaten him with bodily harm, then go on and tell all of our brothers, who would then take turns hexing him. Not to mention the lecture Mum would give Harry and me, as she and the rest of them seem to share your opinion on Muggle mental health treatment. Or you would have blamed me for being a bad wife to your best friend and then I'd still get the lecture from Mum. No thank you! So now that you know, I want you to promise not to tell."

"So you go off and have some, some, some stranger tell you that Harry is a bad husband and you’re a bad wife?"

"No, it's not like that, Ron. You don’t even know how it works, so why are you inventing things? Ginny and I go once a week," the raven-haired wizard explained. "We meet with a very nice Muggle marriage counselor who has had proper training in this field, years of training in fact. He's been helping us deal with some… things. It's not an instant cure, but he is helping us."

"What sort of things," Ron asked menacingly, thinking Harry was treating his little sister poorly, just as Ginny had suspected he would.

"Harry and I have our own set of problems and it's none of your business, anymore than us knowing why you left Hermione last Saturday night and have been gone until… well, I know as of Wednesday you still weren't back!" Ginny matched her brother’s tone.
Ron turned an angry eye on his wife. "So you have been painting me as the villain to Harry and Ginny, have you?"

Hermione sat there with the now familiar hollow feeling inside of her giving her a perception of a protective shell over her. Her husband's angry looks or words could not wound her as he slung them at her, nor could his worsening mood perturb her. It was almost like one of those out of body experiences one has during a dream, watching it unfold like a play and just sitting back and observing it all from a distance. Hermione drained her glass of wine and poured herself another.

"No," Ginny answered for the brunette witch. "I met her for lunch Wednesday. I asked her a question about you and if you were just thrilled at playing first string and she said she didn't know. She mentioned that you had a fight last Saturday and that you took off and she hadn't seen you up to that point. She didn't say you were the one to blame or if it was anyone's fault, just that you fought."

"Well, she's the one who started the fight," Ron pouted, pointing a recriminating finger at his wife.

Normally Hermione would have jumped into the fray, if anything but to defend herself, but at the moment, she couldn't care less if Ron had accused her of an orgiastic gang-bang featuring every Quiditch player on the Falmouth Falcons' team, including the coach and mascot. She sat there silently and waited to see what would happen next while sipping her wine. As long as everyone was jumping up and shouting, why should she bother to join in? There was more than enough yelling going on for four people.

"I don't care who started it or how it ended. Look at her! LOOK AT HER!" Harry's voice hardened as he swept his hand in Hermione's direction. "She looks like hell, Ron. Haven't you noticed how thin she is? Obviously she's not eating! Don't you notice these things? She has dark circles under her eyes, and that was before some Death Eater decided to go on a rampage and kill her co-worker. You're lucky she's not dead too! She's sitting here, obviously still in some state of shock, as she hasn't said hardly one word since you started screaming and accusing her. That's not the Hermione I know. And all you care about is who gets the proper blame on whose fault it was for the fight that caused you to up and leave your wife for... how long? When did you come back? Wednesday night? Last night?" Harry asked, noticing how Ron was now averting his eyes. "Last night?!?"

Ron looked guiltily at Harry and then to Hermione, who continued to sit there glassy eyed while drinking her wine.

"Last night?" Harry asked incredulously. "It took until you found out your wife barely missed getting hexed by some Death Eater madman for you to haul your arse home? And just where were you the whole time you were gone?"
That was the one question Hermione had made a point not to ask, and would not ask it now.

Ron's eyes darted nervously from Harry to Ginny while not looking at his wife. "I was at a friend's."

"It doesn't matter," Hermione drawled lazily with a slight slur. She was feeling even more numb than at the beginning of the fight, due in no small part to the fact that she had skipped breakfast, slept through lunch and had barely touched her dinner, and was finishing her third glass of wine. "We're going into counseling, the matter is closed."

She didn't want to know where Ron had been for the past week. Hermione had promised herself that she would curb her curiosity, as it had brought her much despair recently, and forcing the truth from Ron as to where he had been might wind up shattering even more illusions, illusions that possibly propped up her whole life.

Ron threw her an equally surprised and furious look, tossing his hands into the air. "What?!? I never agreed--"

Hermione fixed him with a quelling glare of her own, finding some of her courage from the wine. "It's either counseling or divorce."

Ginny gasped and Harry fell back into his chair, flummoxed by the casual attitude of Hermione's ultimatum.

"Pick, Ron," his wife challenged him. "What shall it be? Keeping it a secret that we go to counseling from the rest of your family, or your whole family learning that we're getting a divorce because you don't want to make an effort to work things out?"

It was the biggest bluff of Hermione's life, but she was largely counting on the looming threat of Molly Weasley making her husband's life hell that made her throw such a choice on the table. Earlier, Ron had displayed such an aversion to the idea of divorce she was certain he would pick counseling over ending their marriage in a heartbeat.

Before Ron answered, Hermione tipped up her glass to finish off the last bit of her wine. As the last of the liquid slid down her throat, she felt even more lightheaded and dizzy.
The next sound she heard was the sound of shattering glass as Hermione felt her body floating with no direction of up or down.

"Hermione!"

She couldn't tell who called out her name, as it sounded very fuzzy and distant. When she finally cracked open one eye, she saw the world had suddenly turned sideways and Ron was kneeling in front of her, regarding her with great concern while Harry kneeled behind him. A flash of long red hair that must have belonged to Ginny flitted about as Hermione tried to focus on her husband's face.

'Oh, I must have passed out,' Hermione calmly surmised, not feeling her legs entangled with the chair's. 'Well, this will certainly make Ron feel so guilty he'll agree to anything that I ask. Harry and Ginny will certainly be in my corner now that they've seen how Ron has been neglecting his wife.'

Just before she blacked out, Hermione amusedly realized: 'My, that was an awfully Slytherin thing of me to think.'

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Friday nights were rather predictable, and in that regard, it made them a bit tiresome for Severus. Mrs. Nettleton would show up at eight o'clock sharp. The witch would wear a floor length cloak of some dark, rich color and her hood pulled up with nothing on underneath except for some frilly scraps of satiny fabric. Just as she stepped into his flat, Severus would throw her up against the wall and rip off the very expensive silk lingerie her husband paid for, but never saw. Mrs. Nettleton would pretend to fight him, but would seemingly succumb to his manly forcefulness before hitching her leg up around his waist as he shoved his cock into her. The more he knocked her head against the wall as he savagely thrust into her, the more she liked it. A few forceful tweaks of her nipples and deep guttural growls from him and she would come, shrilly squeaking and sounding like a rabbit being slaughtered. The sound was so bothersome, Severus once shoved his hand over her mouth to quiet the woman, and it wound up arousing her even more, making her screech louder. There were times he contemplated buying a ball-gag just for her and wondered if he could get it in place with one hand while fumbling with his trousers with the other as he freed himself. She always liked the spontaneous illusion of him wearing trousers as it made her feel like a woman being properly ravished in the heat of the moment. If the Potions master had known of a fabulous Muggle invention called duct tape, he might have bought a roll just for her mouth.
As he grunted and finished spilling the last of his semen into his client, Mrs. Nettleton gave one last high-pitched whinging shriek. Severus was sorely tempted to just drop her right there and let her land arse first.

Severus put himself back together and straightened his mask for a final adjustment. He saw the witch pick up her torn bit of silk, shoving them in a pocket of her cloak. From another pocket, she pulled out a simple dress and trotted off nude to his bathroom to rinse off and get dressed.

By the time she emerged from Severus' bathroom looking well groomed and composed, he had wine, a vial of the usual combination post coitus contraceptive-venereal disease eradicating potion, and a deaf ear ready for her weekly rant.

"You'll never believe the little tart my husband is shagging this week!" the middle aged witch began, her voice filled with umbrage.

Half-listening, Severus replied, "Who?" He was already bored to tears.

"My son's old girlfriend! And she's two years younger than my son to boot. Can you believe that?" she asked, not even bothering to wait for his response before she continued railing. "They were spotted in Le Maison Chaud having a little candlelit dinner while they played footsies under the table. When he came home I asked him about it, as my friend Maude had owled me earlier in the evening that she spotted them there. Well, he claimed he was giving the girl career guidance and that she approached him for dinner so she could ask him for some wisdom on the matter. Wisdom, my arse! More like he banged some advice into her empty little head and between her legs. Honestly!"

Mrs. Nettleton continued on for quite a while as Severus pretended to listen. The woman's problems were of nothing of great importance or great tragedy. Mr. Nettleton was a very rich and powerful wizard who owned a broom manufacturing company that was a major competitor against the company that built the Firebolt. In addition, Mr. Nettleton owned the Biggonville Bombers in Luxembourg and frequently traveled to that country. Being a rich and powerful wizard, plus owning a Quidditch team, made him a very popular man, especially with many society witches, whom he took to his bed in droves.

After years of suffering the humiliating and not-so-private dalliances of her husband, Mrs. Nettleton began seeing Severus over a year ago as a way of seeking revenge against her husband. The only reason Severus continued to keep her as a client was the fact that she paid him very, very well. She had told him from the beginning that she was going to compile a Pensieve of their interludes and present it to her husband as a gift for his sixtieth birthday, which would be in another
year. Mr. Nettleton had been raised under the old-fashioned upper society morals of the husband playing in greener pastures with younger witches, while the wife stayed dutifully and faithfully at home. Mrs. Nettleton was going to destroy that image with her gift to him for all the pain he had caused her over the years.

Remembering that he needed to continue the attrition of his client list, and furtively thinking upon how he could get this woman off his Friday night schedule, Severus came upon an idea that would serve both him and Mrs. Nettleton.

As she paused mid-rant, Severus interrupted her. "This young chit your husband is seeing. How old is she?"

"About twenty."

"Is she pretty?" Severus asked suggestively.

"Of course she's pretty. My husband wouldn't be shagging her if she wasn't!" Mrs. Nettleton replied brusquely.

Severus let a devious smile spread slowly across the lower part of his face that was showing. "Yes, but do you think she is pretty?"

"Just what are you getting at?" Her curiosity was obviously peaked.

"Are you up for a threesome? Something to add to your Pensieve, perhaps. You, the young girl and another young man in a very… intimate situation." He let the dawning realization of his statement sink in before he added. "I think it's time you began varying you experiences. Your dallying around with just one paramour is nothing to a man like your husband. But if you were to have several dozen or more men to add to your Pensieve for your husband to witness, possibly two or more at a time, that would be something quite memorable. And if you include the fact that you bedded a girl that he himself has had, possibly enjoying herself more in your arms and another younger man's arms, that would be a great injury to his ego."

"Are you the younger man in this little scenario?" she asked coyly.

"No, I have someone else in mind," Severus said, thinking Blaise Zabini one floor up would fit the
Zabini was handsome, in his mid-twenties, and the peak of manly physical perfection. Visions of Mrs. Nettleton banging a wizard like that would surely unsettle her husband. Though Severus was not adverse to a ménage en trois involving a second witch, he was adverse to the idea of having to fuck Mrs. Nettleton for any longer than was necessary, regardless of the hundreds of Galleons he received from each of her visits.

"I will speak with Miss Brown regarding my recommendation for you to see another wizard under her employ to fulfill your needs. He is open to many avenues of pleasure that I am not." 'Namely, being submissive or having a threesome with another wizard.' "I think you will be most pleased."

Mrs. Nettleton's eyes danced with delight at the possibilities at hand. Though she was a rather sheltered creature when Severus first started meeting with her, she soon came out of her sexually repressed shell, though she had seemed reluctant to try new things. She preferred the routine they had been in for the past several months.

"Then I guess I won't be seeing you after this week. If I'm going to give my husband the heart attack that I hope my Pensieve will give him, I suppose I should add a little variety starting as soon as possible." Mrs. Nettleton looked rather smug, and then gave Severus a playful sideways glance. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were a Slytherin."

Hermione woke up in bed with Ginny pressing a cool face flannel to her forehead.

"You gave us quite a scare," the redhead said with great motherly concern.

"Sorry," Hermione hoarsely whispered.

A glass of water found it's way to Hermione's lips and she drank it.

"Slowly," Ginny warned her.

Hermione sputtered, choking on the water that wetted her parched throat.
"I suppose that wasn't very wise of me to drink when I skipped breakfast and lunch," the prone witch admitted with embarrassment as the room continued to spin.

Ginny sighed deeply. She looked at Hermione with a penetrating stare. "Is there anything else besides problems with Ron you want to tell me about? I promise not to say a word to Ron," the younger witch said with serious intent.

For a moment, Hermione wondered if Ginny somehow knew about her visits with Calleo. Hoping her cheeks were not flushed, she schooled her features as best she could, considering her inebriated state. Looking Ginny directly in the eye, she said vaguely and believably, "Nothing you don't already know about." Then she added, "Lousy marriage, Marge's death, and a shitty job."

Pursing her lips momentarily, Ginny nodded, accepting her answer. "Listen," Ginny said, her tone a little lighter, "a week from tomorrow, I have a reservation for a day at the spa. Want to join me? My treat. You look like you could use a bit of spoiling and pampering."

"I suppose I could. I'll ask Ron if it's okay if I skip—"

Ginny interrupted her with a wave of her hand. "I've already mentioned it to him. He seems to think a day at the spa might put some pink back in your cheeks. It's not like you skip his games all the time. It's just one game."

Hermione nodded, still feeling a tad guilty for missing one of Ron's games, though if Ron agreed with Ginny, it must have meant something. Every time Ron played within the United Kingdom, Hermione always attended the match just like all the other Quidditch wives.

"Here, drink these," Ginny ordered, putting two vials in Hermione's hand.

"What are they?" Hermione's brow furrowed.

"One is a nutrient rich restorative potion, as it looks like you haven't been eating properly. The other is a combination analgesic, muscle relaxant and very mild sleep sedative. Ron says you didn't sleep last night and I can't imagine you slept much during the day." The look of maternal worry returned to Ginny's face.

Hermione was briefly reminded of Madam Pomfrey hovering over her during her many trips to the
Hogwarts infirmary. A long forgotten question came to the forefront of Hermione's mind.

"Ginny?"

"Hmmm?"

"Why did you stop your studies to become a healer?" Hermione instantly regretted asking the question, though she'd always longed to hear Ginny's answer.

The younger witch's mouth was set in a tight frown. Turning her face away from Hermione, she replied, "Do you really want to know?"

There was a long pause before Hermione whispered, "Yes."

"I lost interest in a lot of things right after your wedding," Ginny said, her voice filled with melancholy. "I guess you could say I was too depressed to focus on schooling and I decided to take a term out before I started my formal studies. When I was going to start back up in the spring, all that wedding nonsense with Harry just got in the way. And by the next fall term, I guess I sort of gave up on a lot of dreams."

"I think I understand." The older witch did know what it was like to make reluctant compromises, especially after Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Vector died during the war and no one else was willing to take her as an apprentice. "I'm sorry." Hermione placed her hand on Ginny's, seeing the edge of the younger woman's cheek glistening with tears.

"So am I," Ginny replied before sniffing and wiping away her tears.

"Please take these and sleep," Ginny urged her. "Ron said he has to leave early tomorrow to catch the Portkey to a game in Italy, so I'll swing by late in the morning after he’s left to check up on you. All right?" Ginny seemed to be back into her nurturing protective mode once more.

Hermione nodded her head and downed the two potions before settling back under the covers for a long, well-deserved rest.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 22 A/N: In Vino Veritas: In wine there is truth. This is a double titled chapter, much in the same fashion Gilbert & Sullivan would double title their operettas, such as “Pirates of Penzance – or – Slave to Duty.”

I just had to have a flashback of Ron snickering at Draco's name from PS/SS.

If you want to hear what a rabbit in distress sounds like, like when Mrs. Nettleton is having an orgasm, go to either the ATDLHEA Tumblr page here: http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/post/130343278285/and-they-didnt-live-happily-ever-after-chapter, or to the original source at Varmint Al's: http://www.varmintal.com/ahunt.htm#Calling Scroll down to the Cottontail Distress Call mp3 file section and have a listen. Gee, what kind of author offers sound effects with their fics? One that wants to make you laugh your ass off when hearing that sound and imagining Severus wanting to Spellotape the woman's mouth shut. Go ahead and read that section one more time with the sound effects. Now imagine Mrs. Nettleton screaming just like that and Severus trying to not lose an erection over that noise… you can almost see him gritting his teeth and rolling his eyes. Oh God, just the thought of that makes me laugh.

Please give some thanks to Siren and Horserider, who really do improve the quality of this fic through their wonderful beta efforts.

B/N: All give Betz great thanks for sharing her talent. I’m diggin’ the birthday gift Mr. Nettleton is going to get. At the end of the story, you should give us a closing on that, Betz. :-) Siren
Severus awoke in a decent mood. He now had three nights a week to himself. For the time being, he would keep his schedule filled four nights a week, so that if one client decided to take a week off, he could still meet his contractual minimum of three without Miss Brown bringing in anyone new or one of his spare clients into rotation.

Upon entering his study, he mood turned somewhat sour. All his correspondences under his nom de guerre were in his new office at Lovely Lavender's headquarters. Realizing it was Saturday, he pulled out a scrap of parchment, some ink and quill to begin drawing up a shopping list for Marf, as today was the weekly Farmer's Market in Diagon Alley.

As he sipped his tea and nibbled on toast slathered with his own strawberry preserves, Severus began planning his meals for the week. Severus remembered a note that Draco had sent him last night that required him to alter some of the quantities on the list. He just hoped Marf could get to the Farmer's Market before all the good duck had been snapped up and he would have to send the creature to Abattoir and Haunches. He was hoping to begin preparing the duck confit for the cassoulet tomorrow.
Once the list was completed, he handed it to Marf. Severus sighed. He would be a little sad to leave behind a house-elf that he had trained to all his peculiarities, but figured there would be other house-elves that could quickly learn all his idiosyncrasies as Marf had done.

The Potions master dressed for work, as Miss Brown requested that he put a few half days in on the weekend to make up for valuable lost work time during the past few weeks. Both she and Severus knew his time with her was limited and she wanted to make the most it by getting as much help from him as possible for the new line of sex potions before he left for parts unknown to her. As Miss Brown had stated it, this new line would become the cash cow of the Lovely Lavender portfolio of products.

Fortunately, Severus' walk between his residence and the Lovely Lavender Company headquarters was off the beaten track, especially for weekend visitors to Diagon Alley. The tall form of the ex-Death Eater, concealed in his usual hooded black cloak, glided down the narrow alleys still untouched by the morning sun and dressed with summer dew.

No house-elf was there to greet him at the front desk, most probably making use of itself in the manufacturing portion of the warehouse. Reaching for the doorknob to Miss Brown's office, he heard her shriek, followed closely by the sound of a loud crash.

Severus pulled his wand out of his sleeve, prepared for the worst. Throwing open the door and running in, he stopped to see Lavender heave a large, heavy jar of pickled bat ears above her head before launching them at the wall with a scream that would make a Valkyrie proud.

"BASTARD!" she screeched. "Fucking bloody bastard!"

The glass jar shattered and shards flew everywhere. Severus pulled up his cloak to shield himself from the tiny projectiles. When he put his sleeve down, he saw Miss Brown collapsed on the floor sobbing hysterically, curled up in a ball, a letter tightly fisted in her hand. A few pieces of glass had cut her face and arms. Tiny rivulets of blood were trickling down her cheek and forearms.

Confusion over Miss Brown's sudden loss of cool demeanor, the irritation of another hysterical female laying at his feet, and a twinge of sympathy all stirred and mixed within him at the moment. Deciding that he got faster satisfactory results by acting as the compassionate confidant, he crouched down and placed a gentle hand upon her shoulder.

"Are you all right, Miss Brown?" he asked with concern. Severus was truly concerned. Nothing
seemed to shake the unshakable Miss Brown.

Lavender lifted her head off the floor before venomously growling, "Always a Death Eater to royally fuck things up." She paused a beat before softly adding apologetically, "Not you, Severus… Dolohov. Dolohov and Macnair. I have nothing against you. Just those two."

She was about to wipe her snotty nose with the back of her hand and arm when Severus grasped her wrist forcefully, yet carefully. "I think you want to remove some of that glass from your arms before doing that, Miss Brown."

The dark haired wizard led the blood-streaked witch to her chair behind her desk. After removing all of the tiny shards that were embedded in Lavender’s arms, Severus cleaned her wounds and applied a dermal healing paste followed by a scar minimizing ointment he had developed himself for her company. He called Lavender's office-elf, Wonkle, to fetch some tea.

By the time tea arrived, Lavender seemed quite a bit more composed.

"Care to tell me what that was all about?" Severus asked softly.

"There's no need for you to pretend to be the patient and attentive man I know you're not, Severus," she bit out. "So you might as well drop the façade and go back to your usual bastard, misanthropic self and ask me."

Miss Brown rose and stomped over to the fireplace where she threw the crumpled letter still clutching in her uninjured hand into the fire. She watched it burn for a while before turning around and facing Severus.

"Fine," Severus growled, irritated that one of his few sincere attempts at common courtesy was met with such disdain and cynicism. That'll teach me to ever consider being compassionate ever again. "Tell me what in the blazes possessed you to destroy a perfectly good vat of pickled bat ears and…" His eyes scanned the room for the contents of the other jar of ingredients he heard destroyed before entering. "And a very expensive jar of preserved dragon's tongue? If we were still at Hogwarts, I'd subtract two hundred points from Gryffindor for destruction of school property, waste, and unseemly behavior."

Lavender shot him a withering look that had no effect on the master of glares. "Like I said, it's all Dolohov's and Macnair's fault!" she whinged. "Just when things were going along nicely, some
Death Eater has to come along and fuck things up!" Lavender glanced at Severus momentarily. "I never considered you a Death Eater, so my hate in no way applies to you," she added. She wanted to make sure that he understood that none of her anger was directed towards him.

"Well, if it's any consolation, the Aurors led Macnair away yesterday," Severus said, his face cool and impassive. "There's talk that he's going to Azkaban for a Dementor's Kiss after making trouble yesterday during his interrogation. Though, I speculate, that is idyll gossip."

"No, he's going to Azkaban," the witch corrected him. "I decided to terminate his contract. He no longer works for me and he has no desire to live on the streets or adhere to the Ministry's guidelines for acceptable work. He has only one choice left. Macnair is going to Azkaban and get the Dementor's kiss."

Severus wasn't sure whether to be upset at the casualness of her attitude or relieved that Macnair would no longer be at risk of doing something rash, like Dolohov did.

Suddenly angry and unsettled, he asked, "And if you get upset with me, Miss Brown, will you terminate my contract and have me hauled away to that damned island to have my soul sucked out as well?" He rose from his seat to loom over her, doing his best to invoke old fears and respect hinged on his days as her professor.

"My reason for terminating Macnair's contract is personal. It's none of your business," Lavender retorted defiantly.

"Oh, but I think it is my business," Severus insisted. "What's to stop you from calling the Aurors to have them come haul me away? Once my brain has been picked and your new line of sex potions is completed, if I haven't finished getting what I need to escape England, what stops you from turning me in once I've served my usefulness to you?" he hissed menacingly.

He had been betrayed before, by those closest to him on both sides. The first time cost Severus him his soul; the second time his freedom. He needed to know if Miss Brown would throw him to the mercy of the Ministry and if he should arrange new plans shortly.

"Because I don't hate you. I hate Macnair with a passion," Lavender ground out as the tears began to fall.

"And what has Macnair done to you that I could not do to you as well?" Severus asked, demanding
"You weren't there, so you wouldn't know." Her voice was thick and quivering.

"Wouldn't know what, Miss Brown?"

"WHEN HE RAPED PARVATI!" Lavender broke down and sobbed. "The bastard raped her as he Crucio'ed her. She's a permanent resident of St. Mungo's and will never be the same. Every Sunday I go visit her and she just sits there huddled up in a ball, rocking back and forth while mumbling something about the snakes on the ceiling."

Severus’ stomach clenched. There was only one room he knew of where there were snakes painted on the ceiling. He remembered that the dungeons of the Rookwood estate had a very intricate ceiling mural depicting the scene of Salazar Slytherin calling the snakes to him during the building of Hogwarts. Augustus was very proud of the mural as legend of the estate said it was painted by one of Salazar's great grandnephews from the story told to him as a child by Salazar himself.

Lavender continued to explain, "I didn't learn till afterwards that you were a spy for Dumbledore. But when Parvati was kidnapped, you were in the infirmary recovering for reasons I didn't know at the time."

Severus recalled the slew of curses and hexes Lucius Malfoy cast that put him in the infirmary for two weeks. It wasn't until after he regained consciousness that he learned of Miss Patil's kidnapping and subsequent torture. He had never known who was responsible for the young witch's demise until now.

"I know that if you were around, you would have tried to save her from that fate worse than death," Lavender quietly choked out.

Something in the back of Severus mind clicked. "How do you know Macnair was the one to do it?"

Shortly after Severus awoke in the infirmary, he learned about Parvati Patil's kidnapping from Hogsmeade and her subsequent torture. He was given only the briefest of details. He had not pressed for more as the war was at its height of carnage and chaos. And if he did not know who tortured her and if Miss Patil was in no state to name her torturer, he wondered how Miss Brown was so certain it was Macnair.
"Because... the Death Eaters kidnapped me too," she confessed, sobbing into her hands.

"Oh dear God, child," he said in a whisper, pulling her into his arms to rock her. He could only imagine the horrors she might have experienced, having witnessed some of them himself. "I had no idea."

"I begged Dumbledore not to tell anyone. I didn’t want anyone to pity me," she cried into his shoulder. "Blaise was the one who helped me escape." She gave a loud sniff and Severus gave her a handkerchief to use. "He saw me there in the dungeon and I begged him to let me go, to get me out of there. Parvati had already been hauled away by Macnair and I could hear her crying, begging him to kill her. I could hear what he was doing to her even though I couldn’t see it. All that Gryffindor bravery gone, I just wanted to get out of there and save my own skin. I got away with just a few scrapes before anyone could do anything to me and I just left Parvati there alone and screaming." Lavender wailed, "I left her there and I was a coward. I could have saved her if I was just brave enough."

"No!" Severus said fiercely. He shook her. "You were no match for a Death Eater like Macnair. And Zabini was not exactly about to show himself as a traitor to save your skin in front of the others. You’re lucky he found some pity for you and helped you escape with no one the wiser. There was nothing you could have done to save Miss Patil," he told her firmly. "You were lucky you got out of there alive and in one piece."

"We were going to start this business together. We were partners and I just left her there to die," she sobbed, utterly grief stricken from her guilt.

Eyeing her, a thought came to Severus, but he needed to ask to confirm his suspicions. "So why did you place Macnair under contract to work for you?" Severus suspected his employer's weekly visits to Macnair's flat Sunday afternoons were to beat and whip him, but now he could have her confirm his suspicions.

"So I could cause him the same pain, humiliation and violation that he caused Parvati," Lavender answered harshly, her face set in grim determination. "His contract was that I kept his pathetic, sadistic arse out of Azkaban in exchange for dealing with my need to avenge Parvati. And with the addition of some Confusion Concoction and some Obliviates, he agreed. He's a coward too. He'd rather deal with me than face the Dementors. Well, it's been over three years and Parvati is not coming back no matter how many times I make him scream. And no matter how many times I've beaten him till his bones break, it doesn’t make my pain or memories go away. And now I know I'm not better nor worse than them. We all have reasons for the dark things we do."

Severus stood up and looked at her, stunned at the potential for coldness in Lavender that he hadn’t thought possible. It chilled his soul to see a woman who he thought he knew, and remembered
once as a child, take such a casual attitude about the vengeance she had designed and wrought by her own hand. But if Severus had the opportunity, he would have done the same thing and worse to the others after the death of his wife. Instead of taking a few years to come to the same conclusion Miss Brown had, it took him until the fall of the Dark Lord to come to terms with all his inner demons and cast aside some of the burdens of his soul.

"You're right, Miss Brown. No matter what you did or didn't do, you couldn't have brought her back," Severus said with sudden bland indifference.

He sat back in his chair and sipped his tea while lost in thought. Lavender also sat in silence with her own cup.

They both stared at the fire burning merrily in the grate until Severus broke the uneasy silence. "Yesterday you seemed unperturbed by Dolohov's actions. Why the sudden change this morning? Surely, nothing is different, nor are there any new revelations today regarding Dolohov that would cause your sudden outburst."

Lavender continued staring at the fire for a moment longer before answering. She inhaled deeply and paused a while to consider her choice of words. "I think you should be worried about Dolohov's actions. It might interfere with your plans to go on your extended holiday. Hermione Weasley just missed getting caught in the fight. No doubt she was hurrying home to get ready for her visit with you when she left work just before all hell broke loose. Now she has a dead co-worker that she probably thinks she could have saved if she had stayed a while longer. Then after her little visit to you she comes home to find her husband has returned home, worried sick about her welfare. Let's just hope her guilt over all this doesn't prevent her from seeing you in the future, Severus."

"Weasley's back?" he asked, stunned at this information. "Wait. How do you know all this?" Severus eyed her with a keen, piercing look.

"I have my sources," Lavender said in an angry trance before throwing her teacup and saucer at the fireplace with furious aplomb.

"Ginny?"

"Among many others," she replied in slow, carefully measured tones.
There was more to Dolohov's timing and subsequent actions behind Miss Brown's sudden turn of good nature, but considering her previous reluctance to divulge her plans regarding Hermione, Severus decided that the questions he had could wait until the time was right.

Vexed and disconcerted over Miss Brown's revelations regarding herself and Hermione, the agitated wizard decided to shove all thoughts that did not on potions to the back of his mind.

"Come," Severus commanded, "I do not feel like wasting a perfectly good day for work when I bothered to come here in the first place."

Lavender rose and smoothed down her robes and her hair before leading the way to the laboratory, looking a little more tired than usual.

"Hermione?"

Some gentle voice was calling her from her fog of sleep, but the pillow felt so warm and comfortable under her head and the blankets so heavy that she wanted to ignore whatever was intruding upon her happy place. She vaguely remembered some dream involving an extremely large cauldron that doubled as a hot tub while she in her school robes and some unknown wizard whose face she couldn't recall sat in the hot water relaxing. There was some tickling of the feet involved and a purple troll's club, but it all seemed so unimportant and slightly silly that it slipped from her mind as easily as vapor in her grasp.

"Hermione?"

There was someone rubbing her shoulder and patting her back. The dream was gone, and with it, all the relaxed feelings that had accompanied the dream.

"Hmmm?" the tousled-hair witch mumbled.

"Hermione? Are you all right?"

"Hmmm?" Hermione groaned once more, rolling over to see her sister-in-law sitting on the edge of the bed with a rather large and inviting cup of coffee in her hand.
Gathering her wits about her, Hermione surveyed her environs and suddenly remembered Ginny tucking her in last night. Looking out the window, she saw that the sun was high and she had slept away most of the morning.

"What time is it?" the brunette asked, gratefully taking the coffee from Ginny's hands.

"Eleven-thirty."

"What?" she said with confusion.

"I figure you got about at least sixteen hours of good, uninterrupted sleep. You looked like you needed it," Ginny said smugly.

A sarcastic glare was cast the redhead's way. "Gee, thanks."

"Well, you do look a damn sight better than last night. Now you don't look like the walking dead." Noticing Hermione's sudden frown at the phrase, Ginny amended, "Sorry, poor choice of words."

Hermione shook her head slightly, forgiving Ginny's faux pas. Sighing deeply, feeling her joints settle and her muscles pull after lying in bed for so long, the brunette set her coffee down to stretch, grimacing when something low in her spine popped. A quick rub of the eyes to remove the last grains of sleep and she was ready to rise.

"Are you all right now?" Ginny asked, scanning Hermione face for some elusive symptom.

Nodding her head, the older witch was surprised when a large bed tray with legs laden with heaping piles of sausages, toast, scrambled eggs, broiled tomato, and sautéed mushroom with a tall glass of orange juice was suddenly straddling her lap.

"What's this?" Hermione asked, amazed at the copious amounts of food set before her.

"Considering the fact you've missed quite a few meals recently, I think you need to make up for it with a good breakfast," Ginny informed her.
"There's more food here than even Ron could eat in one sitting." Hermione looked at the tray of food with disinterest, not hungry in the least.

"Well, you'd better get started, as I'm not leaving till you've eaten enough so that I'm sure you won't be admitted to St. Mungo's for malnutrition in the near future," Ginny lectured her, crossing her arms as a signal that she wasn't going anywhere till Hermione started eating.

"Breakfast in bed. You're really twisting my arm," Hermione joked lightly before forcing herself to eat.

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Hermione thanked Ginny and walked her into the living room.

"Are you sure you don't want to go with me today?" Hermione asked.

"I have errands to run and lots of little things to do," Ginny explained. "But how about we go and do a little shopping before we go to the spa next week? That way we're in no rush to leave before the stores close."

"That sounds like a plan."

"Good. I guess I'll see you tomorrow then, since I'm going with Harry," the redhead said on a sadder note.

The mood between them became somber.

"Yes, I'll see you tomorrow. Harry said it will be at eleven at the Llangogerygoch cemetery." Hermione ended her sentence as a question.

Ginny nodded. "You take care now. And if Ron starts acting like a prat again, just threaten to go for a visit at Mum's and he'll come around," the youngest Weasley said with a knowing wink. "Having you go and seek sanctuary at The Burrow will make him think twice before treating you badly again. Imagine the look on his face when you say, 'I'm going to go to YOUR mother's.' You'll find he's suddenly quite a bit more accommodating."
Hermione laughed at this little bit of insight from her sister-in-law. "Thanks." She gave the younger witch a hug before Ginny Apparated away.

Once dressed, she headed out hoping to reach the Farmer's Market before it closed at two o'clock. Ron was back for only a day and had already cleaned out everything edible in the cupboard.

There was no question that she had missed out on the new crop of cherries that usually arrive in mid-July and there would only be a tiny pile of bruised fruits and discarded bent stems. The raspberries were all gone as well. After buying a few imported oranges and a couple trays of blackberries, she headed off to the florist's stall.

This was the part she hated most. During the war she had made so many bundles of flowers to pass on her sentiments to the dead, she begged Ron to never buy her flowers. Hermione could still remember every twig and stem she had tied together and placed on Minerva's funeral pyre.

'Achillea for war, since you died in battle. Oak leaves for bravery. Harebell for grief. A dark crimson rose for mourning. Yew for sorrow. Zinnia for thoughts of friends, as you were my mentor and friend. Rosemary for remembrance. And a sprig of lavender heather for admiration, as I've always admired you and so a bit of Scotland is always with you.'

Hermione also remembered the one she made for Albus. Sage. She remembered using lots of sage in Albus' bundle.

As she looked over the flower seller's selection, the saddened witch began pulling stems for a flower bundle to place on Marge's funeral pyre.

'Asphodel, for my regrets follow you to the grave. Peony, for shame of my inaction. Harebell for grief. Yew for sorrow. And Star of Bethlehem for atonement, as I hope there is some way I can atone for my sin.'

Feeling rather pleased that he was able to get a good half-day of work done with Miss Brown, Severus hummed to himself as he prepared the cherry glaze for the roasted duck. Since he was going to be making duck confit the next day, he had Marf pick up a whole duck as well for his weekly dinner with Draco.

'If he so much as makes another comparison of my cooking to those of the house-elves at Malfoy
Manor, I'll shove this bloody bird down his throat and make him choke on it,' Severus thought in agitated anticipation of the blond wizard's periodic poking at his culinary pride.

As he pulled the evenly browned bird from the oven to add the last of the glaze before roasting for fifteen more minutes, he checked on the wild rice pilaf slowly simmering on the cooker. He put the water on so when the duck came out of the oven to rest, he could blanch the tender summer peas.

Severus loved cooking, as he found it could be more challenging than Potions work at times. While Potions would require one's attention on one cauldron the entire time, to stir the correct number of times clockwise or anti-clockwise while adding the right ingredients in the correct order at the proper time, cooking had its own challenges. To prepare a multi-course meal so that everything came out at the same time, equally hot, was a feat that many took for granted, especially those who did not cook for themselves.

When the clock struck four o'clock and the duck had rested, the peas were hot, and the rice cooked to perfection, Severus sat in his flat and waited... and waited and waited. At five after, Severus began tapping his foot with impatience. By the time it was ten after four, he began pacing.

"I go through the bother to cook a decent hot meal and they aren't here on time!" Severus fumed, not realizing how much he sounded just like Molly Weasley.

At quarter past, Severus stormed out of his flat and flew down the one flight to Draco's door.

BANG-BANG-BANG! BANG-BANG! BANG!

There was no answer.

"I'm coming in, and I don't care if you two are shagging like rabid minks right now!" Severus yelled through the door.

Unwarding and unlocking the door, Severus strode into Draco's flat. He looked about, but only saw a large picnic blanket with the leftovers of a picnic lunch placed under a spreading shade tree that Draco had transfigured from the room's furniture.

There was a squeal followed by a shriek coming from the kitchen before the door banged open and a rather nude Draco bolted across the room quickly followed by an equally nude Ginny on his
heels. The redhead was brandishing a large squirt bottle of Florean Fortescue's Scrumptious Chocolate Syrup.

"I'll get you for that!" Ginny yelled with playful exuberance, unaware of the presence of the Potions master.

Severus cleared his throat.

Ginny shrieked again and dove for the picnic blanket. She yanked it up with such force that the picnic hamper, dishes, food and beverages flew everywhere, splattering the walls and Severus' boots with the leftovers of their lunch.

"Severus!" Ginny said, quickly maneuvering the food-stained cloth about her person in a vain attempt at modesty before she burst into giggles.

Draco snorted at the situation before grabbing a pillow from his couch to place over his privates.

Looking over the two lovers, Severus saw the dredges of some cherry pie sliding off Draco's chest, a trail of smeared mustard going all the way up the blond's thigh beneath the pillow, and what the older man guessed was the remnants of chutney caught on his partner's cheek and in his hair. Ginny seemed to be equally covered in a variety of foods, including what appeared to be a slice of ham stuck to her shoulder, cream dripping from her arms, and honey smeared all over the tops of her breasts. He would not bother to guess what other food was smeared across the parts of her body covered by the picnic blanket.

"Children," Severus said in a low and warning voice that only one who had governed urchins for years could elicit. "I suggest you get yourselves cleaned up. Dinner is ready and you are late."

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Draco and Ginny sat at the table with Severus, eating their dinner. Their hair was still dripping wet, and they cast guilty, yet mischievously unrepentant, glances at one another before bursting into giggles and chuckles.

Severus ignored their childish behavior, cutting a piece of duck with restrained annoyance. "If you two are quite done!" the older wizard huffed.

"We told you that we are truly sorry, Severus. Honestly, we lost track of time," Ginny apologized
with earnest sincerity. "It's been so long since we've felt this happy and carefree in a while. We really needed it."

Severus' face softened a bit. It had been a while since Draco had looked this happy. Whatever it was that caused him this spiritual respite from the recent travails of the past few weeks, Severus could not fault him.

"The duck is still delicious, Severus, even if it did have to wait for a few minutes. As always, you've done another culinary masterpiece," the witch praised him, knowing from practice how to soothe a Slytherin's soul with just the right words.

Restraining an arrogant smirk, for he did cook a perfect meal despite having it sit and cool on the table while company was busy with a hasty shower, Severus felt a little placated by her compliment and let his irritation fade, all the while aware of her little ploy to flatter him.

"I just wish I could join you both for dinner like this more often," Ginny added. "But if all goes as planned, then we could be doing this every week." Draco grabbed her hand and squeezed it, smiling warmly at her. "Speaking of plans, I suppose I should update you on Hermione."

Severus thought to cut her off and tell her that Miss Brown had filled him in on the larger details, but he held his tongue, curious to compare what Miss Brown knew to Ginny's account. It always served him well during his years as a spy to use more than one source for information to cross check and verify information.

"As you know, my brother walked out on her last Saturday night after a fight, but returned Thursday night once he learned of the attack."

Severus nodded while quirking one brow, pretending to be surprised by the news and encouraging Ginny to continue, keeping scathing remarks about Ronald Weasley to himself.

"Well, the poor woman didn’t get any sleep Thursday night, as I guess everyone in my family kept Flooing all night long. From what Harry told me of her questioning with Shacklebolt and Moody, she noticed Dolohov’s behavior just before he snapped and thought to swing by Auror headquarters to mention it, but dismissed it. Now she feels especially guilty, because her co-worker is dead."

Severus sucked his breath in. He had suspected that Hermione would feel some sort of guilt over the fact that she suspected the Death Eater's behavior was odd and did nothing about it. He
furtively wondered what sort of questions Moody had lobbed at her. Miss Brown's voice rang out in Severus' mind. "No doubt she was hurrying home to get ready for her visit with you when she left work just before all hell broke loose. Now she has a dead co-worker that she probably thinks she could have saved if she stayed a while longer." Burying his face in his hands, Severus wondered if it could get any worse.

"Draco told me that you both got questioned as well. Are you all right, Severus?" Ginny frowned, feeling a bit worried for the older wizard.

"I'm fine," Severus dismissed her concern, sipping his wine to remove the unpleasant memory from his mind. "Interrogated would be a more appropriate term. Kingsley was able to get away with only one drop of the Veritaserum."

"He was able to do the same for me," Draco said, a grimace set upon his face. "It still didn't stop my tongue when Moody said he wished he had the pleasure of turning me into a ferret himself instead of Crouch."

Ginny leaned over and placed her head upon her lover's shoulder while wrapping one arm about him, rubbing and patting his back. They all sat there in silence, each contemplating a life free of their current circumstances.

Clearing her throat, Ginny continued on the previous thread. "Anyway, as I was saying, I owled Hermione yesterday and told her that Harry and I would come over and that I would cook for her and Ron; I remember how thin she was on Wednesday and how she didn't eat."

Severus asked, "And did she eat?"

"No. She also skipped breakfast and lunch yesterday as well."

Severus shook his head, remembering how he'd eaten most of the food he'd prepared for her last visit. It was as if she hadn't eaten in a week.

"In fact, she hardly touched her dinner and instead drank enough wine that she passed out, but not before she told Ron that either they go into counseling or she'll seek a divorce," Ginny said with a twinge of anger.
"What?" Draco said, jumping into the conversation.

Severus put his face back in his hands and shook his head.

"Right before Harry and I showed up, they had their talk about the big fight and she tried talking my brother into going into counseling. Well, you know how our society feels about that sort of thing, especially Muggle marriage counselors."

Both wizards rolled their eyes in disgust, feeling about the same as Ron's initial reaction to the request.

"Harry, Ron and I had quite a fight about counseling while Hermione sat there looking like she was in shock. And considering that dead glassy look in her eye, I'd say she was in emotional shock and was still so this morning when I went to check in on her before coming over to see Draco. On a high point, I did make sure she ate a breakfast large enough to choke a Hippogriff."

"Care to go over the finer points of the argument?" Severus asked, knowing it would give him something to use to further control Hermione, manipulating her for his needs. He did not acknowledge the part of himself that was truly concerned over this new development.

"Basically, Ron implied marriage counselors are incompetent, especially Muggle ones, which got Harry's back up. He came short of calling my brother a pure-blood bigot," Ginny summarized. "Seeing that it was getting ugly, I supported Hermione's decision. I know if backed against the wall, she'd walk out on Ron and then the first thing she would do is stop seeing you, Severus. She wouldn't be able to afford seeing you and living alone on her salary."

"You don't have to worry about that. Miss Brown has waived Hermione of all my fees from now on," Severus mumbled around a mouth full of wine.

"WHAT?" Draco and Ginny shouted in unison.

"It seems that when Miss Brown met with her last Wednesday night for the exchange of coin, my employer decided to waive my fees and thought that it was in my best long term interest to allow it." Severus did not volunteer the information to Ginny that the only reason he initially took on Mrs. Weasley was for a forty-percent royalty on the new sex potions he was working on.
"So you're taking her on... for free?" Ginny asked, stunned.

"Not exactly. As Draco has recently informed you, we do have day jobs."

"Yes, Draco mentioned you consult on Potions, though you don't brew them. I might have known someone like you was behind the Valiant Wizard line," she complimented him.

Severus bowed his head in acceptance of her remark. "So instead of my usual cut, Miss Brown is upping my percentage on a new line of potions I'm working on."

"Would this new line include the natural lubrication one Draco gave me today?"

The older wizard nodded his head.

"I see." Ginny was lost in contemplative thought for the moment.

"And your feedback on the potion?" the Potions master prompted her, curious to see how well it worked.

Ginny closed her eyes and sighed while Draco smirked. Cracking open her eyes, she leered at Draco while answering, "Absolutely fantastic. My only concern is that it might counteract any contraceptive potions I'm on."

"I've already taken that into consideration," Severus assured her.

"You'd better," she warned him. "I don't want to get pregnant!"

"Really, Gin. Do you think I would let you have a potion if it would let you get pregnant with his child?" Draco asked, his brow furrowed.

"I am a Potions Master. Did you not think that I took that into consideration?" Severus replied, slightly offended.
"Well, my mother took contraceptive potions and look what happened to her!" Ginny exclaimed.

Draco chuckled heartily, finally realizing the cause for the size of Ginny's family.

"No doubt she made them herself, as any respectable manufacturing outfit would brew something that would work," Severus asserted.

The witch blushed momentarily. "Those potions weren't cheap back then. I'm sorry to have doubted your competency, Severus. It's just that I absolutely do not want to get stuck in this marriage to Harry by accidentally getting myself pregnant because of an experimental potion. You can see my point of view with regard to the caution I'm taking."

"Yes, I do. I apologize for snapping at you. It's been a rather trying few days," Severus said formally. It was prudent of Ginny to be cautious, as he could understand her point completely. "Based on how well you know Hermione, do you think she will stop with her Thursday night appointments?"

Ginny sat back in her chair deep in thought. "Well, there is the guilt aspect, but after seeing Hermione last night and this morning, I'm not certain. She has that same emotionally detached quality about her that Harry has. I know it from personal experience. The way she threw her ultimatum on the table last night was scary. I've never seen her so... calm. There's probably more going on right now than I can guess at. Next Saturday I'm taking her with me to the spa. I'll see if I can get some more information out of her then and either owl you what I find out or brief you in person. Perhaps the situation between Hermione and Ron will flesh itself out over the next week and I'll be able to tell more, but right now, it's a toss up. Is she seeing you regularly on Thursdays now?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I loaned her my latest copy of Eccentric Elixirs on the hope that will ensure she'll return to me, if only to bring it back. I also invited her to join me for dinner as well, so I can make sure she will eat something of substance, since she obviously isn't taking care of herself now." Severus cast his eyes down to his plate, fixated on mopping up a bit of glaze with his duck, so he would not see Draco and Ginny giving him the same look they had the last time he'd mentioned Hermione's health.

"You're cooking for her?" Draco asked slowly in insinuating tones.

"I'm making cassoulet," the older wizard replied casually.
"You're making cassoulet? You haven't made cassoulet in ages. If you won't cook it for me, why her?" Draco asked, feeling slighted.

"Because she won't make comments about how the Malfoy Manor elves do it better than me," Severus ground out, letting Draco know his past criticisms and comparisons of his cooking to that of a house-elf were not appreciated.

"But you left out the breadcrumbs!" Draco whinged.

"A properly made cassoulet does not need breadcrumbs. It forms its own crust when made right. And your insistence that it should have lamb and tomato goes without even bothering to tell you just how positively wrong it is," Severus sniffed arrogantly.

"All right, all right. I will not have this discussion get bogged down in the great cassoulet debate," Ginny said, stepping into the conversation to steer it back to a more pleasant topic that did not involve a conclave over the true provincial origins of the dish and which variation is the truer recipe. "I've heard Draco complain about this enough to me and I will not have you two go at it again. So, Severus, you are cooking for Hermione?" Ginny asked, directing the conversation back to more civil tones.

"Yes. As I was saying, since she doesn't seem to feed herself, I can make sure she has at least one decent meal a week." Severus sighed, now that Draco's diplomatic paramour had averted another culinary row between the two.

"Do you plan on making it a weekly habit?" Ginny asked with keener interest, leaning forward while resting her arms on the table.

"If dinner is pleasant, which I assume it will be, then yes. That is, if it does not arouse the suspicions of her husband as to why she isn't eating on Thursdays," Severus answered detachedly.

"Don't worry about that," Ginny reassured Severus with a wave of her hand before grabbing her wineglass to take a long sip. "Ron has been rather oblivious where Hermione is concerned. He hadn't even noticed the state she was in until Harry screamed at him about how thin and tired she was looking last night."

Secretly, Severus was reluctantly pleased that Potter was actually looking out for Hermione, since
her husband was doing such a poor job of it. Ginny would keep an eye on her as well.

"Severus?" Ginny's voice had a note of warning to it, snapping him out of his thoughts. "Hermione is not like other witches who might come to see you. She's not going to delineate between the friendly conversation that she originally paid for and emotional attachment. I want you to be very careful. Please, as a friend. She's very fragile right now and I don’t want her to get too attached to you. She's married and Muggle-borns have a slightly different attitude on fidelity in marriage than some witches and wizards do."

Remembering last Thursday night and Hermione's moment of weakness and how she laved her passionate attentions on his hand, and how he had to fight temptation himself, Severus sat up straighter in his chair and told Ginny, "I assure you. Before it gets to that point, she will be learning my identity. Speaking of which, she has changed considerably since the days of the war. What has happened to her that she is no longer the same insufferably curious girl I once knew? I causally left my copy of *Eccentric Elixirs* out for her to notice and had to practically thrust it into her hands, and offer to let her borrow it. The Hermione I remember would have leapt out of her seat and picked it up, prattling on about the articles inside and other things. I was counting on her insatiable sense of curiosity as a tool to make her realize who I am, but it seems she's not taking the bait."

"I've noticed that too," Ginny noted. "Right after Hermione discovered Draco and me, she kept asking me questions, and then all of the sudden the questions stopped. Not one question about Draco for the past week. It's positively unnerving, as I expected her to keep asking me questions, but… I don’t know. It's like she's resigned to accept the situation, which just worries me even more. And now with this emotional deadness I see, I'm really worried about her. I just don't want her to glom onto you as some sort of emotional raft in a storm and ruin her marriage in the process."

"You think being married to your brother is something worth salvaging for her?" asked the older wizard with disbelief.

"I know you don’t like Ron, or most of my other brothers, Severus," Ginny scolded him, "but Hermione really wants to make this work. Besides, you know what a pariah she would be if she divorced him. There are more Muggle-borns in the community who don’t have the same view on divorce we do, but still. Life would be difficult for her. The similarities between her marriage and mine are beginning to look frighteningly similar though. Hermione is not the type of witch to easily cheat on her husband, especially Ron, so please, don't do anything that will lead to something she’ll regret."

Severus leveled his gaze at her, making his intent clear. "I have no intention of seducing her. To do so would only ruin my chance of our eventual escape to freedom. Once she learns it's me, she will most definitely have no attraction towards me whatsoever. She will feel compelled to help us escape though."
"Oh, I don't know Severus. You can still be quite charming when you're not being a completely sarcastic bastard. If I was into the tall, dark and tragically mysterious brooding type, I'd probably still want to shag you," Ginny said with a bit of cheek while Draco choked on his wine.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 23 A/N: Did anyone notice my little tip of the hat to the movie Gigi with the line, "Just a simple cassoulet" in chapter 19? No? More on that later, as Severus will comment on it.

Llangogerygoch is my own very odd abbreviation of the Welsh town of Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogogoch.

Sage is symbolic for wisdom. Since I like to think of the symbolism of flowers having inherent properties for Potions for my story, I thought the wizarding world would be very conscientious of flower symbolism for everyday use, including weddings and funerals. But there are times I think that they would want flowers for the sheer beauty and fragrance of them, such as Ginny loving peonies with no hidden meaning. My glossary for flower symbolism is from the site:
http://www.thegardener.btinternet.co.uk/flowerlanguage.html

Thanks to my beta Siren for the idea of Moody making a comment about wishing he had turned Draco into a ferret. Three cheers to her.

Cassoulet is the one French recipe that seems to have several different people claiming that their way is the only way to make it, much like Americans and what they perceive as the perfect pizza. Besides, don’t you see Severus and Draco being a bit of a couple of cultural snobs? What's more esoteric and snootily pedantic than fighting over cassoulet?

B/N: I like how you’re making a careful point to show how Hermione is not being the typical Hermione that we know, and how she is becoming more so with every passing chapter… that helps make the rest of the goings-on more effective, I think. Having Severus especially notice it makes it even better. :-) Horserider.
Chapter Summary

Idiots and irritations abound. Sometimes it just seems like Thursday night will never come.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Twenty-Four
“When Ingredient-Testing Witches Get the Blues”

Disclaimer: Rowling owns it all. You don't really think I could come up with anything as original as what she did, do you? If I could, I wouldn't be writing fan fiction, I'd be off at my publisher counting my heaping piles of money from my latest best seller.

The knitting-needle-through-the-eyeball migraine returned in full force. Now that Hermione had only herself to test all the crates, boxes, jars, sacks and bags of Potions ingredients that came through her lab, she also had to participate in the interviewing of candidates for the position now left vacant with Marge's death.

The week had been a blur for Hermione Weasley. She had attended Marge's funeral with Ron by her side, lending her a steady shoulder to lean on, but once home the gaping chasm between them returned and they occupied opposite ends of the flat, avoiding each others company the rest of the day.

Ron reluctantly agreed to Hermione's demand for marriage counseling, but it was her job to find a counselor and make the appointment. Ron said he would speak to Rufus, the owner of the Listing Broom, about getting a regular weeknight off for sessions. It was decided that she would try to find a Monday or Tuesday night, as those were the slowest nights Ron worked at the Pub. So far, Hermione was so busy, she barely had time to go to the loo, much less swing by the Muggle Alliance Network to get the name of a recommended counselor. It struck her later to ask Ginny the name of the one she and Harry met with, but so far she had not gotten around to owling Mrs. Potter and kept forgetting to ask Harry each time she saw him when he brought her lunch most days that week.

Hermione was sitting in the cramped conference room that was located a few doors down from
Madam Dushka's office. As she looked at the latest candidate's Curriculum Vitae, she wondered if using correct spelling had become optional since she had graduated Hogwarts. There were at least four misspelling on the wizard's CV. The candidate, Mr. Trevor Spawn, had recently graduated from Hogwarts, and barely passed his N.E.W.T. level Potions exam with an "Acceptable." Hermione now had the unpleasant task of interviewing him.

Of the eight candidates Hermione interviewed so far, only one was capable enough for Hermione to barely recommend coming back to interview with her superior. Madam Dushka, however, was not satisfied with that one suitable candidate. Hermione was forced to interview a ninth.

Glairing at the clock, Hermione noted that Mr. Spawn was late. Just as she was about to leave and tell Madam Dushka's secretary to cancel the appointment, the young wizard sauntered into the room with an air of easy calm.

"Hi, I'm Trevor Spawn," the young wizard casually introduced himself, extending his hand out in greeting.

Mr. Spawn had an arrogant air of superiority about him the rankled every frayed nerve in Hermione's body. He was tall, and handsome, with short honey golden hair, a dazzling smile and a set of very expensive robes that were smartly cut. If Gilderoy Lockhart and a younger and much more arrogant version of Draco Malfoy had mated, they would have produced Trevor Spawn.

Hermione took the young man’s hand and shook it perfunctorily. "Mr. Spawn, you're late," she said sternly, her lips set in a thin line.

The dashing wizard began explaining his situation with a careless demeanor. "I'm terribly sorry, but it couldn't be helped. You see, I was on my way here when—"

"I don't care for your excuses, Mr. Spawn," Hermione snapped. "If you get the position to work here, you are expected to arrive at work on time."

"Sure, sweetcakes, whatever you say," he said with a lazy drawl, seating himself without being invited to do so.

Had Hermione been a Hippogriff, the young man would have been rendered into tiny unidentifiable pieces no larger than a matchbox. "You will address me as Madam Weasley," she clearly enunciated before sitting down herself. Her head was on the verge of splitting like a ripe
Even though she was expected in putting in the effort of interviewing each candidate, Hermione was tempted to excuse him that very moment and go on to interview a tenth candidate. However, as each interview took away precious time from her lab duties, which had doubled with Marge's death, she allowed the interview to continue.

"I see you only received an 'Acceptable' on your N.E.W.T.s for Potions. Why should the Ministry hire someone who appears to have only put in the minimal effort required to pass a subject?" she said with a sniff and clear dislike for the fellow.

"Well, this job is only a stepping stone onto bigger and better things," he replied nonchalantly, examining his nails as he spoke. "You see, my father has been able to arrange an apprenticeship for me with a Potions master and I need to get in some experience doing something low-level for a while till my apprenticeship begins in the spring."

Now Hermione was furious. She had received the highest N.E.W.T. grades in a generation and she couldn't get an apprenticeship with anyone. All the Potion masters and mistresses she had written to had sent her a form letter stating that they had no openings. Nor would they be taking any new apprentices for quite some time. And here sat some mediocre brat whose father had bought him a position that should have rightly gone to her.

"You may think this job is low-level, but it is an extremely important one, Mr. Spawn. Tell me, how many Potions did you use this morning when getting ready?" she asked carefully.

"Oh, I don’t know. About four or five?" he answered flippantly.

"And do you know what would happen if one of those Potions was manufactured using imitation or faulty ingredients, Mr. Spawn?" the vexed witch queried.

"No clue. Don’t care really, just so they work," the young wizard blurted out casually.

"It seems, Mr. Spawn, that you do not fully appreciate the responsibility we have to the public with this job. I suggest you find some other position to preoccupy your time until your apprenticeship begins. I wish you all the best, Mr. Spawn," Hermione said crisply with no sincerity. "Good day." Hermione rose and offered her hand in farewell out of obligation.
The overly charming young wizard rose from his seat and took Hermione's hand, holding it for far too long. While still grasping her hand, he leaned forward and whispered suggestively, "I'm sure there's some sort of arrangement we can come to, to make you reconsider? How does dinner tonight sound? I can get us a table at Le Masion Chaud, as I know the maître d'." His one raised brow said more than a thousand sexually explicit descriptions.

Hermione snatched her hand from his and stormed to the doorway of the conference room. Spinning on her heel, with a fierce glare, she said, "I don't think my husband, a professional Quidditch player who could pound you into a pulp, would take kindly to some boy making advances on his wife. I said good day!"

Mr. Spawn smiled broadly and slowly sauntered out of the room with a tip of his head in her direction.

Hermione slowly let out the breath she didn't realize she was holding. Just as she was about to walk back down to her lab, she saw Madam Dushka step out of her office.

"Oh Trevor, are you done with Madam Weasley?" Hermione's supervisor said with a friendly smile. "Good, you can come into my office now. I'd like to talk to you about your new job." The older witch slipped her arm into the crook of the young wizard's and guided him into her office while sashaying her hips.

Trevor shot Hermione a sly smile that said 'C'est la vie' before walking into Madam Dushka's office.

Thoroughly fed up, Hermione stormed back down to her lab and remained there until five o'clock, silently seething. It was Thursday and it would be the first day that week that she did not stay past nine o'clock at night. If Madam Dushka had a snit over her leaving at the end of the proper work day, she would tell the witch to go shove a broom up her arse, if Trevor's broomstick wasn't stuck up there already.

"Just a simple cassoulet, my arse," Severus mumbled darkly to himself. It was a simple dish, but it required a lot of preparation.

Why he had offered to make cassoulet was beyond his comprehension, but then he recalled how cassoulet wound up being a dish so large that he had a large amount of leftovers. And he would be damned before inviting Draco to eat his cassoulet in the foreseeable future. Perhaps he would even send some home with the witch, ensuring she would have two good meals for the week.
Since he had Monday and Wednesday nights free, and Katherine Bigelow was too busy moving her business to Spain to see him for one last visit, Severus had time to cook the beans and meats, and assemble it so that all he had to do was pop it in the oven when he came home from work on Thursday. Sunday and Monday were spent preparing the duck confit, which required him to render the fat from the duck and marinate the legs for twenty-four hours before slowly roasting in a low temperature oven for almost six hours.

Still, the Potions master did not mind having someone new to cook for. Draco was jaded, having grown up on extravagant dishes prepared by house-elves, and Ginny dined with him and Draco so infrequently that Severus rarely had a chance to flex his culinary skills for her. And as cooking was the only thing that was even remotely similar to Potions he could still legally do, he took great care and pride in his work. There was one added benefit cooking had that Potions did not give him. After using a Potion, no one ever complimented him with fervor or praised him, comparing it to the nectar of the gods, like a well-prepared dish did.

Severus checked on the cassoulet bubbling in the oven, making sure the crust was forming nicely. Once satisfied, he began making the raspberry-hazelnut vinaigrette for the salad. Whisking the ingredients together so they could marry over the next few hours, he frowned; he hoped Hermione would still come. She had not sent him or Miss Brown any owl that she would not come, but that didn’t stop the thread of doubt that slipped into his mind. Now that the wizard had nothing to do but wait until shortly before Hermione arrived to do a few last minute preparations, he decided to have a nice, hot soak in the bath to help himself relax. For some reason Severus could not fathom, he felt a slight nervousness in his stomach. At first he attributed it to a bout of summer flu making the rounds, but a dose of Pepperup Potion and a touch of Quinine did nothing to relieve the tight feeling of anticipation in his stomach.

As he paced his bathroom wondering if he should wear the new cologne he had recently developed and pondering the decision of making a bath salts version of it, Albus materialized in his blue robes.

Sitting on the commode with his hands on his knees, Albus beamed brightly at him. "Getting ready for your big date?"

Severus whirled on the man with a murderous glare. "IT'S NOT A DATE!" he bellowed, his voice echoing against the glossy tiles. "She's a client and a tool, nothing more. I don't know why you keep insisting otherwise."

Looking about, the living wizard asked snappishly, "Where's Minerva?"
'Oh, she thought you'd be undressed by now, so she'll be here after you've dressed. She wants to talk with you,' the vision replied with an impish smile that brightened his aged face.

"Talk with me?" Severus questioned with a circumspect look, his eyes narrowing.

'Well, you know after last week when Hermione almost... well, we know what happened, my boy.'

Severus shut his eyes closed tightly, his hands grabbing the edge of the tile corner tightly as he chanted, "It's all in my head, it's all in my head, I've gone mad and it's all in my head."

Albus sighed before peering at the younger wizard over the tops of his imaginary glasses. 'Yes, we are all just “in your head”, Severus, but that doesn’t stop you from conjuring up my image at a time when you wish you had my guidance or some soul in which to confide in. I'm just a familiar image--'

"Yes, yes, we've been over this before," Severus interrupted his imaginary mentor. "This is merely some very complicated way for me to argue with myself over some issue or dilemma I'm having a moral crisis about."

'The question,' Albus said, drawing out the words, 'is what are you having a moral crisis about?'

"I am not going to discuss this now… or ever!" Severus hissed, staring at his own reflection in the mirror instead of the blue ghostly blob with a long white beard occupying the corner of the bathroom.

"Fine, you don’t have to talk if you don’t want to," Severus' reflection said.

"Shut up, not you." Severus glowered at the mirror.

His own reflection met his stare. "Fine, you can slit your throat when shaving tonight. See if I care." Severus' bathroom reflection stormed off.
Propping his face in his hand, Severus growled with defeat, "Fine, Albus. What am I having a crisis about?"

"Come, come, Severus. You're the Slytherin. Doesn't your House pride itself on being so cunning?"

"Now you're taunting me." He slid to the floor and saw Albus looking down at him.

"If I was taunting you, I would have made a remark over the fact that you were pacing this bathroom like a nervous fifth year getting ready for Valentine's Day in Hogsmeade," the apparition of the Headmaster teased him.

Severus shot him a withering look, which had no affect on his mind's projection of Albus.

"Fine. I'll admit that I'm a bit nervous about tonight," the raven-haired man reluctantly groaned.

"See, that wasn't so bad." Albus beamed at him with a patronizing smile. Well, to Severus it looked patronizing.

"I'm afraid that she won't show up and then my chance to get out of England will be gone, and for the rest of my life I'll be stuck shagging insipid, empty-headed witches and listening to vapid, bitter ones ramble on about their lothario husbands," he began ranting. "Meantime, I’ll be creating Potions I am forbidden to make myself, much less stir. And when I die, the devil shall kick me out of hell, as there is no punishment he could devise that is worse than this. Oh wait, just one… teach Potions to children all day long. But I’ve already finished that circuit of torture and I even got kicked out of that level of hell. So I guess I'm stuck here until my angel arrives and delivers me from damnation. Now, if you don’t mind, I'd like to bathe in peace… alone."

The vision of Albus gave Severus a look that told him that he would be talking with the older man again on this matter and the subject was not closed. He just hoped the Albus now hidden and lurking in the back of his mind would keep Minerva away until another day.

After drawing his bath, Severus slipped into the water. Remembering the previous week, he closed his eyes and began sucking lightly on the same finger Hermione laved her attentions on while his other hand grasped his cock. Pictures of Hermione hot wet mouth wrapped around his finger, her eyes closed, her pink tongue swirling around and around, then stroking his digit filled his mind, fueling his self-pleasuring indulgence.
How was it that after all the women he had had over the past three years that he had not felt such a momentary loss of control as when Hermione was lost in the bliss of sucking his finger? Never had he been so incapacitated by temptation as that night. Was it the fact that this was the one woman whom he couldn’t seduce? Was forbidden fruit such a delicacy that to taste a mere drop of its intoxicating juice could render most mortal men incapable of coherent thought and restraint? But he had shown restraint. He had done nothing to encourage her to go on, but then he had done nothing to stop her either.

Forbidden fruit or not, he latched on to the memory of Hermione succumbing to her own temptation and used it to bring himself to orgasm quickly. If he took care of his own physical needs before Hermione showed up, Severus would be less tempted to let his mind wander to thoughts of last week. He could push out thoughts of Hermione's body pressed against his, her hand clapping his while her lips wrapped around the tip of his finger before sucking it entirely into her mouth. It took only a few minutes until he was gasping harshly and white pearls of cum were splattering across his stomach.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Glancing at the clock in the kitchen, Hermione asked, "Don't you have to get to work soon?"

Ron was eating the last morsel of his pork chop. He chewed it for a while before answering, remembering how often his wife nagged him about talking with his mouth full. "You'll get rid of me soon enough," the redhead said acridly.

Hermione sighed in exasperation. "That's not what I meant." "That's exactly what you meant." She paused while getting her mind cleared of any possible slips of the tongue. "What I meant to say was…” Trying desperately to think of how to finish a sentence she had no idea of how to complete while sounding convincing, she said, "I don't want you to be late to work. What time does your shift start tonight?"

"Usual time," Ron replied with slight contempt. "You know everything. I'm surprised you don’t know that. You happen to know how lousy I am in bed, I'm surprised you don’t the exact minute I'll be walking through the door at the pub." Now he was being snide.

The familiar hollow feeling inside of her numbed her to his barbs. This was the first time she had seen him awake since Sunday, as they had gone back to the more familiar and safe routine of passing ships in the night, where one would be awake while the other slept in the evening and the morning. During the evenings, Hermione had come home after Ron had left for the pub, eating, reading and going to sleep before he came home from work. Though they had lain in the same bed, they didn’t touch each other; both huddled on opposite sides as they slept.

Hermione left the kitchen to take her shower, not caring if Ron wondered why she was taking one now instead of in the morning as usual.

Ron shouted truculently to her retreating back, "Oy! Aren’t you going to eat your pork chop? I don't want Harry accusing me of starving you again! Don't make me shove this thing down your throat so you can't play the starving martyr! Poor Hermione! Stuck with a lousy husband who doesn’t feed her!"

Ignoring his shouts that she could hear all the way into the bathroom, she sighed as the noise from the spray drowned out her husband's ravings. Hermione just hoped he would be gone by the time she was done with her shower.

By the time she emerged, freshly scrubbed and no longer smelling like her lab, Ron was gone. A quick check in the kitchen and the clock confirmed that he was at the pub already.

Noticing her untouched pork chop, she wrapped it up and put it away, hoping she would remember to bring it as a snack with her to work the next day. One more check of the clock told her she had all of fifteen minutes to finish getting dressed and out the door if she was to make it to Calleo's on time. She did not want to make him wait. The anxious witch had been looking forward to this night all week long. Hermione did not want to waste one minute of her evening by being late.

A touch of Sleekeasy's in her hair, a little brushing, a hair clip and most of the work to get ready was done. It only took a few minutes to add some kohl around her eyes and a dab of lipstick. As Hermione had spent part of last night fretting over what to wear, she picked out her clothes quickly. Though she picked out a modest skirt and top set, she allowed herself the luxury of her nicest lingerie. It made her feel just a touch more feminine. 'Like he's ever going to see my knickers,' she mused while rushing to get dressed.

Just before she bolted for the door, Hermione suddenly remembered the one thing she promised to bring. Opening the bedside table drawer, she pulled out Calleo's copy of Eccentric Elixirs. Inside the front cover was Calleo's letter to her. She had received it Saturday afternoon via an owl from Lavender.

She read over it one last time.
Dear Hermione,

I hope this letter finds you well. After I read article in the Daily Prophet, I remembered the mentioning of your job. I was sad to learn of your co-worker's death, you have my deepest sympathies. I am glad that you are safe, as I would hate to think of any harm coming to you. If you need to talk about what happened, as always, you have my ear and my shoulder.

I look forward to seeing you again next Thursday for dinner as I am anticipating the discussion we will have over the articles you will have read this week.

Sincerest regards,

Calleo

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Hermione gave a long sigh as she ran her fingertips over the neat and spiky angular penmanship. It surprised her that Calleo had written to her, even remembering what she did for a living. Folding it back up, she placed it in a tiny chest she mentally called her "escape box" where she hid all her little secrets from Ron and her friends.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 24 A/N: Hurrah to Siren for a chapter title, otherwise it would have been something lame that I would have been ashamed of. It was just so hard this time to think of anything.

Recipe for Raspberry-Hazelnut Dressing:

First the story behind it. About 20+ years ago, when I was working in the family business doing wholesale food manufacturing, I came up with a new salad dressing to take to a large gourmet market chain located here in the Western U.S (which shall remain unnamed) that we sold most of our products to. After I took it to the buyer, he said he wasn't interested. Six months later, there was a raspberry dressing on their shelves manufactured by a close friend of the buyer - who originally said he wasn't interested, and it wasn't even half as good as mine. After it appeared on shelves, it
seemed other food manufacturing companies - the big conglomerate ones - started making raspberry salad dressings shortly there afterwards. So I like to think I started a trend, or at least was on the very cusp of it.

1 cup Raspberry Vinegar (recipe further down or buy at the market)
3/4 cup Canola or Safflower oil
1/4 cup Hazelnut oil
3 Tablespoons Honey
1 Tablespoon Dijon Mustard
1/4 teaspoon finely minced Garlic
1 teaspoon Thyme
1/2 teaspoon minced Parsley
1/2 teaspoon chopped Rosemary
1/8 teaspoon Black Pepper

Whisk and let flavors mingle a few hours before using. Makes a little over two cups of dressing.

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Raspberry Vinegar

1/2 lb. Frozen Raspberries
2 quarts White Vinegar

Mash raspberries and add to vinegar. Let steep for at least two days, preferably a week, in the refrigerator. Strain out raspberry pulp and seeds, and store.
“My Dinner with Calleo"

Chapter Summary

Welcome to an evening at Chez Calleo's, cassoulet and conversation are on the menu. Husbands and death are out of season and are not available tonight.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Five
“My Dinner with Calleo"

Disclaimer: Rowling owns it, she owns it all. I don't make a single Sickle for writing any of this.

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Severus had been dressed for the past half-hour. The bread had been sliced and the table for two was set in the middle of his parlor-boudoir. All that was left was Hermione Weasley's arrival.

That wasn't entirely true. He paced in front of his armoire debating on which mask to wear and if he should keep a scarf over his head to hide his hair. Severus vacillated between the Bauta he had worn during their previous meetings and his Pipistrello half mask. If he abandoned the scarf and wore the half mask, it might be too much and Hermione might flee with the realization that she had almost thrown herself at her old Potions professor. So far however, she had not deduced who he was. Or if she had, Hermione had not yet acknowledged or confronted him about his identity. The wizard decided that either the scarf would go or he would change to a smaller mask.

The decision was taken from his hands as the hands on the clock struck seven and Hermione knocked on the door. In haste, Severus decided to forgo the scarf and just wear his black Casanova mask that would go nicely with his green shirt and dark gray pants. If anything, he was hoping the color combination of his vestments might help Hermione bridge the connection between the gigolo she visited and the Potions master she might still be wondering about. A glance at his bed curtains told him she was tense and angry. After one last check to make sure his mask was firmly secured and the bed curtains were charmed off, Severus opened the door.

Both Hermione and Severus let out a slow and silent breath of relief.
Bowing in his customary courtly manner, he bid her welcome. "Good evening, Hermione. I'm so pleased to see you again."

He was genuinely pleased, for her presence gave him hope that she would continue to see him the next week and the week after that despite the Death Eater attack, the return of her husband, and embarrassment from her lapse of propriety between them.

Hermione beamed a heartfelt smile at him. Seeing Calleo waiting for her and then welcoming her with such sincere warmth made her feel happy for the first time in a week. The hollowness inside her chest didn’t seem quite so oppressive and the iron band around her ribs lifted for the time being. Now that she was at Calleo's, she would not have to think of Ron, not unless she wanted to. She was in her own sanctuary, free of burdens and obligations for a few hours.

Walking inside, the woman inhaled deeply. "Oh," she sighed dreamily. She closed her eyes before inhaling once more. "That smells delicious."

Hermione had been having daydreams of cassoulet with Calleo all week long. It was the one happy thought that had kept her from screaming in frustration at work or literally strangling Ron in his sleep. And now that she was here, the witch placed all her worries in a little box inside her head and set them aside for the evening. At some point, she knew Calleo would ask her how her week had been, but for now she wanted to bask in the illusion that she didn't have a care in the world except for wondering which side of the table to sit on.

"May I take your cloak?" he asked. His voice was rich and inviting in its tone.

"Yes, thank you," she said quietly, ducking down her head. She felt flustered and reluctantly aroused by his gentlemanly manners.

As Hermione's cloak slipped down her shoulders and arms, she felt the light brushing of Calleo's fingers along the fabric of her sleeve. A small chill raced up her spine while she stifled a sudden intake of breath.

'I am not going to do anything foolish tonight. I am not going to ruin this by letting a little physical contact turn me into some hormonal fool,' Hermione silently chided herself. While she collected her thoughts, Severus discretely gave Hermione's cloak to Marf, who was in the kitchen.
"Would you like to start dinner now or would you like a chance to sit for a while?" Severus studied her from behind and noticed her hair was still wet. A few tendrils along her hairline were beginning to dry and curl naturally in gentle spirals, framing the nape of her neck. Hermione glanced over her shoulder at him, which made her look quite demure.

"Actually, I would love the chance to just sit and relax for a bit before dinner," she replied, sounding more relaxed by the suggestion alone.

Severus watched her walk to his settee, hypnotized by the way her hips moved, the sway of her skirt, the shape of her ankles just below the hem of her skirt, the way her back tapered to her waist before flaring out to her hips. He swallowed hard once to collect himself, desperately trying to remain focused on the moment and not on Hermione's body. It was clear she had not lost any weight since last week. She was being kept fed from the lunches Potter had been bringing Hermione when she wasn't meeting Ginny for lunch.

"Oh!" Hermione said suddenly. "I brought back your copy of Eccentric Elixirs. It's in my cloak pocket."

"I'll have my house-elf fetch it later," Severus replied.

"You have a house-elf? I thought you said you were making the cassoulet?" Hermione queried, a little confused.

"No, I do all my own cooking, but he does help with general housekeeping, shopping and the sort."

"Oh," she said before a small smile graced her face. 'He cooked for me, not the house-elf,' she realized. 'Ron's never cooked for me.'

Thinking it would be better to talk of pleasant things now and discuss her near miss at the Ministry with Dolohov after dinner, Severus asked, "So what articles did you read?"

Hermione's face lit up. "I read all of them, but the one that caught my interest was the one on developing new potions from scratch."

Severus sat on the opposite end of the settee. "I found that article to be a bit pretentious. Why ignore all the work other Potion masters have done only to reinvent the wheel every time you want
"I agree, but I think what the author was trying to point out was the fact that if we continue to take the same methods and apply them over and over and over, where will the new breakthroughs come from?" she countered. "Granted, yes, we should not ignore the previous work of others, but there are only so many ways of brewing and mixing ingredients in the same combination. For there to be new potions and cures, one must step back and take a new approach. If that means starting from scratch, then why not?" Hermione asked rhetorically.

"But to start from scratch would mean a waste of one's time and resources when there are so many texts and tomes to use as a starting point for creating new potions," Severus observed.

"I'm not saying that old potions, ones that are tried and true, are not to be discounted, but perhaps if you were to try something different, such as grating dandelion root instead of slicing it for the Poison Purging Potion, it might yield new results," the young witch suggested. "Perhaps a new potion to treat gout for those who are allergic or cannot tolerate prickly ash bark or sassafras."

Her simple theory intrigued him, but over the years he had dismissed the idea of cutting up ingredients differently, as his time was very limited. Severus often took the work of others as a starting point, as he never had the luxury of time for trial and experiment. The one time he did set aside a few weeks of one summer at Hogwarts, his effort was met with one failed experiment after another. His other chance to experiment from scratch with Miss Brown was discouraged, as she wanted to develop new potions as soon as possible to get them to market and not spend the months or possibly years required to start a potion from scratch, resulting in many failures before reaching success. Severus had once held the idea of trying the same exact thing that Hermione had suggested, but hadn't seen any evidence to support the hypothesis.

'Perhaps if I get out of England and have all the time in the world, I can pursue such a course of research.' Severus placed that thought in the back of his mind to mull over in the future.

Severus kept his arms folded across his chest defensively. He felt as if his craft was under attack, despite the thought that she was might be on to something he had previously thought of as well. "Don't you think that in the art of Potions, which is thousands of years old, someone would have experimented to see if there was some merit to that idea?"

Giving a light chuckle, Hermione answered him boldly. "From a Muggle-born's perspective… no." Severus sat there in stunned silence. "In a world that continues to do the same thing the same way over and over and over because it's been thought to be the best without anyone being interested in trying and find a better way, I'm not sure if there has been a new way of preparing ingredients for Potions in a long time."
"So you think we should just start cutting up ingredients in different ways for tried and proven potions?" Severus was doing his best not to use his usual lecturing voice, especially since his ire was raised. "Just start chopping and slicing randomly and see what we get?" He tried his best to remain pleasant and conversational instead of combative and argumentative.

"Of course not! I mean, what would happen if you used diced banana slugs instead of shredded ones in a potion using lobalug?" Before Severus spoke, she answered her own question. "You'd have an exploding cauldron!" Hermione used an example that she clearly remembered from when she was partnered with Neville in her school days. It had resulted in some second-degree burns on her arms and one leg.

"Or powdered tail bone of the Japanese double-tailed fox instead of coarsely ground in a fast boiling potion? You will have a vapor cloud that could burn out your lungs if inhaled," Severus said, remembering his own short stint in the infirmary from Longbottom's misjudgment on the difference between the two textures.

"Or using whole fairybells instead of minced for the Endurance of the Heart potion," Hermione said, her voice rising.

Severus visibly winced from the implications of that potential damage it would cause, as even Longbottom had never got around to doing something so dangerously disastrous as that. If he had, Voldemort would have thanked Mr. Longbottom posthumously, as he would have succeeded where the Dark Lord had not by eradicating half of Hogwarts along with Potter.

"From our previous discussions, I’ve received the impression that you know something about Potions beyond the average wizard," Hermione said.

Of course Severus knew something about Potions, but during their discussions, he had to downplay just how much he knew, not wanting to tip his hand too heavily lest Hermione realize too quickly who he was. There were only so many Potions masters in England; Hermione was probably aware of most of them. At least during their talks she didn’t act like the know-it-all he once remembered. She talked with him and not at him.

"My point is that we should not ignore what we have learned, but to perhaps take some ingredients that we have used the same way, century after century and use them differently. Or at least approach their preparation differently." Hermione rose from her seat and began pacing, her hands gesticulating as she talked. "I mean, look at Ashwinder eggs. For three years I have been testing them the same way and in each case, I wind up having to go through about twenty percent of the batch before I get a test sample that isn't cracked or ruined."
The Potions master had been looking at Ashwinder eggs with an increasing frequency. Not only had he been looking at them for the past few weeks, as he and Miss Brown had been working on variations of sex potions, he had also tested them while working at the Department of Standards and Regulations as a young wizard during his apprenticeship days. One had to bring a cauldron of water mixed with lye to a low boil and then place an Ashwinder egg into the simmering solution. If the egg did not crack while landing on the bottom, it might crack during the boiling process, as the sudden temperature change from being frozen to boiled often split the shell open, ruining the sample that was used as an indicator to see if the batch was usable or rotten. In most cases, twenty percent of a batch of eggs was used before a good sample would go through the boiling phase and remain intact. The Ashwinder egg could then be cut in half and examined to see if it had the concentric circles of alternating purple and green. Even Severus, despite his talents, usually went through fifteen percent of a batch before getting a viable sample for testing during his days at the Department.

"So last year I did a little experiment," Hermione confessed. "When a batch of Ashwinder eggs came in, I ran two tests side by side. One was the traditional way where I wait till the lye solution comes to a slow boil before dropping the egg in, the other method I tried was to put the egg in the bottom of the cauldron, fill the cauldron with the solution, then bring it to a low boil."

Severus leaned forward in his seat, resting his arm on his knees while cocking his head to the side. "And what makes you think your 'new' method of testing will work?" He was skeptical that her alternate method would even work, but he had no reason why it shouldn't.

"Because it has," Hermione said proudly. She waited for Calleo to challenge her. "I tested every single batch with the double test for six months straight and in the end my new method was better. Now when a batch comes in, I only need to test one egg instead of twenty-eight or twenty-nine out of a 12-dozen shipment. I did have to use that double testing time to find out what the time difference was between the old way and my way though."

"And? The time difference?" Severus asked, licking his lips and curious as hell about her results. The implications of her actions meant that the supply of Ashwinder eggs on the market had increased without a hike in the number of creatures required to produce them or in labor costs to collect and ship them.

"Instead of boiling the egg for eighteen minutes, you time it for twelve minutes once the water starts on a low boil and the egg starts to dance on the bottom of the cauldron. But not that my efforts are of any importance," Hermione said dismissively. "I told my superior about my findings and she shot them down. She said I was to test ingredients and the Ministry was not in the business of financing any costly and unsanctioned experiments on ingredients that I'm only supposed to test the usual way. Even though I found a way to increase the percentage of Ashwinder eggs that make it to market, reducing costs overall throughout the industry, she finds it's of no relevance." Hermione gave an indignant snort of disgust and she started pacing faster, becoming angrier. "I still
test them my new way though. I mean, hasn’t anyone noticed that the price of Ashwinder eggs on
the open market has dropped astronomically? It was right after I started testing one egg only that
the prices started to drop. Has no one noticed or made mention of this? No! And if anyone is
making mention of it, I'm sure my boss, Madam Dushka, is taking all the credit for it!"

Hermione's statement made Severus' mind whir and turn even faster. Was Hermione the reason
why Miss Brown only recently expressed an interest in developing a line of sex potions? Was
Hermione the cause for Severus' calculated future wealth that he counted on from the development
of such a profitable line? It would be beyond ironic that Hermione was the reason for a new line of
potions, resulting in Severus taking her on as a client due to said potions. He would have to
question Miss Brown in such a way as not to arise suspicions about her sudden interest in sex
potions.

Giving a great huff, Hermione sat back down on the settee next to Severus rubbing her temples.

"Do you have a headache? Shall I get a vial of headache relief potion?" Severus offered.

"Yes, my head is throbbing," Hermione groaned, "but I've already taken two vials of that stuff
today. I'm just so tense. I wound up interviewing this… child today to take my old co-worker's
place. He was this incredibly annoying, arrogant, vain, vapid… DUNDERHEAD!"

Severus laughed lightly, then quickly apologized, knowing that Hermione was in no mood to be
laughed at, having been in similar moods frequently. "I'm sorry, it's just the way you said
'dunderhead,' that I found so amusing." It was humorous to him to see a former student use a term
he frequently bandied in a similarly frustrated and derogatory manner. "Please go on."

"After I deemed him not worthy of going on to the next level of interview, he propositioned me for
dinner and other things, just so he could get the job," Hermione said, still indignant over the whole
incident. "Well, I informed him in so many words that I was married and my husband could pound
him to pulp. The next thing I know, my boss invites him into her office to offer him the job. I
swear, he must be baring her to get the job, because that is the only way I can see this idiot
getting it. I never thought I'd see the day that wizards slept their way to the top. He only wants this
position to bide his time until his Potions apprenticeship starts next spring. An apprenticeship that
should have gone to me, if it was rightly based on merit, but it seems this imbecile's father bought
him the position."

This was news to Severus. He had no idea that Hermione wanted to study Potions beyond her
N.E.W.T.s. "You wanted to become a Potions mistress?"
The rankled witch sighed heavily. "Originally, I wanted to study Transfiguration or Charms, but when the two professors I know who would have taken me as an apprentice died during the war, I owled every other Transfiguration and Charms master and mistress throughout Europe. It seems no one wanted to take me, all claiming to have no openings, but I've learned otherwise. I think it's because I'm Muggle-born."

Severus was silently seething on the inside. He knew the real reason why Hermione could not get an apprenticeship and it was all due to the machinations of Calpurnia Fudge. He would have liked to enlighten Hermione about the real reason why she was stuck with no opportunities to master a field of study and was saddled with the drudgery of testing ingredients, but now was not the time. Perhaps once he had revealed himself or Hermione had realized who he really was would he tell her about the outside forces affecting her destiny, perhaps using it as a bargaining chip if she was reluctant to help him. But for now, Severus was not going to reveal anything on that matter, especially since such information might encourage her to leave a job that was key to his escape.

"So once all those options were closed, I would have looked at Arithmancy, but the only person I would have bothered to apprentice under died during the war as well; she was also a professor of mine. I then turned to Potions." Giving a small sigh of exasperation, Hermione closed her eyes and began massaging her temples, as her headache was returning full force, despite the potions she had taken to counter it earlier. "I tried all the Potion masters throughout Europe, but it seemed that none of them would take me either."

Noting her tension and wanting to distract her with the next line of questions, hopefully keeping her too preoccupied to pay too much attention to the nature of his questions other than answer them, Severus remarked, "You look quite tense. If you will allow me, I can ease some of the tension in your neck and shoulders so that your headache is lessened."

Hermione opened her eyes and he saw her mentally debate the possibilities of his offer. "I really don't want to be a bother," Hermione pleaded without much conviction.

"Nonsense, you have a headache and it seems that no potion is going to help this constant state of tension. Besides, how can you enjoy dinner if you are suffering from a headache?" Severus insisted, trying to think of this as another chance to keep up his hand strength and not a chance to touch Hermione's skin for an extended period of time.

A look of grateful relief graced Hermione's features. "That's very kind of you. Actually, that sounds very good right now." She wished she wasn't feeling the constant throb of her head, as it was going to distract from the sensation of Calleo touching her.

Rising from his seat, Severus walked behind the settee and gently placed his hands on Hermione's shoulders. Once his hands gripped the taut piano strings masquerading as tendon and muscle
underneath her skin, Hermione let out an appreciative sigh of relief as her head sagged forward slightly. From where Severus was standing above and behind her, he had a very nice view of Hermione's cleavage down the front of her shirt. The way her shirt buckled and bunched as his hands moved and grasped her shoulders made the fabric gape, giving him a beautiful view of the swell of her breasts and a tiny peek at the top of her lacy bra, her chest rising as she sighed once more.

After he caught himself transfixed on the sight of Hermione’s breasts, Severus quickly got back to the matter at hand. "You mentioned that your Transfiguration, Charms and Arithmancy professors died during the war. What about your Potions professor?"

There were many reasons why he wanted to ask this particular question since she’d brought it up. One was to see if there was another opportunity to drop hints at his identity; another was to discern her feelings towards her old professor and Order colleague.

Caught in euphoric bliss, Hermione began to answer as if drugged by Veritaserum. The pleasurable tingles of Calleo's hands easing her tension were spreading through her body, quickly putting her into a trance-like state. The delicious rush of endorphins spread throughout her body with a thrill, and coupled with the sensation of Calleo's warm and strong hands, she felt her skin goose-pimple along her neck, arms and chest.

She was so preoccupied by the warmth of Calleo's strong hands upon her skin kneading away at her muscles, and the scent of his cologne that had possessed her mind, that she began to speak honestly after letting out one more grateful and encouraging groan. "My old Potions professor disappeared right after the war. I never had a chance to ask him. By the time I had exhausted all avenues in Transfiguration and Charms, he was already gone. Not that I wouldn't have minded an apprenticeship in Potions, as I love it, but it wasn’t my first choice. Besides, if he was still around, I doubt he would have allowed me to apprentice under him."

"Why not?" he asked in a low and softly coaxing voice.

He was having a hard time concentrating on Hermione's answer, as she started rolling her head around, stretching out the relaxing muscles. Her actions presented a nice view of her long and slender pale neck. If leaned down just a bit, Severus could have nuzzled her neck before sinking his teeth into her skin. The fact that he was wearing a mask still didn’t tamp down the urge to attach his mouth to the side of her neck after she gave another long appreciative sigh of his ministrations.

"I got the distinct impression over the years that he didn't like me one bit," she answered truthfully.
Her answer was like a bucket of cold water being poured on his head, bringing him back to the moment. Severus' hands stilled for a moment before they continued going back to the knots in Hermione's shoulders and neck. Careful to modulate his voice so it was pleasant and not accusatory, though he knew her perceptions were correct, Severus asked, "Why would you think that?"

"Because he loathed the people I associated with. In addition, there were a few incidences that did not endear me to him. Like stealing some boomslang skin from him, which he initially blamed upon my friend, but later realized it was me who had done it."

'Ha! She finally admits it,' the ex-professor thought triumphantly.

"Then my friends and I cast an Expelliarmus on him in my third year during a misunderstanding," Hermione continued as she was lulled into a compliant state from Calleo's attentions.

'Misunderstanding my arse,' Severus thought bitterly, but kept massaging. 'You attacked a professor!'"

"I set his robes on fire when I thought he was trying to curse my friend by hexing his broom during a Quidditch game," she said, half-mumbling.

"Hmmm, quite a few reasons for you not to be endeared into his bosom," Severus said with more austerity than he intended.

"And that doesn't take into account the whole house rivalry thing as well," she added lazily.

Hermione paused, wondering if Calleo would piece together the information and figure out whom she was referring to. She then momentarily wondered if Calleo was a Death Eater, thus knowing about Severus, but then thought Lavender would not have someone in her employ she did not trust. Lavender was a member of Dumbledore's Army and her best friend was a permanent resident at St. Mungo's due to the actions of Death Eaters. Then again, she had Draco in her employ, but he was an ex-Death Eater, just like Snape was.

Not really caring at the moment, Hermione added, "I was a Gryffindor."

"I see. So he must have been a Slytherin," Severus answered, more to prompt her to keep talking
than to confirm anything that was obvious.

"Right in one. He had a rather strong dislike for Gryffindors. Or at least it seemed that way from all the disparaging remarks he made about me and my House all the time." Hermione let a low rumble settle in her throat as Calleo's hands moved up her neck and into her hairline, digging his thumbs into pressure points along the base of her skull.

Severus meditated on her words as he worked on her neck. She was right; he would have not accepted her request for an apprenticeship with him right after the war, but to hear what he knew in his heart was exactly as she stated made something inside of him unsettled. It wasn't guilt over the truth of the matter, but he wasn't exactly proud of his actions. Still, there was nothing to feel guilty over, as it was all in the past and he hadn't even been around to turn her down if she had ever got around to asking. There was no point in mulling over spilt potion asking unanswerable questions of what-if and what might have been.

Making a noncommittal noise, Severus stepped out on a limb and said, "Maybe if he got to know you as something other than a student, perhaps with a few years apart, he might have reconsidered."

It was true; he did see Hermione in a new light since she'd come back into his life. She was no longer a student and child, but a young woman and a client with whom he actually enjoyed discussing ideas. Many of the traits that had annoyed him earlier in life didn't nettle him so much, or maybe it was that she had matured and those qualities that irritated him had mellowed over time. Perhaps it was a bit of both. Whatever the case, she was a means to an end. Perhaps a little truth would further solidify her trust in him when the time came and she knew who he was.

"It doesn't matter anymore," Hermione said with resignation. "No one wants an apprentice who's been out of school as long as I have. I'll have to do the best I can with my situation."

He remained quiet, making no comment on her last statement. Severus was doing the best he could in his present situation, as much as he loathed it.

"How's that?" he asked regarding her headache, letting his hands rest upon her shoulders while his thumbs rubbed in lazy circles.

"Mmmmmm, much better," she whispered dreamily before inhaling deeply. The scent of Calleo reminded her of something she had wanted to ask for the past few weeks. "Oh, Calleo? What is the name of that cologne you're wearing?"
Surprised by her question, and at a loss with a direct answer as Draco had not picked out a name for the new cologne that was going into production soon, the dark haired wizard replied, "You are aware that my… employer, Miss Brown, owns a cosmetic company?" Hermione nodded. "Well, at times I am given the chance to sample products that have not been introduced into the marketplace yet. This scent I’m wearing is new and has not been given a name."

Hermione craned her neck up to look at him with a contented smile. "It smells very nice. I remember you wearing it the first night I came here. Since then that scent has... 'Consumed me? Made me obsessed with thoughts of you?’ "... haunted me." Since the cologne was not readily available to the public, then maybe it really was Calleo she had spotted that night in Flourish and Blotts.

If he had not been wearing his mask, he would have cocked a speculative brow at her, but since such simple non-verbal gestures were lost with his facial accessory on, instead he cooed, "Really?"

"Yes," she smiled back at him more. "It's very… masculine. It's almost… hedonistic."

Severus was very proud of this cologne he had developed, as it would smell different on each wizard. It would accentuate a wizard's natural body scents while also smelling like odors that were complimentary to the wizard's personality. This would be something to discuss with Draco on Saturday, as Draco had been using it himself around Ginny.

"And what does it smell like to you? What scents do you pick up from it?" he asked, clearly curious as she had proven to have such a keen and well-trained nose. It amused him that she thought he smelled hedonistic. Was he a hedonist? Doubtful, he preferred to think of himself as a sensualist, but the young witch seemed to revel in it regardless.

Inhaling, she closed her eyes. "Most notably: patchouli, sandalwood and musk. There are some leather, woody and herbal notes, but it's hard to discern the herbal scents with the patchouli being dominant and the cassoulet drifting in from the kitchen, but they are definitely there."

He was pleased. Many of the clients he had worn the cologne for had all complimented him on it, but none had asked for the name nor named the scents that enhanced his own natural body chemistry. Miss Brown had noticed the same scents Hermione had listed, so it seemed that the cologne did not smell different to each witch. His fear that the potion had failed would have been confirmed if Hermione had said that she smelled anything but the scents she listed. The potion added to the cologne appeared to be successful and he could add another product to the long list of items he received royalties on.
"Well, when Miss Brown does settle on a name, I shall inform you," Severus told her. "Are you ready for dinner, Madame?" He extended his arm to usher her the few feet between his settee and the table in the middle of the room.

A slight blush crept upon Hermione's cheek. Calleo's gallant gesture made her feel self-conscious and at the same time utterly feminine. Straightening her spine to improve her posture, she rose and slipped her hand into the crook of his arm to walk the few steps to the table.

Severus guided her to the side farthest from the kitchen and pulled her chair out for her, helping her sit down. Once she was seated, he excused himself to the kitchen. He reemerged a moment later with salad and bread that he set down on the table before disappearing into the kitchen once more.

While Calleo was in the kitchen fetching what Hermione could only assume was the cassoulet that she smelled upon entering and dreamt about all week, she studied the table set before her. It was a square table with enough room to seat four, covered in a plain white linen tablecloth. The china was plain white with a slightly raised pattern reminding her of the simple dinnerware that bistros used during her trip to France. Hermione draped her linen napkin across her lap and wondered how many other clients Calleo had cooked for. She remembered that he mentioned dining alone, so she could only guess that she was one of a few who had dined with him or possibly the first. She heard what sounded like the oven door closing and continued her observations. A bottle of red wine that was already opened and a pitcher of water graced the table.

The door swung open as Calleo exited the kitchen, dragon hide gloves on his hands while carrying the cassoulet that had seductive tendrils of steam curling and rising up from the surface. As he set it on a trivet, the edacious witch saw the crusty top bubble.

Severus sat down and regarded Hermione for the briefest moment, his stomach fluttering with a slight case of nerves, for which he was annoyed at himself. 'Is this what it's like to have a real date?' The witch seated across from him smiled at him openly with her hands placed in her lap. 'This is not a date, she is a client and you are trying to gain her trust, stay focused!' Severus ignored the sense of anticipation he was having over the moment.

After clearing his throat, Severus said, "I hope you don't mind. I've taken the liberty of opening the wine before you came to give it a chance to breathe. Would you care for some this evening or would you prefer something else to drink?"

'No, not the wine, don't drink the wine,' her mind chanted, but found the tableau set before her so enticing and intoxicating, that she agreed to a glass as it would complete the whole scenario she had played in her mind over and over during the week.
"This is a nice gentle red I think you'll like. It's an Amarone, rather heavy on the fruity flavors and a bit rich," he informed her as he poured a small measure into her glass for a taste.

Hermione was feeling very sophisticated because of everything Calleo was doing for her this evening. He had the air of a gentleman, escorting her to the table, helping her with her seat, offering her a taste of the wine and seeking her approval before pouring her a glass, then one for himself.

"Please, help yourself," Severus said with a tilt of his head. This was a dinner between two people, not an opportunity to court her, though he was tempted to serve dinner to her, remembering the lessons his mother had taught him on behaving properly for a lady.

Once they had laden their plates with food, Hermione gave a great troubled sigh.

"Something bothering you?" Severus asked, wondering if now was the time when she would finally breakdown over the events of the past week.

Looking up from her plate to Calleo sitting across from her, the glass of red wine near her right hand, the table before her, she felt the pricking of tears at the corners of her eyes. This was perfect. This was what it should be like with her and Ron and it wasn’t and most probably never would be. It also reminded her of her summer in France with her parents and the happy memories from that time when the world opened up just a little bit more for her and became a little more wondrous. That was the summer when French boys whistled at her, raking their eyes along her body and smiling at her in a way that was not innocent in the least, while her father placed a protective arm around her and her mother and she laughed at it all. This dinner reminded her of those little bistros she went to every night with her parents, when they allowed her to take a sip of their wine and made her feel so mature and grown up.

Hermione sniffed and dabbed the corner of her eye with her napkin. "I'm sorry," she apologized, "it's just all so…” *Romantic.* "Perfect." She turned her head to look out the window. "I almost expect to see the Eiffel Tower looming in the distance, it's wonderful. This reminds me of happier times." She almost said that no man had ever cooked for her before, but that would sound flirtatious and she was definitely not going to flirt with a man she was already once tempted to be unfaithful with.

Severus found himself struck by her words, suddenly remembering the last time he’d dined with a woman alone. Was his wife the last woman who dined with him like that? His felt his throat become dry and he forcefully shoved those thoughts away, instead focusing on Hermione sitting across from him and not the regrets and remorseful thoughts that might plague his mind if he let
himself think on them.

Keeping his thoughts to the present, he asked, "You've been to France?"

"Yes, my parents took me when I was thirteen." Hermione lifted her fork and began eating.

"Where did you go while you were there?" Severus began eating as well.

"Paris, Normandy coast, Bourgogne, the Loire Valley, mostly staying in the north," she replied after swallowing. "Have you been there?"

"A few times," Severus answered vaguely.

"Ooh, I noticed you didn't use breadcrumbs in your cassoulet," Hermione said brightly.

"I think breadcrumbs are unnecessary if made properly," Severus said, hoping she would not insist that they were needed.

"I think I've had cassoulet made every different possible way. While in France I practically lived on it. I ordered it every time it was on a menu. With breadcrumbs, without, made with duck or chicken, tomatoes or no tomatoes, it all tastes so wonderful when made well. And your cassoulet is simply heavenly," she praised him sincerely before eating another forkful.

"Thank you," he said in a deep and contented voice. Severus smiled to himself.

Hermione thought of asking him for the recipe, since he did mention it was a simple cassoulet, but from the tenderness of the duck and complex mingling of flavors, she knew this dish belied his description. Besides, some people were very protective of their recipes and Calleo just might be one of those people who guarded their recipes like state secrets. She did wonder again if Calleo had cooked for other women before or if she was the only one. As she silently warred with herself to curb her curiosity and not open her mouth to ask and ruin the illusion, Calleo spoke.

"Hermione, you look preoccupied. Care to share?" Severus asked, knowing she had some questions she was stopping herself from asking. This might be the prompting she needed to renew her sense
She grabbed her wineglass and took a sip while trying to think how to phrase the question. "Do you frequently cook for other women?" Hermione avoided the word "client", as the mere mention of the word would cheapen her experience, not that her question was any more tactful with or without the word.

Regarding the woman across the table, he realized that Ginny was right. Hermione was the sort of woman who could easily become attached to him. Severus knew it wasn't jealousy, but she was possibly seeking some sort of validation that she was somehow more special than the other witches who visited him.

"I have a few personal friends who I cook for once in a while, but regarding those who do not know me without my mask, no. You are the first I have cooked for," he answered.

His reply prompted another question from Hermione. "I noticed you did not wear your head scarf tonight. Do you always cover your hair or only sometimes?"

"Some of the times. It depends on whether I feel I can trust my company or not," Severus said, his voice dropping lower so it was almost a rumbling purr.

Hermione closed her eyes and swallowed. Calleo's voice was doing funny things with her head and some rather pleasant things to her body as well. Before her mind could stop her mouth, she asked, "Do you trust me?" Resting her hands on the table, she leaned slightly forward as she watched his non-verbal body language. She looked at him with cautious yet hopeful eyes.

Did Severus trust anyone? Yes, some people to a certain degree. But did he trust anyone completely? Not anymore. The last person he trusted blindly was Albus and the old wizard had failed him in death. Without Albus to speak up for him and defend him, he was incarcerated under the Death Eater Decree. Albus had broken his trust by not providing some plan for clearing Severus' name in the event of his death. But did he trust Hermione? He trusted her to do the right thing where he was concerned and help him gain his freedom. She had tried to help the house-elves despite their reluctance. He was no house-elf and he desperately wanted his freedom and was unjustly denied it. Of course he trusted her to not abandon him and to help him escape.

Regarding her, he leaned forward while reaching for her hand. Severus allowed his index finger to lightly trail down along the seam between her index and middle finger, caressing her skin. It was a simple gesture that could be interpreted many ways, but if anything, he did it to reinforce his reply. "Implicitly."
Holding her breath, Hermione gazed back at him. Her head swirled with emotions she couldn't name and was too frightened to consider. She felt like she was treading in waters too deep for her to handle and she would drown. The next question would have been to ask if he had ever removed his mask for any other woman, but she thought that might lead to answers and more questions she might truly regret.

The aroused witch sat back up in her seat and began vigorously spearing her salad with her fork, realizing her curiosity was getting the better of her again. Flustered and desperate to change the topic, Hermione said, "I really enjoyed the historical article on Chinese Potions during the Tang dynasty."

Severus was relieved she had quickly changed the subject. Right after his answer, Hermione had a fleeting look of adoration in her face that he recognized instantly. Through his work as a gigolo over the years, he periodically had to end business relationships with some clients as they became too emotionally attached to him. But this was the first woman he had not bedded who had looked at him in such a way. What he did not like was the sudden feeling that he welcomed such a look from her.

Once the topic of Potions and articles from *Eccentric Elixirs* was brought up again, Hermione and Severus spent the next couple hours in the safe territory of all things academic. During dessert, which consisted of strawberries lightly marinated in an orange Muscat with crème fraîche, the talk turned from Potions to Alchemy. Afterwards, they adjourned to the settee.

As Hermione sat sipping her Turkish coffee that Calleo had brewed in an Ibrik over a flame on the low table in front of them, she smiled to herself.

"You look happy," Severus noted.

"It seems this is the only place now where I feel happy," she said with a touch of melancholy.

"Knut for your thoughts."

The smile left Mrs. Weasley's face. "I wish I didn't have to leave here at the end of the night. When I'm here, I don't feel so... when I'm here, the disappointments and regrets of my life don't seem so oppressive. For a while, I get to forget my troubles and pretend that maybe life could be a little different. And when I talk about my troubles, you aren't judging me, knowing me as I am to the other people in my life. You don't have expectations of me to be perfect or smart or always being
the reasonable one."

There was silence as Severus let Hermione think to herself. He watched her run her finger along the rim of her demitasse as she meditated. It was a comfortable silence that held no desire to be filled with idyll talk. It felt good. The soundless tranquility was comforting as they both sat in contemplative quiet.

Severus supposed it was time to let Hermione get her latest troubles off her chest. With a gentle and concerned voice, he asked, "Would you like to talk about what happened at the Ministry last week?"

"No," she whispered. "Thank you for the letter, though. It was very sweet of you. I needed all the support I could get this past week, but I'm done crying now. I'm tired of crying."

Severus watched the veil of indifference settle over her features and her demeanor became infused with a blank coolness.

"Would you like to talk about anything else?" he asked intoning subjects of a personal nature.

"My husband?" She said it with such dispassion it was almost mechanical.

"Do you want to talk about him?"

"Not really. He came back last Thursday night right after…" She swallowed hard. "I gave him an ultimatum: divorce or counseling," Hermione said stoically.

"And?"

"He reluctantly agreed to counseling," she replied coldly. Hermione felt suddenly very tired and the hollowness inside of her returned. "I'd rather not talk about him. Something, anything else but death and my marriage."

"Of course, Hermione," he spoke in comforting tones.
Hermione’s sudden emotional detachment unsettled Severus. Over the years, he'd wished many of his clients would stop crying and turn off their emotions when complaining about their husbands, but to witness a woman who came to his doorstep and had already lost some of her vibrancy, lose her passion and spark so quickly made Severus feel empathy for her. He once used to be a passionate young man filled with not only hate, but hope and ambition. When his wife had died, the only thing left in him was hate and remorse. It was this deadness inside of him that allowed him to finally master Occlumency, as almost all emotions inside of him had withered into nothingness, so there was nothing to cloud his mind from the cold logic that kept him alive as a spy.

Now Hermione was sitting next to him with that same vacant stare that he recognized from years ago. As much as he didn't care to see her cry, he would rather see her wail mournfully, beating her hands upon his chest than to sit here like a statue with a dying spirit trapped inside.

"Tell me," Severus began, hoping that going back to Potions talk would cheer her up, "what other experiments other than the Ashwinder eggs have you done?"

Hermione gave him a weak, but grateful smile. "Unfortunately, I haven't had the chance to do any other experimentation. I barely have time to keep up with all the ingredients coming into the country. Do you experiment with Potions?"

Now was Severus’ chance to drop more hints. Modulating his voice to mix in the hint of regret and slight anger while a little wistful, Severus said, "I used to, up until about four years ago." The statement was technically accurate. Severus did not experiment with Potions, he consulted on the experimentation of them. He gave a restrained sigh, hoping to draw Hermione into more questions about himself.

"And now?" she asked tentatively.

"I…" The Potions master paused for the effect that he was hiding something. "I don't anymore."

Hermione weighed the options of asking more questions or giving Calleo his privacy and not digging into details any further. But the way he hesitated piqued her curiosity. She tamped down that damned bothersome notion to ask more questions and let it be. 'If he wanted to tell you more, he would have said something. He obviously doesn’t want to elaborate on it anymore than you do regarding Ron. Just drop it. If he wants to tell you, he will, don't ruin this with your curiosity.'

However, since he used to experiment before, that didn't mean he wasn't willing to talk about the
work he did years before. "So tell me about the experiments you used to do."

Severus smiled. No one had ever asked him about himself, understanding his need for anonymity, but this question allowed Severus to talk about himself without giving away anything too personal. "Gladly. What sort of experiments are you interested in? I did a great many."

A little of the fire returned to Hermione's eyes. The light in her eyes had faded over the previous week, but their intellectual conversations seemed to feed that little bit of radiance still left in her.

They talked until it was late. As they conversed about favorite Charms, Hermione heartily laughed for the first time in a long time. Calleo laughed during the conversation as well, which made Hermione's insides tingle from the deep and resonating sound that vibrated through her body. His laughter made her smile stretch a little wider than before; her cheeks were aching, as she hadn’t smiled so much in quite a while.

Noting the time, Hermione set down her tea. "I'd better be getting home," she said sadly. "As always, it's been a wonderful evening and I've truly enjoyed myself."

"As have I," Severus commented. He still couldn't believe she identified the two rare herbs he put in the tea that week.

"It was a lovely dinner. The cassoulet was beyond delicious, it was absolutely superb!" Hermione exclaimed exuberantly.

"Would you like to have dinner again next week?" Severus asked hopefully. It was so much more pleasant to dine with charming company who could discuss things other than one's lousy marriage, the way most of his clients did. Though Hermione had complained about her marriage in the past, he could understand and sympathize, as he personally knew the husband she bemoaned. Besides, most of the time was spent talking about subjects that interested them both.

She gave him her answer with a smile. "Same time next week?"

"Yes, that would be fine. Any requests?" the wizard asked, wondering what other dishes they might both enjoy.

"Surprise me," Hermione answered him. 'Oh shit.' That phrase came unbidden from the back of her
mind. It was the same phrase Ginny used when telling Lavender what she wanted Draco to do to her. *This isn't sex, it's just dinner. Stop panicking.* The thought of it still made her heart thump loudly in her chest.

"That I will." Severus went to fetch her cloak.

Hermione glanced around Calleo's flat once more and noticed the bed curtains. *Didn't they used to be a different color? Something other than black?* She quickly dismissed the notion when Calleo returned with her cloak.
Standing behind her as he helped her with her cloak, Severus said casually, "If ever you need to talk other than on our usual Thursday nights, or if there is an emergency, you're always welcome to stop by most evenings. I have Monday, Wednesday and Friday nights free. Use your knock and I'll know it’s you."

Glancing over her shoulder, Hermione noticed how close Calleo was to her. She inhaled his essence one last time, trying to memorize that scent of his that made her head swim and her mind reel. Looking up at him through her lashes, she could almost peer into his mask and see his eyes staring at her, penetrating her with his gaze. His hands on her shoulders felt so good that she didn't want to move yet. Any movement might cause him to remove their welcomed warmth and gentle pressure.

The tempted witch swallowed nervously, as she restrained herself from reaching up to touch him. "Thank you for your offer. That's very kind." Hermione closed her eyes and tried to gather her willpower. Her heart began beating in her rib cage like a bird stuck in a cage trying to take flight.

"Anything for you, Hermione," he whispered, memorizing the way her face looked in profile so close to him. The ex-Death Eater would do anything to gain her trust and ensure that Hermione would help him. Severus had to stop his hand from reaching out to stroke the side of her neck; it was so close. He could feel the heat from her skin radiating onto his hand.

If Hermione was not married and Severus was not a gigolo, this would have been the part when one or both parties would reach for the other for a spontaneous kiss. But the fact that Severus never kissed his clients and Hermione was a married woman with principles made the air thick with sexual tension that could find no release.

They both stood there, basking in the aura of the other, neither one wanting to be the first one to move away. In the quiet, they could hear each other's breathing and almost feel the air pulse with each other's heartbeats. Their breaths sounded ragged to their own ears, hypersensitive to their own bodies and to each other.

Hermione could feel his breath pooling on her shoulder, its warmth reaching her neck and making her shiver slightly with anticipation of what might happen.

Severus could smell her skin, that elusive sweetness of a woman's skin that no perfume or potion could ever capture. He was tempted to remove his mask and let Hermione know who he was, but prudence dictated that he be patient. The former spy forced himself to focus on the fact that if he wasn't careful, he would botch everything up by doing something rash, urged on by hormones that seemed to spring up from nowhere.
"Until next week," he whispered. He did not dare to kiss her hand tonight for fear he would not stop with one kiss.

"Yes. Until then," she said with a breathy response. "Good night, Calleo."

"Good night." Severus made the first move and opened the door so that Hermione could leave.

Just before he closed the door, Hermione turned and gave him one last look from the hallway. Her face bespoke pages of conflict within herself.

As the door clicked shut, Severus rested up against it, sliding down to the floor with his hair fisted in his hands. "Oh, that was close," he said to himself. Breathing deeply, he tried to regain his composure.

Never before had Severus been tempted to do anything based on pure instinct; such was the desire to kiss Hermione tonight. Never had passion dictated that he do something other than what his logical mind instructed.

Was it foolish to offer her a chance to come and visit him more than their once a week scheduled meeting? Perhaps, but increasing the number of visits Hermione had within a period of time would speed up the process of his escape from Britain. It would be something to discuss on Saturday when he and Draco had their once a month product testing session.

For now, Severus needed to get drunk… very drunk, or he might let his mind wander to the reason why he had almost kissed Hermione and why it had troubled him to see her so emotionally dead earlier.

He just hoped Marf would have a vial of hangover relief potion available when he woke the next morning. The ex-Death Eater needed to be sharp when discussing last week's events with Shacklebolt and Draco.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 25 A/N: Fleab has done a lovely fan art illustration for this chapter, for the scene when Severus helps Hermione with her cloak at the end of the night and almost brushes his hand against her neck. Fleab took a little liberty with the Bauta mask, but it
works, as you can see the restrained temptation on Severus' face. Available for viewing here: http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/post/130554392895/fan-art-by-fleab-and-they-didnt-live-happily

In cased you missed it, the chapter title was a play on the movie title, "My dinner with André."

"Amarone wines are like no other wines in the world. After harvest, the grapes are air dried on racks for several month. During this time the sugars concentrate and the botrytis oxidizes the grape acids and increases the glycerin content. Sometimes refereed to as " the Gentle Giant of Italy" this wine typically expresses aromas of dried cherry or prune flavors with rich, mouth-filling texture. With age, will develop more complex characters such as leather, mushroom, licorice, tea or tobacco. This wine requires hearty dishes such as game, venison, pheasant, lamb stew, duck cassoulet, coq au vin." Unfortunately, the link to the source of this material is no longer valid and is a defunct web site. http://www.globalchefs.com/wineGuy/indexWineGuy.htm

B/N: Give Betz and Horserider the WOOT, ya'll. Both very busy women who make time in their lives for HG/SS fanfic, and they've been churning these chapters out like a baby does poo (please forgive the analogy). Was this some hot stuff or what? The plot thickens and it gets harder and harder to wait for Betz to send me the next chapter these days. ~
Siren
“Beauty Is Only Potions Deep"

Chapter Summary

Hermione spends the day at the spa relaxing with Ginny while Severus and Draco head off to test the latest batch of beauty products.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Six
“Beauty Is Only Potions Deep”

Disclaimer: Let's all thank Miss Rowling for allowing us all to play with her characters and not suing our pants off for engaging in our little fanfic writing habits… so long as we make the proper disclaimers that she owns it all and we don't make any money off of it.

Saturday couldn't come soon enough for Hermione. Friday had been filled with one unpleasant situation after another.

Madam Dushka was waiting for Hermione in her office to notify her that her yearly performance review was coming up, and a large part of that depended on how quickly the junior witch could train Trevor Spawn in his new position as Potions Ingredient Tester. Friday morning was one rush job after another, ordered personally by Madam Dushka for certain apothecaries that had connections within the Ministry, as there had only been one Potions tester alive and working during the week. Friday day turned into Friday night, with Hermione still at work finishing up some last-minute jobs for Madam Dushka. By the time the weary witch stumbled home and out of her fireplace, exhausted and reeking like the dragon dung she tested just before heading home, she did not have the strength to bother eating dinner, much less cook dinner. Hermione forced herself to take a shower before collapsing into bed.

Sleep that night was also a nightmare in and of itself. Twice she woke up to find the bed squeaking and gently rocking, only to realize it was Ron wanking in the middle of the night. Hermione laid there in the dark pretending to be asleep, listening as Ron breathed as quietly as possible while his hand stroked his own flesh and thumped against his loins.
The second time she woke up to his masturbating again a few hours later, she opened her eyes and surreptitiously watched him in the dark. The moon, in its last quarter, shone through the window, faintly illuminating her husband’s profile. His flat, pale, hairless chest looked ghostly blue as it rose and fell quickly with each restrained gasping breath; while one of his long arms moved quickly, his free hand cupped his sac. Ron's eyes were shut tight, as his mouth hung slightly open from panting. When he came, his body tensed for a moment as he hissed, his mouth forming soundless words Hermione could not make out.

Ron went to the bathroom to clean up, giving Hermione a chance to roll over while not alerting him to her wakeful state. When he climbed back into bed, she felt the bed dip and heard the springs creak. As much as Hermione did not want to have sex with her husband, still being angry with him, she did miss the casual contact that they once had. Since Marge’s funeral, Ron hadn't touched her once. She missed the physical contact of her friend and husband: a small hug here, a stroke of the back there, a playful pat on the arse. From the cold disposition he now directed towards his wife when they were both awake and in each other's company, she wasn't about to make the first move and touch him, as she felt it would not be welcome.

When Saturday morning came, Hermione woke to find Ron had already left early for the Quidditch game. The witch was guilty with relief that she wouldn't have to face him that morning, and she could just get ready without having to deal with another outburst or his hostile glare.

Once she had eaten a simple breakfast of toast and tea, Hermione dressed and Apparated over to Harry and Ginny's home. Harry gave his wife a quick buss on the lips before the two witches Flooed over to Diagon Alley. They wanted to do some shopping before going to Madam Hope's Eternal Springs and Day Spa.

The witches went to their own vaults at Gringotts separately instead of joining the other, keeping the stomach churning cart rides down to a minimum.

As Hermione stepped into her and Ron's vault, she noticed the pile of coins was quite a bit larger than she expected. Instead of the twenty-five odd extra Galleons she was expecting from her frugal breakfasts and lunches – and the forfeit of Calleo's fees – there were a couple hundred extra Galleons she could not account for. Mrs. Weasley had always been very good in accounting for every Galleon she and Ron spent, keeping the household budget in check with their meager salaries, but there was quite a bit more than she expected. Wondering if some of it was due to Ron's new temporary position as starting Keeper for the Chudley Cannons, the thrifty witch took only what she calculated she had saved herself, plus expected expenses for the next month and rent.

Strolling along Diagon Alley, Hermione’s eyes began catching items displayed in the windows that she had never before noticed. Now that she had a little money to spare, purchases that she had denied herself or put off came to the forefront of her mind. Flourish and Blotts had the latest
selection of Charms and Alchemy books in the window. Ginny had to bodily drag Hermione away from the front window, joking that the older witch left slobber marks and nose prints on the glass. The stationery shop next door was still yet another temptation to browse and possibly spend her steadfastly scrimped pile of money. Another yank of Hermione's arm from her redhead friend, and the two were finally ambling along the crowded thoroughfare for some clothes shopping.

Hermione was ready to pass by Madam Malkin's and head to the second-hand robe shop, but Ginny cajoled Hermione into the slightly pricier establishment. She hadn't been into Madam Malkin's to buy new robes since just before the beginning of her seventh year at Hogwarts. Mrs. Weasley immediately started looking at the clearance rack for deeply discounted clothes. The only thing that inhabited that dark corner toward the back were robes and cloaks in the most horrendous colors, including neon chartreuse, a rather sickly muted-pastel blue, an ungodly violent fuchsia, baby shit green, and dirty mustard.

Picking up the mustard-colored robe, Hermione held it to her face, wincing at how the color made her skin look green in the mirror.

"That is definitely not your color, young lady," lectured the enchanted glass, her own reflection chucking the offending garment over her shoulder.

"Put that back," came Ginny's voice drifting over the rack. "You will not buy that. Come here, I've picked something out for you."

Hermione reluctantly emerged from the clearance section empty-handed to see Ginny holding up a simple yet elegantly cut robe in royal sapphire blue, and another one cut with a slightly higher waistline in royal purple.

"Ginny, I can't buy those!" Hermione protested.

"Why not?" Mrs. Potter countered.

"Well… well… those colors are just so… strong," Hermione explained.

"Hermione… dear… if you buy another outfit in one of those safe, dingy colors that make your skin look pasty, I swear I'll Incendio the thing before we even get out of the store," Hermione's friend threatened with a sincere smile that said she would indeed do such a thing. "These are your colors. You should be wearing jewel tones: emerald green, ruby red, sapphire blue, and royal
"I don't know. I don't think these will go with anything I own," Hermione said, trying to talk her friend out of making her try them on. If anything, she was afraid if she tried them on, Ginny would be right and Hermione would be tempted to buy them both.

"Just try them on. No one is twisting your arm to buy them. Just to see if the color does look good on you," Ginny pleaded with a hopeful expression. "If the color looks good on you, you can always buy a few tops and skirts later on to go with them. Besides, black, white and dark grays will always go with it, and you have a few of those colors in your wardrobe."

The older witch frowned, knowing that once they were on her back, she would most definitely be leaving the store with at least one of them. She was too afraid to look at the price tag for fear she couldn't afford even one.

Ginny cocked her head and said, "Listen, I'll make a bargain with you. Try them on and if you like both, you buy one, I'll buy you the other."

"No, Ginny. I couldn't." The brunette shook her head.

The younger witch made a counter offer. "How about if we make it an early birthday present? Hmmm?"

Thinking for a moment, Hermione reluctantly agreed. "All right."

As the royal purple robe slipped over her shoulders, Ginny let out a small gasp of glee as her eyes lit up.

"Oh, that is definitely a good color on you. Your skin looks great with that on," Ginny enthusiastically declared.

Hermione turned around and looked at herself in the mirror, trying to find something of fault with the color, but couldn't. It was a fabulous color on her, just as Ginny professed; however, it was one size too large. Just as she was about to tell Ginny about it being too big, Madam Malkin came up to the pair of shoppers.
"Is there anything I can help you two ladies with?" Madam Malkin said, looking at Ginny and not Hermione, as Mrs. Potter’s clothes showed she was the one with money to spend.

Mrs. Potter stuck her nose up in the air haughtily. "Yes, my friend here needs this on a smaller size. The color is perfect. Go fetch it, please." Ginny was doing a rather good imitation of Narcissa Malfoy, from what Hermione could remember of meeting the woman, including the little dismissive wave of the hand.

"Right away, Mrs. Potter," the store owner simpered before scurrying away to get the right size.

"That was rather snobbish of you, Ginny," Hermione stated, dumbstruck by her friend’s sudden attitude. "I'm surprised you would behave that way."

Ginny stepped forward conspiratorially. "Let me tell you a little something Draco taught me," she whispered. “In certain shops, when you act like a rich bitch with piles of money to spend, the sales staff will help you and even go out of their way to make a sale. If you act like a decent human being, they don’t think you have the Galleons to spend and you will not get what you really want, because they won't fetch it for you out of the back, and so you wind up buying something you don't want instead."

Mrs. Weasley frowned at this arrogant attitude towards sales staff, but secretly wondered if there was some merit to this idea, as she had the hardest time getting the sales staff of some stores to help her.

Leaning forward even further, Ginny whispered, "I hate acting like a snob, but even when I married Harry and finally had the money to buy nice clothes, I couldn't get the sales staff to get me what I wanted. Once Draco taught me that little trick, I've never had a problem finding exactly what I want here."

Hermione raised her eyebrows in shock over that particular revelation, surprised that behaving normally towards a salesperson would result in getting snubbed and ignored. She highly doubted she could ever act that way to another person, even if it was to get the right-sized robes in the right color.

Madam Malkin came bursting out of the back room with an armful of robes in different styles, all in the same royal purple. "While I was back there, I saw these other styles in the same color. Would you care to try these on?"
Stunned, Hermione began trying on the dozen or so different robes before picking one that flattered her figure to the fullest.

"Good!" Mrs. Potter said with some finality. "Now go find us what you can in this color," Ginny's evil twin ordered Madam Malkin while holding up the royal sapphire blue robe.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Saturday couldn't come soon enough for Severus. Friday had been filled with one unpleasant situation after another.

His weekly parole meeting consisted of the usual question followed by a new mandatory procedure that required Shacklebolt to perform a Prior Incantato, to determine which spells Severus and Draco had cast during the past week. The Auror regretfully informed them that he would have to do that every week as part of a new measure in the aftermath of Dolohov's attack.

Dolohov's violent behavior resulted from a lingering frustration and growing resentment over having such limited powers, including his restrictive and demeaning job prospects, the inability to have a Floo connection at his place of residence, and the revoking of his Apparating license, among many other things. Severus had warned Shacklebolt that this sort of thing might happen when the Death Eater Decree first came out. However, this was the first incident where a rogue Death Eater was captured and questioned before being sent off to Azkaban; previously caught Death Eaters had been subdued and hexed by Aurors to the point where they could not answer questions coherently enough.

Miss Brown was in a perpetually foul mood all day Friday, snapping at Severus, to which he snapped back with equal irritation. He was so vexed that he didn’t get around to asking Miss Brown about her reason for starting this new line of sex Potions, and if it had anything to do with the price of Ashwinder eggs.

Friday night was spent late at the office dealing with a slew of owls addressed to Sebastian Delgado. One was from the British Potions Hobbyist League, a rather selective and elitist group of pretentious, thieving, sycophantic imbeciles he ever had the pleasure of refusing to join. The only reason they met and invited new members was to try to ensnare some unsuspecting Potions master or mistress into the group in order to get the person to talk about some new and experimental potion he or she was working on; they would then steal it and claim it for their own before the duped victim had time to publish the new potion as their own.

Severus was tempted to send a very pointed, but polite, refusal of their “kind offer” using a parchment infused with a rather nasty itching powder; he had developed this parchment during his apprenticeship years ago with hopes of sending letters to James Potter and Sirius Black. The
Potions master never had the chance to test it on anyone, but he calculated the end result would be the affected person clawing the top layer of skin off most of their body before the potion wore off. Of course, he had also developed an antidote, but only did so in case of some unusual accident where he himself was exposed to it.

As Severus' research notes on the itching powder were buried somewhere among his many notebooks, he set fire to the invitation with an *Incendio* instead. The other letters he received were offers for Mr. Delgado to come work for other Potion manufacturing firms, as Miss Brown always gave Severus' nom de guerre as her firm’s consulting Potions master. Each letter was cast into the rubbish bin after being torn in half. What galled him more was the fact that with the name Severus Snape, he couldn't get himself a job with Potions with the legal restrictions; but with some made-up name and a few vague and unreliable references, and with word of mouth, he could command more respect and money than under his own name. He told himself it didn't matter, as he hoped that in less than a year he would be somewhere else, where his past – his one colossal mistake as a youth – would not be a hindrance to him anymore.

Saturday morning dawned. Severus set Marf out for the weekly shopping run, including a few particular items for next Thursday night's dinner with Hermione. After the elf was on his way, Severus grabbed his cloak and went to knock up Draco before heading off to the Lovely Lavender's headquarters.

Once inside the building, they picked up the latest test batch of potions, creams, lotions and assorted bottled beauty products they would be testing that day before Flooing over to the spa. There were a few new items Severus and Lavender believed they had finally perfected within the past month, but many of them were new and improved versions of existing products already on the market.

As much as Severus hating testing beauty products, he knew that part and parcel of being a Potions master was to test them on oneself before distributing to others. It was part of a Potions masters' equivalent to the Hippocratic oath. Draco, as part of the job of marketing, sales and advertising, tested the products with Severus once a month at a spa in which Miss Brown was a silent but substantial partner. The public was told that the men's side of the spa was closed down for monthly maintenance, while Draco and Severus would have the whole "men only" part of the spa to themselves in which to try products and relax all day long. Mr. Malfoy didn't mind having first crack at the new beauty products, and using them gave him insight into how to market and promote them.

They both realized the irony that Severus, who had been called many derogatory names regarding his unique and striking looks, was the creator behind forty percent of the beauty potions on the market.

As Severus and Draco exited the fireplace into the men’s lobby of Madam Hope's Eternal Spring...
and Day Spa, the only one to greet them was a house-elf. Only the house-elves were aware of the two ex-Death Eaters frequenting the spa once a month. As a large and silent partner, Miss Brown demanded that no one except the house-elves were to be on the men's side during the once-a-month closure, claiming that she needed to have her specialists test products without being disturbed by anyone. And as Miss Brown was in part the house-elves’ employer, they were sworn to secrecy regarding the two notorious wizards who came to the spa. Lavender claimed to her spa partners, who did not know the identity of these specialists, that it was to keep company trade secrets and guarantee products were not copied and brought to market before being launched by The Lovely Lavender Company. They agreed to her terms on the condition that she sell her products to the spa at slightly below wholesale costs.

The two wizards strode past the reception desk, down the hall and to the dressing room area.

As they undressed in their own private dressing rooms – large cubicles separated by Byzantine tapestries with chaise lounges and floor-length mirrors – they talked over the cloth dividers.

"Have you decided on a name for the latest cologne I developed?" Severus asked while unbuttoning his trousers.

Draco, in his own dressing room next door, answered, "Not yet. I want to get some feedback from you as to what your clients have said about it before I narrow down my list of possible names." The clink of his cuff links into a small vanity bowl rang like a bell, filling the momentary silence.

"Most of my clients haven't said much but to compliment me on my cologne. 'Oh, that smells nice,' but nothing beyond that." Severus hung his clothes on the enchanted valet station that would present him with clean pressed clothes at the end of his visit. "However, one client did say that the cologne on me smelled a bit hedonistic. She even commented that the scent of it had haunted her memory from the first time she smelled it on me."

Draco wrapped a towel around his waist and threw another exquisitely plush white one over his shoulder. "Oh! That gives me ideas! I like that." Pushing the curtain aside, he stepped out onto the cool tile floor.

Severus emerged a few seconds later covered in the same manner.

With a dramatic sweep of his hand in the air, Draco said in his best wireless announcer's voice, "'Haunt, the scent of you will haunt her.' I like that very much, a lot of potential there. Which client of yours said that?"
Averting his eyes and the question, Severus looked at the basket containing the several products that needed testing. "I suggest we start with the facial products, as using them after the sauna and steam room will affect the results."

"Fair enough," Draco agreed. "You still didn't answer my question. Who said that your cologne haunted her?"

"Hermione Weasley," Severus answered, trying not to grit his teeth in expectation of the slew of comments Draco could throw his way. When no snide quip came his way, Severus looked at Draco to see him looking at him oddly and with one brow cocked. "Don't. Just don't," Severus added tersely with narrowed eyes.

"I wasn't going to say anything," Draco replied coolly, his hands up in a gesture of surrender.

"She's the reason why I knew the cologne was a success. She was able to correctly identify the exact same scents Miss Brown identified when I wore it." In order to deflect more irksome questions about Hermione, Severus redirected the conversation. "You never did tell me what scents Ginny and Lavender detected when you wore it."

"A mixture of spice and cedar with amber, musk and Chypre, with hints of citrus, cumin and basil."

"Musk?" Severus asked to confirm.

"Yes."

"Interesting," Severus mused aloud. "Hermione mentioned smelling musk as well. I suppose since it is a natural male scent, it would only be amplified by the cologne."

"Well, Ginny technically did not say she smelled those particular scents, but I did have a sample of the individual scents for her to smell to decide if they were indeed the scents she identified," Draco elaborated.

"Hermione was able to name every single scent that Miss Brown identified on me. The witch really has a remarkable nose. Those years testing Potion ingredients have honed her talent. She has been
able to identify every single ingredient in the tea I've brewed during her visits," the dark-haired wizard remarked, restraining anything resembling a smile, remembering Hermione naming a few rare herbs in her tea a few nights ago.

Severus almost mentioned it was becoming a game between Hermione and him, but held his tongue, as Draco was giving him even more pointed looks.

"So she's not quite as annoying as you thought she might be?" Draco asked a little too innocently.

Severus picked up the basket of test potions and did his best not to stomp off to the treatment rooms.

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Hermione walked into the women's lobby of Madam Hope's Eternal Springs and Day Spa and let out a huge relaxed sigh. She loved it here, and just the atmosphere itself made her feel serenely calm and tranquil.

The spa décor was a mixture of many styles, based mostly on cultures with strong communal bathing traditions. Between the Turkish, Russian, Finnish, Roman, and Japanese styles, the décor was a mish-mash that, though discordant to one another aesthetically, seemed to work together in the way the place was decorated. Styles ranged from the minimal slate and teak shower stalls, to the ornate mosaic swimming pools flanked with marble Corinthian columns, to the gingerbread-detailed Finnish saunas.

Ginny and Hermione both handed over their wands for safekeeping, and to prevent the wood from warping under the extremely warm and damp conditions of the facility. They were then led to the dressing room area by a clinically dressed, yet beautiful witch. Hermione suspected her French accent was fake.

As they undressed, they continued chatting about Harry's upcoming birthday party at the end of the month.

"You know I don't mind throwing Harry a birthday party every year," Ginny said, her voice carrying through the shoji divider between her and Hermione's dressing cubicles. "It's just that I would like to have a birthday party for myself one of these years too. I just feel that throwing another party for myself a couple weeks after Harry's is a bit much," the redhead admitted.

"Well, you could always roll them together," Hermione suggested.
"I mentioned that once. Though Harry agreed to the idea, I could tell he was a bit crushed. I think in his adulthood he's making up for all the horrible birthdays he had growing up with those awful relatives of his. I mean, can you imagine getting a pair of used socks for your birthday, or a piece of tissue, or a wire coat-hanger?!? Just the thought of it makes me want to cry, then go hex the wankers for being such utter rat bastards to him." Ginny gave a short huff. "I really think some of the issues Harry is dealing with are due to those wretched people. Maybe part of the reason why he is so emotionally distant at times is because he was never properly loved as a child."

"It could be that the only way Harry could cope during the war and be successful at Occlumency was to turn his emotions off," the older witch rationalized with some of her own recent personal insight. "Maybe he has to just relearn to relax and let himself feel once more. Speaking of which, how's counseling going?" Hermione inquired, changing the subject to keep her mind off her own emotional numbness that seemed to constantly pervade her state of mind.

Ginny emerged from her cubicle with a towel wrapped around her waist and a second towel draped over her shoulder, her upper torso and breasts exposed. Hermione joined her a second later with her towel securely wrapped around her torso, her modest nature not feeling comfortable walking around half-naked despite using communal showers at Hogwarts for seven years. She wished she had the self-confidence Ginny had with her own body.

"Well," Ginny began, after she looked about and noticed that there were no other patrons around within earshot, "his personal counseling on Monday nights is coming along nicely. There's a lot of survivor's guilt from the war, abandonment issues he's dealing with from not growing up with parents and Sirius dying, then there are his issues with trust. It's a long road, but he's getting there. Thanks you for not mentioning to Ron about Harry's personal counseling and letting us tell him about marriage counseling."

"That wasn't for me to tell Ron, it was for you and Harry to tell him," Hermione said, as she opened the door to the sauna, feeling the wall of heat envelop her. "Thanks for sticking up for me."

The redhead shrugged as if it was no big deal, joining Hermione in the cedar-lined room. "So, marriage counseling is not quite so smooth. A lot of the time Harry and I yell at each other or list off complaints. He mostly complains that I try and fight too much with him and nag him. I tell him if he just actually talked with me, instead of sitting in his study shut up like a clam, I wouldn't be nagging him. It gets rather cyclical in nature, each blaming the other for our own reactions." Ginny sighed deeply as she took the towel from around her waist and placed it on the bench to sit on, and wrapped the other towel around her head to keep her hair up and off of her face and neck.

Hermione finally took off her towel and mirrored Ginny's actions, realizing that she had nothing Ginny hadn't seen before. "I'm sorry to hear that. It'll get better. It just takes time. So have you
picked a theme for Harry's party?” the brunette asked.

"I was thinking of making it like a Muggle camping trip or like a pool party, as Harry bitterly remembers being left out of those trips as a child," Ginny said. "The marriage counselor says it might bring some closure to some of Harry's unfulfilled childhood longings."

"Speaking of which, I keep forgetting to ask you and Harry. Can you give me the name of your marriage counselor? I haven't had the chance to get to the Muggle Alliance for a recommendation." Hermione felt the oppressive heat seep into her bones and her pores open up. A layer of sweat covered her whole body, and it felt wonderful to bask in the heat, even though it was summertime.

"Sure. His name is James Hoover. He has his practice located near Redding. He recently put a Floo connection in a back room and knows how to deal with owl post. He's the uncle of a Ravenclaw who graduated same year as Charlie." Ginny wiped the beads of sweat from her brow so they wouldn't trickle into her eyes. "He charges on a sliding scale."

"Don't a lot of people," Hermione mumbled absentmindedly.

"What?" Ginny asked, pretending not to catch her friend's comment.

"Nothing." Hermione dismissed her own ramblings.

"Did you want to see a counselor regarding Dolohov's attack and Marge's death?" Ginny asked delicately.

"No, not really. I'm dealing with it myself." Hermione's voice brooked no argument that the situation was not up for debate.

"Well, you've always listened to me when I needed to talk about Tom, so if you ever need an ear, just Floo or Apparate over anytime," Ginny kindly offered, having read Severus' owl on Hermione's refusal to discuss the traumatic event. "Speaking of which," Ginny added, "Ron mentioned you weren't home that Thursday night of the attack when he came back."

"He did? When?" Hermione rebuffed, hoping to stall while she thought up a convenient and believable lie, since Ron never asked where she had been.
"Since Harry said you weren't at work during the attack. Where were you?"

Hermione wondered if someone kicked up the heat in the sauna another twenty degrees, as it suddenly felt unbearably hot. "I was just out," Hermione remarked offhandedly. "I think it's time for me to get out." She rose and grabbed her towel, quickly dashing off to the cool plunge pool.

Severus laid on his back with his hair wrapped up in a towel while a house-elf finished applying an even layer of the All Skin-Type Cleansing, Exfoliating, Purifying, and Toning Mask to his face. He could feel the gentle tingle of the cleansing bubotuber pus and the cool sensation from the tea tree oil. The avocado mixed with the strawberry seeds, in combination with the special seaweed tended by the Bretagne coast merpeople, felt quite pleasant on his skin as it began the exfoliating cycle of the mask.

This batch felt and smelled much more pleasant that the previous batch they tested last month, which had the smell of low tide and made his skin feel filmy after rinsing. A few adjustments, and the mask might be ready to produce and market. The Potions master and Miss Brown had been working on a facial mask that could be used on all skin types for almost a year, and it seemed that they were close to perfection.

"How does this batch feel, Draco?" Severus asked with some concern, as an earlier batch had made Draco break out in an itchy rash that was easily rectified once the yucca extract was removed.

"Much better. No burning sensation… this time," Draco announced from the table next to Severus'.

"How was I to know that you would have an allergic reaction to yucca?" Severus defended himself.

"Considering that I am distantly blood-related to about a fifth of the wizarding population in England alone, it was wise of you to remove that ingredient. The essence of murtlap feels quite nice. Since I do tend to have dry skin, it's quite soothing in fact," Draco observed, his hair wrapped up in a towel to keep it from getting into his face, which was coated with the green goop they were presently testing.

Between Severus' naturally oily skin, Draco's delicate dry skin, and Lavender's combination skin which was prone to hormonal monthly breakouts, the three of them were a sufficient base to see if this latest batch of the mask would indeed work on all skin types.
"So how was dinner with Mrs. Hermione Weasley?" the blond wizard asked as he propped himself up on one elbow, his lower-mid section covered by his towel. He was careful to not smirk, so his mask wouldn't crack during the cleansing phase.

Severus sat up and positioned himself towards the edge of the table he was lying on. "It was acceptable," he replied knowing Draco would be asking his usual questions.

"Acceptable? Why, coming from you, that sounds like a compliment. Next thing you know, you'll be saying she was even charming," Draco ribbed his mentor.

Severus grimaced slightly then stopped himself, as he could feel his mask crack and start to flake away around the corners of his mouth before the mask had even had time to start the purifying phase. "Just what are you getting at?" he asked impatiently.

"Nothing, nothing at all. It just seems that recently on Friday mornings you are in such a good mood… well, better than normal while we are on our way to see Kingsley," Draco commented, ignoring the house-elf who was applying the first coat of a pastel fuchsia to his nails.

"Could it be that each meeting I have with Hermione brings us closer to our freedom?" Severus replied, refuting what Draco was implying.

"Even if she was the Second Coming of Merlin himself, that alone wouldn't make you any more pleasant, or should I say less acerbic in your attitude."

"Just what are you saying?" Severus asked, knowing what his young friend was going to say anyway.

"I think you like meeting with her. You've said yourself that you actually enjoy conversations with her. Coming from you, that's means you are practically smitten with her," Draco proclaimed.

"Nonsense!" the older wizard exclaimed, while keeping his foot still as a house-elf was applying a coat of muted coral polish to his toes.

"Let's see," Draco began as he started listing examples. "You've cooked for her and made comments regarding the state of her health as if you are concerned for her. You even recommended to Ginny that when she mentioned taking Mrs. Weasley shopping, she should encourage her to buy
jewel-toned robes, as they would be better colors than the drab darker colors she currently wears. Shall I go on?"

'He's almost as bad as Albus,' Severus silently fumed. 'Possibly worse.' "Firstly and secondly, she hasn't been eating properly, and if you have seen her recently, you could see how positively malnourished she is. What good would it do to have her help us if she winds up in St. Mungo's for starvation? At least if I can feed her once a week, I know she's eating and won't pass out, unlike what Ginny said she did last week. And as for her state of dress, if I see one more dingy worn-out robe on the witch, I shall burn it myself. The only thing missing from her robes to separate them from Lupin's are the patches. At least if she's going to buy something new, it should be something flattering versus the current selection she wears that makes her look anemic and sallow. If I have to look at her all evening, the sight of her should not make me wince." It was a far harsher statement than what Severus truly felt, but he was compelled to overstate facts in order to purge certain ideas out of Draco's head that he didn't want to admit to himself.

"Speaking of making someone wince, that color on you is quite hideous," Draco noted, looking at Severus' toes. "If you are going to test the drying and smudge-proof ability of a nail polish, go with a darker tone like a wine red, not coral."
Severus lifted one foot to examine it and recoiled from the garish color, relieved that no other wizard other than Draco was around to see him wearing nail polish on his toes. He would wear it for a few hours to see if the setting solution with additional Jacaranda dew made it quicker to set and even harder to smudge and chip, thankful it would be coming off during his pedicure later that day.

"Better be careful, Draco, or I'll mention to Miss Brown what a complimentary color that frosted pastel fuchsia is on you. Needless to say, when it comes time to test new temporary hair colors, I will suggest we develop one to match your polish and insist you try some on your precious platinum locks. You just better hope that I consult Miss Brown on the right ratio of vinegar to gelatin, or the color could wind up being permanent. I wonder what Ginny would say if her lover had pink hair. You two would clash together so spectacularly," Severus added with a menacing chuckle that hinted that he would make good on his threat if Draco kept prodding him on the subject of his feelings, or lack thereof, towards Hermione Weasley.

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Two witches sat listlessly in the steam room, listening to the water hiss and evaporate on the heat charmed rocks. Sweat trickled down Hermione's neck and chest, eventually running down between her breasts and over her stomach.

Glancing over, Hermione said, "I wish I had your body sometimes, Ginny. You've got the curves I always wished I could have. And your hair color is far better than this dark mop I have."

"What? Are you kidding me? You're the lucky one," Ginny whinged. "Everything I buy runs just a touch too long, because I have these big, fat hips that nothing will fit around. And my chest makes it so I have to buy a slightly larger size for tops or I look like some tart with her cleavage all shoved up front, like two ripe melons being presented on a platter. And you can have this color, you're welcome to it. I always wished I had your dark brown color. I've threatened to dye my hair once, and both Harry and Draco said no."

"But you've got these curves that wizards die for," Hermione insisted. "Everything looks so good on you. And besides, I'm tired of my dull, dull dark brown. I was thinking of lightening back to a more golden brown, like when I was a girl."

"Don't you dare dye your hair."

"Isn't that being a bit hypocritical coming from a witch who almost dyed hers?" Hermione said rhetorically.

"Yes," Ginny reluctantly admitted, "but with those new robes, if you lighten your hair, it will lose
"Well," Hermione said slowly, thinking of the hair lightening kit she bought at the apothecary a week ago, but hadn't got around to using it. "What about just a few shades lighter?"

"No," Ginny said emphatically. "You need your dark chestnut locks to carry off those colors. Lighten your hair and the color will overpower you. Trust me on this."

"All right," the brunette witch reluctantly agreed. "I still wish I had your breasts instead of these sagging things. I don't have much at all, and they still sag. I'm twenty-three years old! They're not supposed to sag for decades!" Hermione complained plaintively.

"You think mine defy gravity on their own without a little help?" Ginny replied.

"You charm yours?" Hermione asked, aghast that witches did such a thing other than to teeth and hair.

"Of course. How else do you think I can wear those strapless dresses to functions without my breasts jiggling about like a blancmange in an earthquake?" the redhead explained. "I've got to control the girls. If you want, I'll teach you the charm. It's really nice to use on hot days when it's too unbearable to wear a bra."

Hermione nodded, enthusiastic over the prospect of learning a new charm, even if it was for vanity.

"I'm just about ready to get out and rinse off before I go for my massage and body scrub. So I'll see you in a few hours," Ginny said as she rose from her seat on the tiled bench.

As Mrs. Potter walked out of the steam room naked without covering herself, Hermione scrutinized Ginny's backside and wondered how the witch could complain about having voluptuous curves like that. At every Ministry function Hermione, Ron, Harry and Ginny attended together, the older witch saw the way wizards' eyes roved over Mrs. Potter's body as she passed through a room, and she knew no wizard ever ogled at her like that. Even Ron never looked at her with abandoned lust like some wizards did openly at Ginny when Harry was not by her side.

Hermione sat in the steam room for a few more minutes before leaving to rinse off for her own massage.
Severus was trying the second test batch of improved body polishing scrub on his left arm, comparing it to the first batch he tried on his right arm. Both scrubs seemed to do a good job of removing the dead skin and giving it a healthy glow, but the second batch seemed more abrasive due to the addition of the ground beetle carapaces. On the basis of ten strokes on each arm, the Potions master could tell his left arm was slightly raw, whereas his right arm felt clean without the sting of taking too much skin off. He made a quick mental note before trying a newly improved version of the Valiant Wizard Deep Cleansing Shampoo for Oily Hair. He thought it was fine as is, but Miss Brown wanted to see if she could change it so that it would add more body without drying his hair out. The last thing Severus needed was flyaway hair.

Draco called out over the shower stall divider, "What did you add to the fine hair shampoo formula? It tingles."

"Ah, Miss Brown mentioned that the latest customer survey you did found that wizards with dry hair tend to have dandruff, so this is a version of the Valiant Wizard Fine Hair Shampoo with a dandruff blocker potion I added," Severus shouted back.

"It's not going to do anything funny to my scalp, since Malfoys don't suffer from dandruff, is it?"

"No, but I thought it needed testing to see if you would have a reaction, since your skin is so sensitive to many potions," Severus explained. "What is that term you discovered when you were trolling the Muggle apothecaries once?"

"Hypoallergenic."

"Ah, yes. That's the one. Such a fancy term for potions designed for sensitive skin," Severus mused out loud.

Draco turned off his shower and began drying off as Severus rinsed and repeated. Just as the dark-haired wizard emerged from the shower dripping wet and looking a bit pink in patches all over his body from testing several new products on various body parts, the blond wizard had already dried off and was donning a long, white, plush terry dressing gown.

"Off to meet Ginny?" Severus asked.

"Yes. I love the fact that this spa was rebuilt during the Restoration period, so it was designed with
"You mean secret doors to rendezvous chambers where nobility would come to have clandestine trysts with lovers and courtesans while their spouses were in other parts of the baths," Severus elaborated.

"Exactly," Draco said with a sly smirk.

"Give Ginny my regards," Severus said as he bid Draco adieu for a few hours.

He was glad the younger wizard would be gone for a few hours in order to give himself a bit of time to expel some of the niggling feelings Draco aroused during his questions regarding Hermione.

Hermione laid on the massage table feeling completely boneless while the masseuse, who looked like she could be a professional Beater for England's Quidditch team, pummeled, ripped apart and reassembled Hermione's muscular structure like a jigsaw puzzle. The only thing Hermione had to tell the witch was that she stood over cauldrons all day long; this told her masseuse exactly where most of the tension was manifesting itself in her mid- and lower-back.

As she drifted in and out of sleep, Hermione wondered if Calleo knew how to give more than just neck and shoulder massages. He seemed to know exactly where to place his hands, with an innate knowledge of where her headache was residing, and knew the right pressure points to address in order to allow her to enjoy the rest of her evening with Calleo.

'Calleo,' she inwardly sighed. Hermione was surprised to see him open the door without his headscarf on, but was thrilled to finally see his locks so she could fill in another missing mental piece of him. 'Black, black hair like a raven's wing. Long enough to run my fingers through it.' She wondered how it would feel as it slipped through her fingers.

Hermione had been attracted to men with dark hair ever since she dated Viktor Krum. His dark thick hair, dark brown eyes and distinguished profile made him look handsome, as opposed to other boys his age who tended to look pretty or cute. There was that crush on Professor Lockhart in her second year, but in light of his ineptitude, she no longer felt drawn towards the blond hair, blue eyes set, preferring a wizard with darker features. Sirius Black, once he cleaned up and no longer looked like a ragged scarecrow, peaked her hormonal interest; but at the time he was so much older than her, and she found it difficult to be attracted to a man she knew was old enough to be her father.
Then there was Professor Snape. The man wore a perpetual scowl on his face, and his unpleasant personality colored her perceptions of him; even to this day she could not recall what he looked like without his sarcastic voice echoing in her head, laying insult upon scathing remark about her bookish behavior or appearance. There were times Hermione wondered if Professor Snape would have loathed her as much if she were a Ravenclaw, or if she weren't a friend of Harry's. She did know that she never knew the man beyond what little he showed of himself, beyond the façade of an unapproachable man. Professor Snape had the dark hair and dark eyes and prominent nose she usually found handsome, but his personality was so offensive to her, she could never find anything attractive about the man.

Now a new man had come into Hermione's life to fuel her sexual fantasies. Calleo had quickly replaced Viktor in her mind, as a sexual object to fixate upon in order to bring herself to orgasm. The memories of Viktor were so old, she could not recall them over the many years of Ron's touch. The memory of Calleo's touch burned brightly into her mind, each time he kissed her hand goodbye, rubbed her shoulders or brushed his hands against her as he helped her with her cloak.

Last Thursday night, as Calileo helped her with her cloak, Hermione had become so aroused that when she got home, she had found her folds slick with viscous desire. She had locked the door to the bedroom and cast a Silencing charm so she could finger-fuck herself into oblivion, imagining it was Calleo's fingers deep inside of her stroking that elusive spot Hermione had heard about, but had never reached; the one her old lunch mates talked about like some great carnal secret. Satisfied with a few small orgasms, she showered and crawled into bed only to hear Ron come home shortly afterwards.

Here she was on the massage table feeling the telltale signs of arousal seeping between her legs while lustful and prurient thoughts of Calleo fucking her with unrestrained passion flitted through her mind. Her heart raced as she visualized herself straddling him naked on the settee, his large, strong hands grabbing her hips and guiding her up and down as she slid up and down his shaft.

Fortunately, Hermione's massage was near the end. Once the masseuse left, Hermione jumped off the table and hurried back to her private dressing room, locking the door. Casting off her long white terry dressing gown, she straddled the chaise lounge and began masturbating herself, using her legs to impale herself repeatedly on her fingers while she rubbed her nipples against the brocade upholstery as she rose and fell. She imagined herself straddling Calleo's body, his chest hair and hands brushing against her breasts, his hands upon her hips guiding her up and down.

As she looked in the mirror placed behind the chaise, she saw herself flushed with desire, which heightened the tingling feeling coiling in her belly. Hermione wondered what it would look like to watch herself ride Calleo like a water nymph rides the swells of the sea. If Calleo had been really under her that moment – his cock filling her inside, alleviating this aching she had between her legs, satisfying this base desire that filled her with wanton hunger – then maybe, maybe she could forget all that was wrong and just live in the moment of lust and sweat and friction. The memory of
his breath on her neck, the sounds of his breathing came to her, and she came with a great shudder, biting her lip to keep from crying out aloud.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Severus laid on the chaise lounge panting loudly, thankful Draco was busy with Ginny and not around to hear him masturbating in his dressing room. As his heart thumped painfully in his chest, he could still imagine Hermione straddling him, riding him, her feet planted on either side of the chaise lounge as her legs worked to raise and lower herself onto his cock, her wild hair a halo that swayed with each movement. Of all the masturbation fantasies Severus had had of Hermione, this one seemed almost real, as if she was there, her breasts bouncing in front of his face, her lean body arching and bucking as he thrust up from underneath.

And when Severus came, he swore he could hear Hermione whisper his alias, 'Calleo.'

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Feeling quite relaxed and a little dreamy from her little private interlude with herself, Hermione sauntered lazily to the champagne springs to soak for a bit while waiting for Ginny before her own body scrub. The tiny warm bubbles traveled up her body, creeping up her legs and between her slightly swollen lips.

After quick glance around to see if there was anyone else in the communal spring, Hermione laid her head back and let her legs spread slightly to allow more bubbles to gently stroke and tickle her labia and clitoris. It almost felt like vibrating hairs being dragged along her flesh. She gave a small hum of appreciation over the sensation that was prolonging her blissful state.

When the sound of a door opening echoed throughout the room, Hermione brought both legs together quickly and sat up straight, while trying hard not to look guilty over the fact she was getting turned on from the bubbles dancing on her skin below.

"Oh good, you're here," Ginny called out, looking positively glowing and relaxed.

"Good massage and body scrub?"

"Absolutely," her friend sighed with a contented smile, as she slipped into the champagne springs to join Hermione. "God, I love sitting in these springs. It feels positively…" Ginny looked about and waggled her brows. "Naughty."

Both witches burst into gales of giddy laughter, knowing the exact meaning of Ginny's words; their laughter and smiles were an admission of guilt.
The atmosphere felt so peaceful and quiet at the moment that Hermione's brain decided to ruin the moment by wondering if Ginny had stopped seeing Draco. But as she had made a promise to herself to curb her curiosity and adopt a "don't ask, don't tell" policy on the matter, the older witch held her tongue and banished all thoughts of that nature from the forefront of her mind. Today was a day to relax and rejuvenate, not fixate on problems that stressed her out so much that she would drink on an empty stomach or not sleep for most of a night.

Ginny cleared her throat and visibly swallowed. "Hermione? Can I tell you a secret? Will you promise not to tell Harry or Ron?"

The perfect moment was ruined. The tension that had inhabited Hermione's body for the past several months returned slowly; her muscles began tightening, and the warmth of the springs began to feel annoying and prickling to her skin. Not wanting to promise to anything she would regret, she replied in a very Slytherin fashion, "That depends on what it is."

Ginny looked a bit bashful as she said, "It's nothing bad. Even Mum knows about it."

"Oh," Hermione said, looking a bit stunned and simultaneously relieved. 'Is she pregnant?" Part of Hermione wanted it to be yes, but another part of her hoped it was no, wondering that if she was, would it be Harry's or Malfoy's child? If it were Malfoy's child, would Ginny still be magically bound to her husband? "Go ahead."

"Well," Ginny said hesitantly, leaning forward, "I've been taking belly dancing classes for ten years."

"What?" This was the last thing Hermione expected to hear Ginny admit. "What do you mean for the past ten years? How did – when – and what do you mean Harry and Ron don't know?" she said with a little exasperation.

"That's just it. I started taking lessons right after that trip to Egypt. Mum thought it would be kind of fun for me after I asked, and Dad was aware of the lessons, but we never told my brothers, as they would have gone off on some weird rant about lascivious dancing and their baby sister and such," Ginny explained. "Needless to say, when we did see belly dancers in Egypt, they were all too thrilled to sit there and stare with their mouths hanging open, drooling like a bunch of dogs. So I asked if I could learn to dance like that, and Mum arranged lessons in a Muggle town nearby."

"So Harry doesn't know? Why not?"
"Because if I tell him, then Ron will find out," Ginny said a little hotly.

"Well, maybe if you ask Harry not to tell—"

Hermione was cut short by Ginny emphatically saying, "No! I told Harry, in confidence, about how years ago Dean Thomas wanted to have sex during my fourth year, then Harry went off and told Ron. I told Harry not to tell Ron, and then he went off and spilled the beans anyway."

"Is this something you've talked about in counseling?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, but Harry rationalized it away by saying my brother had a right to know about how his dorm mate was trying to push me into sex when I wasn't ready – and this was something that happened years ago, mind you," Ginny growled. "So Ron blew up and went on another one of his emotional volcano outbursts and bugged me as to why I didn't tell him, and… it was just so unpleasant. The counselor did take Harry to task for betraying my confidence and trust, and told him that part of trust was not only trusting others, but allowing others to trust him as well."

"So why are you telling me? Why now?" Hermione asked, wondering if Ginny had an ulterior motive and if this was some sort of test of her confidence.

"Because I trust you won't tell Harry or Ron." Ginny looked away, focusing her attentions on the tendrils of steam floating up from the spring water.

Hermione sat there feeling pulled like a piece of taffy between three people. Ron, who was trying her patience and her tolerance; Ginny, who was testing her friendship with the slew of secrets she kept; and Harry, who she felt loyal to, yet lied to on behalf of Ginny in hopes of keeping the two together despite his emotional detachment to his own wife.

"Are you going to eventually tell them? You are an adult. There's not much they could do about it since you've been doing it for ten years," Hermione said logically. "It's not like they could take those lessons back."

"I could tell them, but then there's the whole, 'Oh why didn't you tell us sooner, Gin?' Then they'd go into the rant about immoral dancing, keeping secrets and things. They don't want to know, trust me."
She knew she was going to regret asking, but the older witch did anyway. "Does anyone else besides your Mum and Dad know?"

Ginny looked up at her with a little smirk, looking a little guilty. The older witch knew her answer before it left her mouth. "Draco."

"Why? Why him and not your husband?" Hermione's mouth was set in a stern frown.

The redhead cocked her head sideways and scrutinized Hermione, as if she was trying to peer into her soul. Finally she said, "Hasn't there ever been anyone in your life you could tell your deepest, darkest secrets to and not fear being judged?"

Hermione ducked her head in an attempt to hide the sudden blush upon her cheek. Her ears felt like they were burning. "No," she lied quietly, "but I guess I do see your point."

Groaning, Hermione got out of the water and grabbed her towel and dressing gown. "I think I'm going to cool down in my room for a while before I go for my body scrub."

Ginny informed her as she left that she was going to the sauna and the steam room for a bit, and would meet Hermione in the spa garden for tea later.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 26 A/N: The Severus and Draco nail polish part of this fic was inspired by Melanie (DeviantArt: usagistu), who, at my request, did an illustration for this chapter. Slight NSFW as is shows Severus and Draco draped only in towels across their hips and a hint of Draco's butt cheeks. It is no longer housed on her DeviantArt page and only viewable here: http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/post/130621392575/art-by-melanie-deviantart-usagistu-and-they

I asked her to show that Severus and Draco were getting manicures and pedicures, but she added the nail polish and I found it so cute, I just had to incorporate it into the story.

Please welcome a new beta to the ranks, the fabulous JuneW.

Chypre -- A notably woody-mossy mix, this type was given its name by French
perfumer Francois Coty, who created a scent based on his impression of the island of Cyprus. Chypre simply is French for Cyprus and is pronounced "SHIP-ruh."
Chapter Summary

Hermione has an evening of culture and pick-up lines. Severus deals with Miss Anne's needs and his dawning realizations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Seven
“Truss Me”

Disclaimer: If you honestly think that I own any part of Harry Potter, including concepts, characters, books, movies, franchise rights, monies, or copyright, you are either mad, incredibly obtuse, or Gilderoy Lockhart has hit you with one too many Obliviates. In the first or last case, go check yourself into St. Mungo's while chanting, "Betz doesn't own anything relating to Harry Potter." If it's the second case, you'll have to ask Severus Snape if there is a potion to cure stupidity.

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'You're tardy, Miss Anne.' Severus opened the door and bid his Saturday night client welcome, holding his tongue about her late arrival.

Miss Anne bounced into Severus' flat with her usual youthful enthusiasm; dressed smartly in her summer robes and her hair pulled up off her neck. There was no errant tendril escaping her immaculate coiffure to lure Severus to her neck, nor was there anything demure about this witch.

"Hello, Bob," the young and well-heeled witch chirped. "Sorry I'm late. Ran into friends on the way here, couldn't be helped." There seemed to be no contrition in Miss Anne's tone.

Severus surveyed the young woman in front of him. Sure, she was beautiful and rich, but she also tended to be a bit vain, inconsiderate and flighty. Hermione would never be late to an appointment
with him, as he knew it was not in her nature to be tardy or thoughtless. The one saving grace to Miss Anne was her willingness to experiment in avenues of pleasures most witches did not think even existed.

"Undress," Severus ordered her curtly, "and do not speak until you are spoken to."

The witch gave him a submissive nod of her head, knowing what lay ahead. Severus sat down on the settee and watched her disrobe for his pleasure.

"Turn around," he commanded, and Miss Anne obeyed, spinning around slowly before Severus told her to stop facing away from him. "Continue."

Though her hair was strawberry blond, Severus did his best to ignore the color, imagining it a much darker shade, while concentrating on her backside and the curve of her bottom, the shape of her legs and how they had been wrapped around his waist many times. Miss Anne was one of they key benefits to his night job: shapely, willing, and had a tendency to avoid idle and meaningless chatter. She was every wizard's fantasy, and he had the privilege of being paid to fuck her till she couldn't walk straight.

From what little they talked and what Miss Brown had told him, Miss Anne had had a string of rather public and messy affairs with many eligible wizards whom she later would invariably find out had been bedding one of her friends or her Muggle sister, or had a preference for wizards instead. Tired of the dating scene and the press covering her every move, but not willing to shelve her active libido, Miss Anne, who was a casual friend of Miss Brown’s, was directed to the services of Severus. With Severus' confidential nature, she was sure her sexual tastes would not make it into the press. He would not give an exclusive expose to Witch Weekly, unlike an old boyfriend with an old grudge or empty pockets that needed lining with blackmail money to keep quiet.

She continued to stand there quietly and patiently once undressed, knowing it was expected of her from Bob's tone.

Wanting to try something novel this evening, Severus strode over to his armoire and pulled out one of his more ornate feathered masks. Walking up behind her, he secured the black and red feathered mask over her face. With his Bauta mask on and the full-face mask on Miss Anne, he could pretend for a night that Hermione was here at his sexual beck and call.

"Get on the bed on your hands and knees," Severus demanded. This would have been a convenient time to wear a half-mask, as he could enjoy the fantasy of probing Hermione's depths with his tongue, but the illusion of wearing his habitual Casanova was more arousing than any taste from
As she crawled onto the bed, Severus was tempted to drop his trousers right there and take her from behind, but instead waited until she was on the bed before slipping up behind her and stroking her damp sex with his long and dexterous fingers. As his fingers began to slide into her, first one, then two, three, then four fingers, Miss Anne began arching her back and meeting his thrusts, groaning and panting like some stray bitch in heat.

After she came, her muscles clenching around his hand, he ordered her to undress him and then stroke his cock. As he lay sprawled on the bed watching the witch prostrate herself at his knees while her hand pumped up and down his length, he tried to imagine Hermione's hands wrapped around him instead. He was not able to maintain the fantasy; it too much resembled Miss Anne and not his brunette fantasy, so he ordered her back on her knees and quickly plunged himself into her from behind. As she bucked against him, he drove himself into her with a fierce determination to bury himself in her so deeply she would split in half, and Severus closed his eyes trying to imagine it was Hermione instead. A semi-coherent groan escaped his lips as he came deep inside her just as Miss Anne reached her own peak.

As he pulled out of her unceremoniously, she finally spoke and asked, "What did you call me?"

'Oh shit.' Did her really say something he didn't mean to in the heat of passion? Severus would have to be much more careful in the future, but for now he had to drag out an answer until he could think of a believable one. "What do you think I called you?" he queried, unsure what he said himself.

"Something like 'my knee'? At least it sounded like that," she answered.

'Oh bloody fuck.' The raven-haired wizard really did call out her name. This simply would not do. Hermione was getting under his skin and he was getting too involved with her for his own good. He would have to speed up the process in which she discovered his true identity before other catastrophic mishaps occurred.

For now, he had to make up a quick and credible lie. "I called you, 'my peony,'" Severus said sweetly, as he reclined back, patting the bed next to him to invite her to lay next to him instead of getting up and dressing like she did on some nights, once they had both reached orgasm.

As she settled next to him, she asked, "Can I take this mask off now?"
"No, it's part of the illusion that we are whoever we want to be," he fibbed partly. Actually, he wanted to pretend she was someone else entirely.

"See, that's what I like about you. You're so creative. I can always count on a good time when I come see you," she praised him.

"I thought we would try something different tonight. Talk, perhaps," Severus suggested, desperately thinking that maybe if he could have an intelligent conversation with his most physically pleasurable clients, then thoughts of a particular brunette witch, which had been recently plaguing him with great intensity and frequency, would recede. If he could somehow talk with some of the clients he shagged with the same passionate intensity that Hermione drew out in him during their conversations, he might stop fantasizing about her and no longer think fondly of their evenings together.

"Sure, why not? I'm game," Miss Anne agreed flippantly. "What shall we talk about?"

"What interests you?" he asked, allowing her to lead the conversation, as he had no idea what captured her imagination.

"Well, I just read in Witch Weekly how this fall the bias cut robes will be all the rage," she began prattling on excitedly.

Severus suppressed an exasperated groan of despair, as the witch began rambling on all matter of things of no importance. He just hoped that if he fell asleep sitting up while she continued talking without pause, that his head would bob in his sleep during the right spots to make her think that he was awake and paying attention.

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Hermione came home just in time to fix dinner, only to find that Ron wasn't home. There was a note on the bedroom door attached with some Spellotape.

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Hermione,

The game ended a little earlier than expected, as Wally caught the Snitch in less than 30 minutes. Some of the other men on the team decided on an impromptu pub-crawl, so I won't be home till
late. If I drink quite a bit, I may not make it home, as I don't want to splinch myself or Floo to the wrong place.

Hope you read this note before making dinner for two.

Ron

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'Well, that kind of puts a damper on my plans,' Hermione bitterly thought.

She had spent most of the day at the spa and allowed herself to relax for the first time in ages. With plenty of time to herself, while Ginny was away getting her own treatments, Mrs. Weasley had time to reflect on her marriage and sex life from a more tranquil perspective.

Ginny did mention earlier that day that men were like dogs that needed to be trained, especially in the bedroom. Some men were more difficult to train than others, while others were just natural at learning tricks. 'Isn't that a rather bad pun – tricks – considering who she's shagging. Silly rabbit, tricks are for prostitutes.' Hermione groaned at her own forced pun and the free association images that sprung up in her mind: dogs; collars and leashes; men on all fours; men on street corners leaning up against lampposts; Ron in a dog collar on all fours being hit over the nose with a rolled-up newspaper for leaving the seat up on the toilet; Malfoy in a miniskirt, torn fishnet stockings and platform high heels, leaning over to talk to a trick cruising by in a car.

Forcing her mind back to her original train of thought, Hermione thought it might be nice to seduce Ron while trying to teach him how she liked to be touched. She had tried some years ago, but in his teenage hormonally overcharged exuberance, he just sprinted towards the finish line, ignoring foreplay and reaching orgasm quickly instead of learning to take a leisurely stroll along her body. Now that they were very accustomed to each other's bodies, perhaps now was a good time to instruct him to take things a little slower. Mrs. Weasley did wonder if her suggestions and requests would be misconstrued as complaints and bossy direction in the bedroom. Her husband did seem to be rather thrilled when she took the initiative before, which she rarely did, when he had found her fingering herself while fantasizing about Calleo. Maybe taking the initiative with sex and telling him what she liked would be the key to improving her sex life. Maybe if her sex life weren't so pitiful, Hermione wouldn't be tempted every time she masturbated with thoughts of Calleo's cock buried deep inside of her.

Since she had the whole evening to herself, Hermione wasn't sure what to do, so she began going through her mental list of things she had put off.
Once she had sent Pig off to her parents with a note suggesting Sunday dinner at her parents’ home next weekend on the twenty-seventh, Hermione cast a cleaning charm on the kitchen to take away the layer of grime she had recently noticed. A few more charms, and all the kitchen cupboards were reorganized.

Walking into the bedroom, Hermione was tempted to start laundry when she laid eyes upon the heaping pile of clothes which she was planning on washing the next day, but decided against it. She was feeling refreshingly clean from her day at the spa, and didn't want to feel dirty again from standing over a cauldron full of hot water and soiled clothes.

Sitting on the bed, Hermione summoned the snow globe her parents gave her when they came back after the war. During the last few months of the war, Wendy and Wallace Granger were encouraged by Albus Dumbledore to go on an extended holiday in another country, preferably on another continent for safety purposes. Wards and Fidelius charms were fine, but with the wrong person finding out certain information or unsuspecting spies within the Order, it was safer to just ship them off to points unknown to everyone other than the Headmaster and Hermione.

Her parents had rented a rather fancy caravan outfitted with the latest amenities and toured the United States, calling it a long overdue second honeymoon. There were many presents they had brought back for Hermione once Voldemort was dead. She had a rather nice pair of silver and turquoise earrings her parents brought her from a jewelry shop owned by Navajo Indians, and an alligator skin coin purse they picked up in Louisiana. There was another pair of earrings set in three-colored gold mined from the Black Hills of the Dakotas. Hermione didn't have the heart to tell her parents that Black Hills gold had been cursed by the Lakota shamans, and she doubted even Bill could break the curse cast on the gold. So long as she didn't wear it, she felt the curse would not affect her. Her hand-woven Nantucket basket regularly accompanied her on trips to the market, and she enjoyed snuggling under her warm Amish quilt on winter nights in front of the fire, but it was this simple little snow globe that made her smile the most.

It was a large snow globe with a music box set into the base. Inside the little globe was a miniature characterization of San Francisco. Her parents pointed out all the highlights they saw represented in the tiny model, including the Golden Gate Bridge, the Transamerica Pyramid, Coit Tower and Chinatown. There was a hill with a pair of molded cable cars that Hermione charmed to run up and down the steep hillside when she turned on the music box. With a simple tap of her wand, the music began playing.

The tinny music played the first verse of "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" over and over again, as the flakes of fake snow swirled and floated about the sphere. She smiled as the music played on. It was the least practical gift her parents brought back, and perhaps this keepsake was the most sentimental for that reason, reminding her that every now and again some frivolity in life is needed. She had never imagined her parents ever spending good money on something whose only purpose was to collect dust and take up space, so for that sake alone, it warmed her heart.
Was Ron something that collected dust and took up space in Hermione's heart? He wasn't a knickknack that she couldn't just throw away, he was a human being with feelings and a mind of his own. She had a history with him, and they had made a promise to love, cherish and respect each other with their wedding vows. Perhaps these were vows that she couldn't fulfill.

Hermione carefully put her snow globe back on her dresser in its place of prominence next to her wedding picture and jewelry box.

"What now?" the witch asked herself out loud.

She really didn't feel like doing any more cleaning, and a quick look at her bookshelves revealed no interest in reading books she had read at least three times over already.

"I need a new library," she grumbled, remembering she had not bought herself a new book since Christmas when Ron had taken her to Flourish and Blotts so he could buy her exactly what she wanted. Granted, all the fun and surprise had been taken out of their gift-giving years ago when they had both realized they were terrible at picking out gifts for each other without the recipient's help. So every birthday, Hermione could count on Ron bringing her to the bookstore every September, and Hermione would take Ron to the Quidditch supply store every March. There was the rare instance where Ron had help from Ginny or Harry to pick a present, but those times were few and far between.

"Do I really want to go to Flourish and Blotts?" she asked herself. The best student at Hogwarts in recent history did love going to the bookstore, but decided to not risk temptation, knowing there were a few extra unaccounted for Galleons in her and Ron's vault.

'When's the last time you went out by yourself? Just went out the door with no plans and had a good time?' There was the brief recollection of the older wizard propositioning her in a seedy dive to come back to the Leaky Cauldron with him, but she dismissed the memory. 'What am I going to do? What is there to do?'

"Accio Daily Prophet." The paper flew into her hands. Scanning the entertainment and cultural events calendar, Hermione settled on an amateur production of "Merlin and Morgana: The Lost Years" that was playing in Hogsmeade in the newly-built cellar amphitheater located under the Three Broomsticks.

Noticing the time, Hermione grabbed her new purple cloak and Apparated to Hogsmeade with only
ten minutes to spare before the curtain rose.

Severus had no idea what possessed him to engage in conversation with Miss Anne. Perhaps it was some twisted thought that he did not have enough suffering and misery in his life, and he should get a healthy dose of it while in her 'enthralling' company. It could have been that he was letting the little head think for the big one, though even his own prick had more conversation skills than Miss Anne. At least when she had his cock in her mouth, she was quiet.

However, the fact remained that Miss Anne was still wearing the full-face mask and he could not shut her up by ordering her to perform fellatio. The benefit of having her remove the mask would be to quiet her prattling by doing something more constructive, like wrapping those lips of hers around his now flaccid length. But once the mask came off, the illusion would be gone. It was no use, the illusion could not be maintained with her constant inane chatter. Either way, there was no way he would feel aroused by her presence anymore that night.

Why did he encourage Miss Anne to talk? It could have been he found their session tonight less than satisfying. Granted, she was just as beautiful, enthusiastic, responsive, and wet as ever, but the act seemed hollow once completed. There was nothing of substance to the encounter. Yes, he had always promised himself when the war was over he would engage in as much meaningless, no-strings-attached sex as possible, eluding relationships and promises of fidelity, but suddenly all of it seemed tired and empty. When did this sudden ambivalence towards casual sex take root? Severus had a feeling it started when Hermione walked into his life almost four weeks prior, but he wasn't about to admit it to himself.

With the exception of Katherine Bigelow, he was starting to find the company of his other clients rather bothersome. They whinged constantly, and when they weren't complaining about bad husbands and thoughtless boyfriends, they would talk endlessly about themselves. He was only slightly more tolerant of those with true troubles and worries in their lives, due only to his belief that the universe held a balance sheet, and he still had not paid off his debt to Albus for all the years the old man had listened to him complain, whinge, bitch, piss, and moan about students, the Dark Lord and other things. Still, no other clients, with the exceptions being Katherine and Hermione, engaged in lively debates with him about all manner of subjects, and Katherine was no longer one of his clients.

Severus didn't miss Katherine, per se, but he was glad she was able to move on with her life in ways he still had not. The change of scenery with her move to Spain was just what Katherine needed to close that chapter of her life. Severus wondered when the page would turn for him and he could begin anew, finally putting the memories of his wife to rest and his dark and bedeviled past behind him.

Tired of inane gossip and the drone of Miss Anne's voice, Severus interrupted her. "Please, don't let me keep you from joining your friends. If you must leave, don't let me stop you. I know what a
busy social calendar you have."

"I don't have anywhere to go tonight. I'm all yours," she said, much to his chagrin. He could hear the smile in her voice. Her fingers were lightly trailing up his arm, drawing lazy patterns over his Dark Mark.

'Merlin, kill me now,' he silently pleaded in misery. "You have really exhausted me this evening. So I must request we pick this up next week at our usual time," he politely, yet sternly informed the eager witch.

"Well, I always could spend the night. I'm willing to pay a lot more," she purred.

"No." His answer was resolute.

"But you don't even know how much I'm willing to pay," Miss Anne parried.

"It doesn't matter. I don't wake up next to clients," Severus replied firmly, getting more irritated by her insistence with each passing minute.

"I could make it worth your while," she said suggestively. "Remember that little fantasy I had about getting a wine enema, then later letting you have your wicked way with me with every phallic vegetable conceivable while you fucked me up the arse? You certainly seemed open to the suggestion when I mentioned it a few weeks ago."

Severus' cock stirred at the thought of Miss Anne tied down to his bed, gag in place, legs and arms hoisted and bound so she looked like a contorted and trussed-up turkey, a rather large courgette stuffed up her twat and her arse lubed within an inch of her life; it was a decadently depraved, double penetration fantasy come true. Then suddenly the thought of just leaving her there like that and walking away from her to see her squirm and fight, indignant over not getting fucked and just walked out on, amused him more than the idea of violating her eighty different ways until the crack of dawn.

"As much as that sounds quite appealing, I must plead exhaustion," Severus said, dismissing her. "Perhaps next week. I'll make sure my house-elf shops for a spectacularly large array of crudités to fill your... needs."
"Poor Bob," she cooed with sickeningly sweet tones. "I wore you out. Well, rest up next week, because you're going to need it." Miss Anne got up from Severus' bed and dressed quickly, not bothering to shower.

Once she was gone, he removed his mask and looked down at the one he made Miss Anne wear. He was tempted to burn it now. Why he kept the mask, he wasn't quite sure. Severus bought it for a client that preferred to see him in flamboyant masks that reminded her of her youth in South America. The feather arrangement around the face portion of the mask reminded the witch, whom Severus could no longer recall by name, of the local gods worshiped in her mountaintop village as a young girl. The witch lost her virginity at seventeen on an altar by some priest dressed up as one of the high gods, his identity hidden by a mask very similar to the one Severus now picked up and tossed into the fire.

It was foolish of him to think that a simple mask over Miss Anne's face would fool his mind, as well and his body, into thinking he was shagging Hermione. Hermione would never simply submit herself in such a fashion, at least he didn't think so. She did not seem the type to be so compliant to orders in the bedroom. Then again, he had no idea what the witch would be like between the sheets. The one instance where he got to see her passion unleashed on his one finger had left him with speculative thoughts of what she would be like uninhibited by the veil of self-consciousness that shrouded her potentially sensual nature. The only thing he did know was that Mrs. Weasley was unsatisfied by the sex life she currently had. Her husband obviously had no clue how to draw out the sexual goddess in the woman.

Realizing his thoughts were once more fixating on Hermione, Severus cleaned up, dressed quickly and went out the door to visit Draco one flight down. He was usually done with his Saturday night client by this time. Standing at the top of the stairs, Severus froze as Draco's door opened.

A slightly older than middle-aged witch emerged from Draco's flat. "Oh, I just wish my son would listen to me like you do," the witch sighed. "Absolutely no respect for his mother, that one. He's always too busy with his work to even come visit me once a month. Oh well, I still have you," the older witch said wistfully while patting Draco on his forearm like someone's grandmother would when handing out tidbits of sage advice.

"I'm just glad that I could be here for you," Draco replied with such an air of sincerity, even Severus was impressed with the young wizard's acting skills.

"Well, goodnight." The witch waved at her masked companion still standing in the doorway.

"Goodnight, Madam Agatha," Draco called back to her as she began descending the steps.
Once Severus was sure the witch was gone from the building, he went downstairs and knocked on Draco's door.

Draco answered the door sans mask. "Miss Anne is done for the night?"

Severus nodded.

"Come on in," he invited the older wizard.

Severus made himself at home, relaxing into a chair by the fire, his legs stretched out before him and crossed at the ankle.

"What brings you down to my abode on a night like this? And so early, too," Draco remarked with a cocked brow. "Young witches getting to be too much for an old man like you?" he ribbed the older wizard.

"I'm not that old," Severus bit back.

"That's what I've been telling you for years," Draco pointed out. "It's about time you finally admitted it."

'Damn.' Severus had been tricked by simple baiting of what little vanity he had, his weariness making him fall prey to a ploy he should have spotted a mile away. 'I must really be tired.'

"If you must know, I dismissed Miss Anne a little early. The witch is beginning to bore me," he said dryly while examining his nails.

"Now if I didn't have Ginny in my life, there would be one witch that I doubt I could tire of. However, being in love with a witch does tend to put a damper on one's desire to bed other witches, even with a healthy sex drive," Draco admitted.

Momentarily lost in thought, Severus only caught part of what Draco had said. "What did you say?" he asked offhandedly, now focusing on what Draco was saying.
"I said, once I realized I was still in love with Ginny, even after she came to me as Mrs. Potter, all the other women I was bedding no longer held the allure they once did. For some reason, being in love made all those other witches seem less than appealing. Every time I’d have to shag one, I’d have to close my eyes and pretend it was Ginny just to keep going," Draco confessed unabashedly. "You have no idea how disturbing it was to think I was losing my virility until I realized I was in love with Ginny and I didn’t want to make love to anyone else but her. I would have been utterly embarrassing in time if Lavender didn't phase out my shagging clients."

"What?" Severus said more to himself than to Draco's remarks, suddenly dumbstruck by the idea forming in his mind.


The older wizard sat there desperate to expunge the horrible notion that was growing at an alarming rate, unable to answer his friend. He just shook his head in self-denial.

Draco quickly fetched Severus some Calvados. "Here, drink this."

Severus gulped down the apple brandy, not bothering to savor it.

"What's wrong?" Draco looked at him thoughtfully.

Sometimes it was hard for a Slytherin to fool another Slytherin, especially one who knew Severus as well as Draco did. The older wizard answered as vaguely as possible. "Moment of panic."

Scrutinizing the man sitting across from him, Draco finally deduced the reason. "Mrs. Weasley?"

"You could say that," Severus replied cryptically.

"Is there a problem?"

Severus feared if he looked Draco in the eye and told him a lie or a half-truth, the younger wizard
would see right through him and know the real reason. Instead, he looked away and gave an answer that was unrelated to his moment of anxiety, but one that Draco would believe. "Just thinking about when I finally reveal myself to Hermione."

"Understandable. Speaking of which, how soon do you think it will be before you do reveal yourself?" Draco asked in earnest.

The blond man that was now sitting across from him was starting to remind Severus of a music box with a faltering charm, playing the same tune over and over again, "When? When?"

"I DON'T KNOW!" Severus roared with sudden fury. "Your nagging certainly isn't helping in the matter! This is a very delicate situation and you are not privy to all the nuances involved. You cannot rush subtle manipulation; there cannot be a timetable on the twisting of a person to one's will. It is a process that requires patience, something I am losing with you constantly pestering me."

The raven-haired wizard could not fault Draco for his question, but his anger gave him a convenient excuse not to examine the recent questions of why Miss Anne suddenly held little allure for him.

"Why, Severus," young Malfoy drawled with a composed air, the antithesis of the other wizard's agitated state. "I never said you should do it soon. I was just wondering how it was coming along. Ginny did mention a sudden lack of curiosity. You never did tell me how Thursday night went."

"Well enough," Severus snapped back. "She was reluctant to talk about Dolohov and the attack, as well as anything to do with her husband."

"Interesting. Very interesting. She suddenly chooses not to unburden herself to you like she has done during all her previous visits?" Draco mused.

"Perhaps she's tired of dealing with events that cause her much pain, choosing instead to shut off emotions that are a nuisance and interfere with functioning properly," he retorted.

Once the words escaped his lips, Severus realized he was speaking more about himself, but the same logic could easily apply to Hermione. In fact, he knew exactly what Hermione was doing when the subject of the attack and her husband came up. He had behaved in much the same way many times over the years when Albus had tried to get the emotionally distant Potions master to
"open up" and talk about his feelings regarding Severus’ wife. Severus frequently asserted he had no feelings.

There were occasions when Albus was able to catch the brooding man at just the right time and in just the right mood, encouraging Severus to get things off his chest, but the only time the subject of Gabrielle was ever discussed without reservation was the night the young Death Eater came to the Headmaster, broken and full of remorse.

Draco was leading him towards thoughts of Gabrielle once more, and he wasn't prepared to deal with another set of unsettling memories heaped upon the emotions he was suppressing regarding Hermione. Instead, Severus did what he did best and frequently; he closed off his heart and let anger, disdain, and hate fill its place.

"I think I will bid you goodnight," Severus announced abruptly. "I have reports I will begin tonight instead of waiting for the morrow." The older man rose and dusted the invisible lint off his trousers. "Thank you for the drink."

Without further ado, Severus showed himself out.

Draco continued to sit by the fire, analyzing the recent conversation and sudden change in his mentor's attitude. Several hypotheses came to mind, but the most obvious one that made sense made Draco's eyes widen slightly at the implication.

He, of course, having gone through similar symptoms before, could see the signs. If it was true, then their plan for escape had two outcomes: either flawless success or complete catastrophic failure.

A talk with Ginny was in order to confirm or refute his theory. One thing Draco had learned over the years was to trust a woman's intuition in these matters.

An evening out was exactly what Hermione needed. The only ticket available was in the back, so she was able to get it on the cheap. With a pair of Omnioculars, she felt like she was sitting within the first three rows.

The play ended with a standing ovation.
Hermione, feeling a bit more cultured for seeing a play she had longed to see and that was considered a classic in the wizarding world, moved with the rest of the crowd out of the underground amphitheater and into the cool night air just outside the Three Broomsticks. Like many of the attendees, Hermione moved inside the tavern for a nightcap before heading home. With her hair still freshly washed and coiffed from a day at the spa, her skin glowing and her new purple robes on, Mrs. Weasley glided into the bar feeling relaxed and carefree.

"Sherry, please," Hermione asked the barman.

As she waited for her drink, Madam Rosmerta breezed by with a tray full of drinks for a loud congregation of revelers in the corner, singing the Chudley Cannons fight song. Just as Hermione got her glass of sherry, the buxom barmaid passed by again and stopped dead in her tracks.

"Bless my soul! It's Hermione Granger! You look dressed for an Unforgivable," Madam Rosmerta exclaimed.

"Mrs. Hermione Weasley," Hermione pointed out, lifting her left hand up for the older witch to see her wedding band.

"Which one? Let me guess… Ron?" she asked with a knowing wink.

"Yes," Hermione answered with a sudden lack of enthusiasm.

Madam Rosmerta had seen the entire spectrum of the human soul pass through her pub to know each and every look, and recognized Hermione's face enough to understand completely. "Don't worry, love. It'll get better," she assured Hermione with a friendly nudge of her shoulder against Hermione's.

"How did you--" Hermione didn't bother to finish the question, as the older and much wiser witch just gave her one of those all-knowing looks.

"One doesn't run a pub without learning how a witch or wizard looks when they're feeling a certain way." Rosmerta took Hermione by the shoulder and turned her to view a secluded corner of pub. Pointing, she said, "See that couple there, the bloke with the green robes? This is probably their first date. See how he sits back a bit, unsure of how to touch her, not knowing if he should even reach out and grab her hand?"
Turning Hermione's attention to another couple near the first, Rosmerta continued, "See that couple there? They've dated a while and haven't gone to bed yet. See how eager the man is to touch her, how all his attention is on her and her alone as if she's his whole world?" Directing the younger witch's gaze to the end of the bar, Rosmerta observed, "And see that bloke there. Bet you five Galleons his wife just left him. Look at the way he sits like his whole world has been crushed, the way he plays with his wedding ring."

Hermione looked at the woman before her with a newfound respect, realizing there was more than one type of knowledge in the world.

"So where's your other half?" Madam Rosmerta asked.

"On a pub-crawl with his teammates tonight. He's Keeper for the Chudley Cannons," Hermione informed her.

"Oh," the other witch said with sudden nervousness. Hermione was too preoccupied looking at other couples to notice the older witch's agitation. "Well, I'd better get going. Busy and all. It was good seeing you, love." And as Hermione turned to wave goodbye, the witch disappeared amidst a new swarm of patrons rushing into the bar.

As Hermione sat sipping her sherry, thinking about how she wished Calleo was there with her so she could discuss the play with him, she felt a pair of eyes watching her. Looking down the length of the bar, she saw a handsome, slightly older wizard in his thirties smile and wink at her. She blinked, slightly startled by the sudden attention. Trying not to blush like some innocent schoolgirl, she kept her eyes fixed upon the drink in front of her.

Lifting her glass to her lips to take a sip, Hermione saw the handsome wizard slide up next to her out of the corner of her eye. As she turned to face him, Hermione saw him smile warmly at her.

"Hi, I'm Alan," he said in greeting, extending his hand.

"Hermione," she replied, shaking his hand carefully.

"That color on you is rather striking. In fact, it's quite lovely on you," he complimented her as his eyes traveled over her features.
Hoping her cheeks weren't flushing an even more obvious shade of pink, Hermione ducked her head down and replied. "Thank you."

It felt rather risqué to be talking with a man in a bar she didn't know, especially one that was appraising her with eyes that seemed to disrobe her where she stood. Yet at the same time, she didn't want to stop. It felt glorious to be admired for her looks for once. Was it so wrong to feel beautiful in the eyes of other men? Ron certainly hadn't looked at her with anything resembling the hungry predatory look in Alan's eyes for months, maybe years. Though she knew it was wrong to lead Alan on, and she vowed to herself that she would never wind up in bed with him, a small part of her wanted to tease him and make him act like a fool for her. Suddenly she realized that she was behaving just like the flirtatious girls she had looked down upon with disdain all those years at Hogwarts. All those witches batting their eyelashes and tossing their hair about, giggling like twittering birds at insipid jokes. But on the other hand, Hermione suddenly understood the power behind those simple gestures, to control men and bend them to their will.

Deciding to play it a little dangerously before ending the charade, whilst hoping no one she knew was at the bar, she licked her lips a little seductively before taking a small sip of sherry, looking up at Alan through lowered lashes.

The effect was instantaneous. Alan's eyes glazed over, his gaze fixated on her lips.

'Am I really that beautiful tonight or is Alan just so desperate he's willing to try any witch tonight?' The thought put a damper on her sudden bout of self-confidence. Guilt suddenly washed up on the shores of her mind, and she knew it was time to end the game.

'What would Calleo think if he saw me acting this way?' Suddenly, she realized she wouldn't care what Ron would think, but what would Calleo think? Shame filled her.

"Well, it was nice meeting you, Alan, but I'd better Floo home before my husband misses me." Hermione smiled a bit wanly at him, and saw the note of rejection and acceptance in his smile.

"Goodbye, Hermione," he bid her farewell with a smirk. Something in the way he looked at her said he was hoping to see her around again sometime soon.

Somehow being adored and seduced by a man as handsome as Alan didn't hold nearly the appeal of a nice evening with Calleo. At least with Calleo, she knew he was an intelligent man, a good conversationalist, funny, insightful, and well-mannered. Alan reminded Hermione of the men her old lunch mates at the Ministry talked about, where the man would fawn over them during the evening and not bother to wake them when he left their bed in the morning or to owl them
afterwards. Still, it was nice to know that she could catch the eye of a man like Alan once in a rare while.

Hermione decided to Apparate home instead of Floo, avoiding soot on her brand new robes. Once home, she went straight to bed, not caring if Ron came home that night or not. On the chance he might not be back until morning, she situated herself in the middle of the bed and hogged all the covers. If Ron did come back that night, he could nudge her over and wrestle some of the covers away, but if he wasn't going to be home, why should she deny herself the luxury of sleeping where she damn well pleased?

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Irritated for no damn good reason, Severus made his way under cloak of night to work and took the lift up to his office. Just as he pulled his hood back and was about to take off his cloak as he walked towards his office, he heard the shrill shriek of Miss Lavender Brown behind her office door.

Wondering what in the hell she was doing there, he walked over to the door to make sure she was all right and not having another destructive temper tantrum. As he lifted his hand and was about to knock, he heard a distinctly male voice as well, grunting and panting. Miss Brown began moaning loudly in a rather encouraging fashion.

Tempted, Severus debated the pros and cons of bursting in on Miss Brown under the pretext of truly making sure she was all right. On the one hand, Severus would learn whom she was sleeping with, as she kept such private information to herself, never disclosing the fact she was even seeing anyone. Such information could be used as a bargaining chip against his employer if needed. On the other hand, suddenly bursting through the door when he had no idea who might be betwixt Miss Brown's legs might prove to be a bad move, as it could be anyone, possibly even Cornelius Fudge for all he knew. Then there would be the explanation as to why a Death Eater had access to Miss Brown's place of business, there would be Obliviates involved, and it could wind up being a rather messy ordeal. Instead, he crouched down by the door and listened for any telltale signs of Miss Brown's unknown lover.

After a few more moments, the lovers on the other side of the door made the obvious noises indicating they both reached orgasm. They spoke in such low tones, he could not make out any of the words. After a few more moments, he heard both parties leave by Floo.

Severus went to his office to start his report, noting the time, while wondering if Miss Brown was in the habit of bringing her lover or lovers to her office on a Saturday night for a quick shag. He would have to come back next Saturday night under the false notion of catching up on work.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 27 A/N: And if you are wondering why Miss Anne calls him Bob, it's my tip of my hat to the term B.O.B: Battery Operated Boyfriend.

Okay, okay, okay, I slipped in one big "nachos and beer" line into my fic. (For those who are not acquainted with the term, 'nachos and beer' is the most extreme rating on a phrase that it so totally American on the Agony Aunt meter of Britishisms.) Here in the U.S., there is a kids' cereal called Trix that is really awful. It has all sorts of artificial colors and flavors, and is then packed with minerals and vitamins to make the parents believe they are allowing their kids to eat something healthy, when eating the cardboard box it came in would actually be more nutritious and provide more fiber. Sorry, ranting. Anyway, there is a commercial for Trix that has kids keeping the Trix away from a rabbit that wants to eat Trix cereal. The rabbit rants like a junkie the day before his weekly trip to the methadone clinic, "I want Trix! Gotta have Trix!" The kids snatch the Trix away from the rabbit and say, "Silly rabbit, Trix are for kids." Well, for years I've been saying. "Silly rabbit, Trix (tricks) are for prostitutes." For those non-native English speakers, there is an idiom for prostitutes doing a sex act, it's called "turning a trick." Get it? I know, it's a little forced and told myself I wouldn't use the line unless the opportunity came up. It did, I indulged, and I won't apologize. You are allowed to groan out loud and pelt me with virtual vegetables (not used by Miss Anne). Thanks to Piggie for letting me know there is no such thing as Trix cereal in England.

If you want to see a Trix commercial and understand what I am referring to, I have a commercial queued up for viewing on the ATDLHEA Tumblr page: http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/post/130690433590/cultural-reference-and-they-didnt-live-happily

The phrase: "You look dressed for an Unforgivable," I thought would be a good turn of the phrase "You look dressed to kill" in the wizarding world.

And a huge round of thanks to my betas, Horserider and JuneW.
Chapter Summary

Hermione and Ron have a civil conversation, but that doesn't mend all wounds. Albus and Minerva 'pop' by for a visit with Severus.

"It is often under the guise of friendship that we slip so easily and unnoticed into love."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Eight
“Bright Lights, Big Bookstore”

Disclaimer: No money is being made from this story, JK Rowling owns all concepts and characters.

Hermione woke to the sound of the Floo in the living room roaring to life at seven in the morning. Groaning, she rolled over and clung tighter to the blankets, burying her head deeper into the bedclothes in order to ignore the fact her husband had returned, like an ostrich with its head in the sand.

'The prodigal husband returns.'

Hoping she did a good job of pretending to be asleep, she listened to Ron creep into the bedroom, past the bed, and straight to the bathroom. When she heard the taps for the shower turn on, Mrs. Weasley figured since she was up, she might as well be in the kitchen when Ron emerged freshly showered, all evidence of last night's activities rinsed down the drain.

Pigwidgeon was waiting on his perch with a note for Hermione from her parents, inviting her and Ron over for Sunday dinner next week. The letter mentioned that they would be welcome to show up anytime after one o'clock, and dinner would be at about five.

Opening up the cupboard, Hermione remembered she hadn't had time the day before to go
shopping for food at the farmers’ market. Fortunately, there was enough to make some eggs and toast for breakfast. By the time the eggs were ready, Ron was ambling into the kitchen.

"Morning," he greeted his wife perfunctorily.

"Morning." The sound of the spatula scrapping the cast iron skillet filled the silence. "Eggs?"

"Sure, why not?"

Ron grabbed a plate and walked over to the cooker, and stood next to Hermione. She heaped a large pile of scrambled eggs onto his plate and added a few slices of toast, before dishing up her own breakfast. Just then the teakettle whistled.

"Tea?" Hermione asked blandly.

"Got any coffee?"

"No, I need to pick some up."

"None for me, then," he declined.

Hermione sat down next to her husband, and both began to eat in the same awkward silence that had pervaded their lives for the past week.

"I owled my parents about coming to dinner next Sunday. They said to come over at one, dinner at five," she informed Ron.

"Oh."

Ron ate his eggs without looking at his wife.
"Shall I owl them back that we'll be there?" Hermione asked, hoping she wouldn't have to explain to her parents why Ron couldn't come, but hoping he might decline.

"Sure."

They went back to not speaking; only the sounds of the masticating of food and the sipping of tea could be heard.

Once Ron was almost done eating, Hermione mentioned, "I went to Gringotts yesterday." She paused. "I saw quite a bit more money there than I expected. Did you get a pay increase or a bonus?"

Ron finally looked at his wife, his face placid and detached. "Yeah, been meaning to tell you that. Coach decided to give me the position of starting Keeper permanently. When the season ends in November, we're going to renegotiate my contract so that I'm paid full salary, plus perks. In the meantime, there is a bit of an increase, plus a bonus for every game we win." There was no enthusiasm with his statement, no joy in relaying the news that he had longed to be able to tell her for years.

Hermione smiled weakly at him, mustering as much happiness for him as she could, but found it faltering. "Congratulations, Ron. I guess you were right, you finally made starting Keeper. You just had to hold onto your dream long enough." It was as close to an apology for her years of nagging as it ever was going to get.

"Yeah. I guess I was right," he said with what sounded like defeat in his voice. "You can buy yourself some new clothes now. You deserve them," he said with no feeling.

"Ginny and I went shopping yesterday. I've been saving money with making my own lunches and scrimped enough for a new robe." She ended the sentence on an up note, trying to sound cheerful, but failing miserably. "Ginny wanted to buy me an early birthday present, so she bought me another one," Hermione finished, her tone more quiet and reserved.

"Oh." Ron looked neither pleased nor displeased.

Ron picked up his dish and took it to the sink. He almost placed it in the sink to be washed later, then stopped. Reaching for the dish soap, he washed his plate and set it on the drainboard to dry.
As he was walking out the kitchen, Hermione whispered, "Thanks."

He stopped dead in his tracks as she spoke her gratitude. Without looking at her, he nodded his head and then continued walking out of the kitchen.

Hermione wasn't sure why she thanked him. It could have been for the simple gesture of washing his plate; it could have been for agreeing to dinner at her parents. Maybe it was the fact that it was the most civil conversation they'd had in a while and Ron didn't start fighting with her again. Whatever the reason, it still took all of her strength to say it.

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Severus dragged his arse out of bed sometime after lunch. He had spent most of the night writing out his report on the latest round of testing he and Draco had conducted from their day at the spa. He did not come home until the sky was lightening with delicate pre-dawn hues of periwinkle, cornflower blue and palest orchid. Draco still needed to get back to him on some things, and Severus always waited forty-eight hours before turning in his final report to Miss Brown, changing it when necessary if Mr. Malfoy had any delayed allergic reactions to the formulas. Mr. Malfoy would be turning in his own report to Severus to add to the final scroll on Monday morning.

As the Potions master stumbled into his bathroom, he stared at his reflection with bleary eyes. Dark stubble mottled his complexion. "You're not twenty-one years old, Severus," he said to himself before scrubbing his face and eyes with his hands in an attempt to clear the last of the sleep from his mind. "Hell, you're not even thirty-five years old anymore," Severus added more somberly.

During the second rise of the Dark Lord, Severus had been required to not only teach, but to spy for both his former master and the Headmaster. There were days that went on for more than twenty-four hours. The Hogwarts Potions master would teach classes all day long, correct papers, and supervise detentions, only to be called by his former dark master to some gathering of his "loyal" followers at night. By the time Crucios had been dished out, orders given, hems of robes kissed, and everyone had genuflected in reverence, it was time to go complete their missions of terror and thuggery. They would go all night, and Severus would drag himself back to Hogwarts before dawn with just enough time to clean up and make it to breakfast, only to start his day once again. There were some weeks where Severus lived on nothing but Pepperup Potion and Invigoration Draughts.

While wearing his Death Eater robes, Severus would do as little as possible yet still doing his best to appear as a faithful servant and enforcer of Voldemort's rule. Most of this was accomplished by doing nothing more than standing around while others did the dirty work, as he handed out a snide remark here and there. There were things he did do when his fellow Death Eaters were not watching, like placing a Portkey in the hands of an unseen cowering child, and placing a Disillusionment Charm on the unconscious form of an injured Muggle-born so they would be passed over and ignored until the attackers were gone and the Aurors arrived. They were little things that could never be traced back to him nor seen by the others.
Still, it had given him some self-satisfied warmth to know he saved some lives out there, even though they would never know it was Severus Snape. Those that were conscious would no doubt still be wondering why they had received a momentary bit of mercy from some tall dark figure in a black robe who had struck fear in their hearts. The Aurors never recorded any of this; while they did not know the identity of this softhearted Death Eater, they knew there could be Ministry informers reading their reports.

Splashing some cold water on his face helped revive Severus a little this morning. He just didn't have the stamina of staying up all night long anymore. He didn't need to do it anymore, and his body let him know just how displeased it was being denied a good night's rest in a soft warm bed, or at least taken off his comfortable schedule.

Still growling a little to himself as he tried to wake up, Severus shuffled into the kitchen for a cup of tea and some toast, his hand still rubbing his face and scratching at his facial growth. A lone hank of hair defied gravity and stood up at an odd angle.

As he plopped down into his chair at the table, he mumbled to himself, "Why did you have to spend all night working when it could have waited until today or tomorrow?"

The wizard knew exactly why he spent most of the night at Lovely Lavender’s, working industriously until the break of dawn. It kept his mind busy and away from thoughts that rattled him to the core.

"I am not falling for her," he grumbled into his tea. "$I refuse to fall for my own lies."

At that moment, Severus' subconscious mind wondered what Albus and Minerva would have said, if they were still alive to visit him.

'My, my. Look who decided to join the land of the living,' Minerva castigated Severus crisply.

"You should talk, Minerva. Don't you have a ghost mouse to go chase or something? Don't choke on the tail," the bedraggled wizard muttered at the apparition of Minerva sitting across the table.

'Severus, my dear boy, we are just concerned. You look rather tired,' the transparent Headmaster observed.
"I should be, after staying up all night," Severus retorted.

'And just why were you up all night long?' Albus prodded him further.

Severus growled into his tea and glared at his old mentor sitting next to him. "You're in my head. You obviously know the reason why."

'Yes, yes. I tend to agree with young Malfoy on this one. I think you are becoming rather attached to Hermione.' Albus straightened himself in his chair and popped some unknown confection into his mouth.

"That's just conjecture. I think you are just believing the rather convincing front I am projecting."

'That may be, but even with the rather kind and flattering things you say to Hermione during her visits, are they not liberally infused with truth?' the white-haired vision pointed out. 'Truth that you trust her, that you are glad to see her and enjoy your talks?'

Severus put his head down on the table and wrapped his arms around his head in partial defeat.

'Hermione rather reminds me of Gabrielle,' Minerva noted.

Leaping up out of his chair with a sudden rush of adrenaline, Severus roared, "DON'T YOU DARE EVER SPEAK HER NAME!" The infuriated wizard grabbed his mug of tea and smashed it against the wall. The visions of Albus and Minerva winced ever so slightly. He placed his hands on either side of his head and shut his eyes, willing the visions of Albus and Minerva to disappear and the conversation to end. "HERMIONE IS NOT HER! HERMIONE COULD NEVER REPLACE HER!" he screamed. Overwrought, he slumped back into his chair and willed himself not to cry. "I will not cry, I will not cry, I am dead inside, I cannot allow another inside my heart ever again. Never, never..." he ground out, talking to himself, his eyes still shut tight.

'We are not saying Hermione ever could replace your wife,' Minerva amended, rising to place a gentle translucent hand upon Severus' back as he gazed blankly at the wet tea stains dripping down the wall. 'What Albus and I are suggesting it that it is time for you to move on and accept the fact that you have atoned for her and your unborn child's death.'
Severus gritted his teeth, feeling the tears come against his will.

'Perhaps it is time for you to allow yourself to feel once more, Severus. There is nothing weak about feeling strongly for someone,' she added.

"No, I will not. There is no point," the raven-haired man said with resignation, blinking back the tears. "She is married to that Weasley boy. When I leave, she will remain here with her oaf of a husband while I seek out a new life, free of this tyranny that I am subjugated under. Maybe in several years’ time when I no longer feel the sting of their death and the guilt it brings, even after all these years, then maybe I will think about letting another witch into my life, but I will not love her. I cannot love again. It broke me once to have it taken from me in such a way, I don’t think I could stand losing another."

'Maybe Hermione is the one to let you feel again. It has been years, Severus,' Albus reminded the Slytherin wizard. 'There is no dark wizard anymore to take the ones we love away from us. Everyone is safe now, in no small part due to all the sacrifices you made. Perhaps you deserve the reward of someone in your life, even if it is for a short while. It may not be love, but I think she is willing to offer you friendship.'

"And where will the friendship end? It is often under the guise of friendship that we slip so easily and unnoticed into love," the weary younger wizard reflected aloud.

'Yes, but even you have admitted, Severus, that you were not in love with your wife. But you did love her,' the vision of Dumbledore remarked.

"I could have fallen in love with Gabrielle, given enough time." Severus sniffed and pretended not to notice the few tears that escaped.

'Don't deny what your heart wants, Severus. You may not have the luxury of time to enjoy it with Hermione, but you didn't have the luxury of time in the end with your wife either. Seize the chance, and let your heart do what it will. Remember that love is the most powerful thing in the universe. There is no regret in the experience of love, only when we deny ourselves the ability to love,' the wise memory of Albus sagely told him.

"And when love is used as a weapon against us? What then?" Severus asked, feeling the long forgotten physical pang of weighty regret in his chest. "We have a choice between two roads, both leading to hell. I've taken one path before. If Moody or Fudge discovers anything, it could be just like facing The Dark Lord and Lucius all over again, only this time Hermione would be caught in the middle."
The apparition of Minerva moved back to her seat across from Severus. 'You're quite a bit older now, Severus. You are very careful, and we have the greatest faith that it will all come out well in the end and no one will get hurt. Do you forget that Ginny and Lavender are there to help you and Draco as well? What of them? Are you not concerned that they will be used against you and Draco?'

"Ginny is coming with us, and Lavender is quite cunning herself. No doubt she will not get caught, and if she does, she has a way out," the living wizard rationalized.

'Severus, you have planned it so that Hermione will not be placed in harm's way, especially if the Ministry pieces together how you will get away. So don't let any unfounded fears and old scars stop you from allowing yourself to enjoy your friendship with Hermione,' the old Gryffindor witch assured Severus.

"Please," Severus pleaded. "Can we just drop the subject? I am not falling in love with Hermione. I never will," he insisted. But somehow a part of his heart was already falling for her against his will.

Hermione did remind him of his wife in some ways. It was Hermione's curious brown eyes on that first day in class during her first year that evoked old memories of his wife. They both had that same insatiable quest for knowledge, and that damned belief that all the answers to life could be found in a book. It was this certain air of righteous know-it-all common sense that had made his wife Gabrielle think she could start talking to the other Death Eater wives, trying to convince them to talk to their husbands about the fallacies of pure-blood propaganda. It was this attitude about proof and knowledge, with no regard to how the blindly zealous mind worked, that led to her death. Logic and fact did not always conquer socialized prejudice and ingrained hate.

There were no dark wizards now out there who would kill Hermione based on her beliefs, but forces were already affecting her life. Calpurnia Fudge was one. One witch held Hermione's present and future in her hands, and though she was not killing Hermione, she was, in a sense, destroying her spirit by keeping Hermione's hopes and aspirations squashed.

Severus was even more exhausted now than when he woke up. It was with greater frequency that his mind kept drifting back to Gabrielle. The last time he felt this strongly towards another witch, she had been his wife. Some selfish part of Severus wanted to allow himself the luxury of letting himself wallow in the warm and fuzzy feelings of a growing friendship with Hermione. But the logical part of Severus' mind wanted to allow it to go no further, knowing there would be pieces to pick up afterwards once he left England and she was finally gone from his life.

The selfish little boy inside of him that cried for affection demanded that the adult Severus let him
have this one thing, if anything, to keep him happy with good memories of warmth and tenderness he had been denied for years. The adult part of Severus did not want to stop the friendship that was blooming between Hermione and him.

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Hermione had just put the clothes into the laundry cauldron in the kitchen and was letting them soak before going back to wash and spot-treat them. As she passed through the living room to the bedroom to fetch her lingerie for hand-washing in the sink, Ron cleared his throat.

"Um… I was thinking… that… maybe…" Ron began, trying to find the right words to break the awkwardness between them. He set his Quidditch magazine down and rose from the couch to walk over towards his wife. "Well, maybe we need a little romance in our lives. That with the war and all, we never… erm… had a chance to really date and such, like most girls want to be… you know… taken out to nice places… and…"

Ron let out a huge breath through puckered lips and ran his hand through his rangy red locks, his eyes darted about nervously, never fixing themselves on Hermione. "What I mean to say is, maybe we should try a little harder… the both of us. Maybe go on some dates and things, to… erm… God! I had this all worked out in my head and now I can't get it out!" he shouted with exasperation at the floor.

Ron started pacing about as he continued while Hermione stood rooted to the spot, unable to respond to her husband's sudden nervousness and desire to work things out.

"I made a reservation for our anniversary next month at the Grand Royal Supper Club," he blurted out.

Ron finally looked into his wife's eyes and waited for her response.

Hermione stood there dumbstruck. For as long as she could remember, she took care of all the arrangements when they went out for special occasions or anniversaries, even her own birthday. And now Ron, who had been rather cold towards her during the past week, had made plans for their anniversary that she hadn't even begun to think about. His hopeful and nervous eyes were searching for signs of gratitude or something she couldn't name.

Knowing she was expected to respond and say something, Hermione stammered, "Ah… thanks!" She swallowed. "That was very thoughtful of you," she added with uncertainty. There was a pause before she remembered she should probably smile back at her husband for such a considerate gesture.
'Wow, the Grand Royal Supper Club?' Hermione thought to herself.

The Grand Royal Supper Club was a very posh and elegant dinner and dancing establishment, with a reputation for entertaining the well-heeled and well-financed slice of wizarding society.

Upon realizing that dancing was a feature of the supper club, Hermione meekly asked, whilst hoping Ron wouldn't find offense, "Erm… don't they have dancing there?"

She remembered how Ron had avoided dancing at the Hogwarts Yule Ball and how he only did the requisite first dance with her at their wedding, including stepping on her toes and dropping her when he dipped her. Hermione wondered if they would be sitting the whole evening at the Grand Royal, or if she could hope that her husband would dance with her… willingly.

Ron licked his lips before answering evasively, "Well, um, I kind of... have been taking lessons recently. Rufus' wife has been teaching me a few steps recently."

"Oh." Hermione smiled to herself. 'He's making an effort. Maybe there is hope.' "What sort of dancing do they have?" she asked. The witch had heard of the club by reputation and word of mouth, but she didn’t personally know anyone that had gone there.

"Foxtrot, swing and tango… or so they told me when I made the reservation," Ron admitted, trying to sound casual about it.

"Oh." Hermione sought to find something to say to fill the uncomfortable silence. "How was it that you were able to get a reservation? I've heard it's hard to get in."

Ron gave her a quirky smile. "Being a rising Quidditch star has afforded me a few perks beyond a few extra Galleons. Speaking of which, you should buy something really nice for yourself to wear, something special and breathtaking. Don't worry about the price, you deserve a nice fancy dress. You can even wear it at the next Ministry ball, if you're worried about not being able to wear it anyplace else."

Hermione felt only a little guilty for having bought herself a new robe, but the thought of buying something so frivolous as an evening dress that she could only wear but a few times a year made her feel uneasy. Still, Ron wanted to spoil her a little, and she couldn’t help but feel a little happy that he was trying so hard to make up for the past. Besides, she was tired of wearing the sensible
and dowdy dress she had worn for the past two years at the Ministry functions, while most of the other witches wore something much more feminine and alluring.

"Thank you," she breathed. "Ginny will love any excuse to take me shopping again."

Ron smiled at the mention of his sister. "Yeah, I'm sure Ginny and you will have fun."

There seemed to be nothing else for them to talk about, and they both stood there shifting from one foot to another. To Hermione's relief, the buzzer in the kitchen went off.

"Oh! That's the laundry, I'd better get it," the witch said, thankful for an excuse to find a reason to walk away from the tense and uncomfortable conversation. Before she walked away, Hermione stood up onto her tiptoes and gave her husband a brief kiss on the cheek. "Thanks," she whispered.

"Yeah," Ron breathed in response, before walking back to the couch and his Quidditch magazine.

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All the laundry had been hung and dried, and pressing charms had been cast. Hermione had just finished putting all the clothes away with a modified packing charm. It wasn't time to start dinner yet, and she dreaded the thought of sitting in the living room with Ron. Yes, his effort to do something romantic regarding their anniversary next month was quite welcome, but it still didn't dissipate the uneasy and clumsy atmosphere between them.

The few cumbersome conversations they did have that day were painful and forced. As Hermione was sitting on the bed, she wondered what she could do to continue avoiding Ron the rest of the day until dinnertime, when they could both dine in silence, using the excuse of eating to be relieved of talking.

The sound of the Floo in the living room roared to life.

"Hermione?" Ginny's voice could be heard all the way to the bedroom.

Upon hearing Ron's sister, Hermione rushed out to the living room. "I'm right here," she called out in response as she entered the room.
"Oh good, you're here." Ginny's head turned to look over Hermione's shoulder. "Hi, Ron!" she said cheerfully.

"Ay there, Gin," Ron greeted his sister with a jerk of his head from the kitchen doorway.

"Mind if I borrow your wife for a bit? I need her help planning Harry's birthday party," the red-headed witch explained, giving Hermione an exaggeratedly comical wink.

"Sure. Give Harry my best. Tell him to owl me any time he wants to get tickets to a game."

"Will do, Ron," Ginny answered as her brother went back into the kitchen.

"You want me to come over," Hermione asked, hopeful for any reason to get out of the flat.

"We can talk over the Floo if it's too much bother, or if you're in the middle of something," Ginny said, not wishing to impose on her friend.

"No," Hermione replied a bit hastily. "No bother. Just let me get my cloak, and I'll pop on over in a tick."

"See you then," Ginny replied before the flames died out.

Hermione bolted for the bedroom to get her cloak, calling out to Ron, "I'm going over for a bit. I'll be back later."

Hearing some sort of acknowledgment from her husband, who was still lingering in the kitchen, she grabbed a cloak and Apparated to the Potters' from the bedroom.

Once she was at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, Hermione let out a huge sigh of relief. The oppressive tension at home was finally gone, and she could relax.

Ginny walked through the kitchen door and greeted her friend. "Well, that was quick," she commented while wiping her wet hands on a tea towel.
"Is Harry home?" Hermione asked, looking about.

"He's out for a bit, running a few errands. He probably won't be back until close to dinnertime, knowing him," Ginny said with a carefree shrug.

"Omph!" Hermione groaned, as she plopped into a chair. "I'm so glad you Flooed. I don't think I could have stood another minute in that flat with him."

"That good, eh?" Ginny looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"Well…" Hermione paused to gather her thoughts. "At least he wasn't being snide this morning." She sighed and rubbed her eyes a few times. "My parents owled back to come over next Sunday for dinner, and Ron agreed."

"Well, that's good," Ginny remarked hopefully.

"Yes, but it was incredibly awkward and tense when I mentioned it over breakfast. Then later on Ron tells me he made reservations at the Grand Royal Supper Club for our anniversary," the older witch said with little enthusiasm.

"Oh! He got you a reservation? Jammy cow!" Ginny squealed. "I've been wanting to go, but Harry doesn't want to go because there's dancing. You know how Harry is when it comes to dancing," she said with envy. "Wait a minute… Ron doesn't dance."

"I know," Hermione muttered darkly. "But he says Rufus' wife, Rogina, is giving him lessons. I just hope she teaches him not to step on my toes again. I swear, after my wedding I promised myself I'd never wear sandals again."

"Ron wants to dance?" Ginny questioned, disbelieving Hermione's statement.

"He made the reservation, so he must want to… make amends, or something. He said with the war and everything, we never got a chance to date properly and he never got to take me out much and romance me, in so many words." Hermione shrugged at the notion, but her brow furrowed as she continued. "Maybe this is the turning point in our relationship where things start to get better. Still,
it was just very uncomfortable for both of us. I just couldn't wait to get out of there, and then you Flooed."

Ginny rubbed Hermione's shoulder in a sympathetic manner. "I know, it's rough," the younger witch said, sounding a lot like Hermione's mother. "These hurt feelings and awkwardness will take time to get over. But he is trying."

Hermione nodded, lost in thought.

"How about I get us some tea before we start on Harry's party?" the redhead offered.

"That would be lovely." The brunette smiled at her friend's considerate gesture.

As Ginny was in the kitchen making a fresh pot of tea, Hermione's thoughts went back to dancing. It really was sweet that Ron was making an effort to patch things up, taking dancing lessons and making the reservations. Then she thought on Ginny and her little confession about her secret belly dancing lessons. Hermione had wondered during the past day why Ginny had brought it up and told her. She had felt almost obligated to share some secret of her own in return for the information. Why did Ginny tell Hermione? It was as if Hermione was this great vessel of secrets, and for each one she took, she almost felt the need to share one of her own.

The few secrets Mrs. Weasley did have, she kept locked up and hidden in her "escape box." Not even Harry or Ron knew about her special box, nor would they ever. Dark Wizards rose and fell throughout history, and – knowing the long life span of wizards – Hermione figured it would be best to keep this one secret to herself. The only other secret Hermione had was Calleo. Lavender knew about Hermione's visits with him, but Lavender could also be counted on to be discreet. Ginny would be discreet too, but Hermione doubted Ron’s sister would look kindly upon her sister-in-law seeing such a man behind her brother's back.

'Dancing... Ron wants to take me dancing.' It seemed so out of character for Ron. Then the thought struck her. 'Oh, bugger!' Hermione remembered how to waltz from some lessons years ago for the Yule Ball, but she had forgotten how to do the Foxtrot. And she had never learned how to dance swing or do the tango.

Hermione audibly groaned, putting her hands in her face just as Ginny returned from the kitchen.

"What's the matter this time?" Ginny asked lightly as she set the tea tray down.
"I don't know how to dance," came Hermione's anguished reply through her fingers.

"You know how to dance."

"The waltz." The older witch glared at Ginny, making a point that it was the only dance she remembered.

Ginny gave a rather small "Oh" in reply, looking a bit sheepish.

"Do you know how to foxtrot, swing or tango?" Hermione asked, looking pleadingly to her friend.

"Sorry, I'm a bit rusty." Then she added brightly, "But I can show you how to roll a Galleon along your stomach if you want to learn how to belly dance."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "No, I don't think that would go over very well at the Grand Royal Supper Club. However, that might go over very well at Harry's party though," she added on a side note with a sly smirk.

The younger witch folded her arms and resolutely said, "No."

"Aw, come on. Why not?"

"Because it doesn't fit in with the cowboys-and-Indians theme Harry wants for his party," Ginny reasoned. "That's why I need your help. You're Muggle-born, and your parents went to America for a while during the war. Can you help me get together a cowboys-and-Indians themed party together? We're going to do it as a sleepover with tipis in the garden. There'll be barbecue and... and... what else do cowboys eat? I was thinking of roasting half a side of buffalo in the garden on a spit. And what exactly is barbecue?"

"You can eat buffalo?" Hermione asked, stunned at the thought of half a ton of wild animal roasting in Harry and Ginny's back yard.
"Sure! You can order up to a whole side of one from Abattoir and Haunches. Considering the fact that we might have up to seventy-five people, we might need all that meat." Ginny poured some tea for Hermione and handed it to her with a splash of cream. "So I was thinking you could help me. We could go to a Muggle bookstore. I could buy a few books on cowboy-type food, Indian décor, and things like that. Do you think you could owl your parents about what they could suggest, as they actually were in America?"

"Well, I'll be seeing them next Sunday," Hermione replied. "Is that soon enough?"

"I guess so. I should be able to work out any charms in time for the party and buy whatever I need. You think we could go to a bookstore today? It'll give me some time to get some ideas." Ginny looked at Hermione expectantly, hoping she'd say yes.

It had been quite a while since Hermione had ventured into Muggle London, but she did know of a couple of bookstores that were fairly large and might carry what Ginny wanted.

"I don't see why not. You're going to need some Muggle money," Hermione pointed out.

"At least the goblins at Gringotts work on Sunday," the younger witch said. "I should have exchanged some yesterday while we were there."

"We should get going, as the stores tend to close early on Sunday," Hermione noted.

After finishing their tea, both witches Flooed over to the Leaky Cauldron. Once money had been changed, they set out into Muggle London.

As they stepped out into the afternoon air, Hermione breathed deeply and looked around. Since the end of the war, she had been venturing with less frequency into Muggle London, sequestering herself within the secret culture of the wizarding world. A few people seemed to be talking to themselves, until Hermione realized they were talking on their mobile phones, which had special tiny ear and mouthpieces connected to their equally tiny phones. She never remembered mobile phones being so minuscule.

Posters for movies with actors she no longer recognized were plastered on walls, and the clothing that young people her age were wearing seemed almost as odd as wizard clothing did when she had first ventured down Diagon Alley as a child. It almost shocked her to see girls wearing jeans so low that the cracks of their arses could be plainly seen. They reminded her of photographs of her mother
as a university student in the early seventies, wearing low-slung bell bottoms and peasant shirts while holding up her hand in a peace symbol. But these current pants were studded with rhinestones, and the sheer peasant blouses were so see-through that you could tell what color bras they were wearing, or that they had tank tops on that didn't bother to come halfway down their stomachs. Hermione shook her head at the latest fashion trends, especially when she had a clear view of some bird's arse crack.

It seemed like the Muggle world was changing so rapidly to Hermione. New gadgets that she had no clue of what they did were in people's hands, and cars that drove by looked more like something out of a science fiction fantasy movie than what she had ridden in as a child. Music blared from shops they passed by with a style of music Hermione could find no melody to, and lyrics that seemed to be shouted rather than sung. The glare of fluorescent lights inside the stores looked harsh and made everyone's skin look green and pasty.

Hermione's feet kept moving and she kept up the light banter with Ginny, but all the while she was stunned at how the Muggle world suddenly seemed so foreign and strange to her now.

'Is this what the Muggle world looks like to those who are not Muggle-born?' she pondered. 'All plastic and loud, glaring and strange?'

She was brought back from her reverie when they reached a large multi-storied bookstore on a busy street.


Looking about the store, Mrs. Weasley remembered weekends when her parents would bring her to the local mega-bookstore as a child, and she would spend the entire day browsing books, begging her parents to buy all the ones that caught her interest. Though her parents were never one to deny her books, they did set a limit to the number they would buy her each visit.

Hermione steered Ginny over towards the cookbook section in order to find some authentic western barbecue books, while the older witch went in search for books about Indians.

As the brunette witch meandered through the isles, reverently running her fingertips lightly along the glossy spines, a voice brought her back to the present. "May I help you? Do you need any help finding anything?" Hermione's head snapped to look at the young man standing behind her.
He was a tall fellow with a willowy frame, overly pale skin, dull and brittle hair dyed black within an inch of its life, and black-painted fingernails. He wore the requisite store uniform with a friendly name badge, but the bright primary color shirt and neatly pressed pants looked mismatched to the young man's appearance and several facial piercings.

"Erm, yes. I'm looking for books on cowboys and red Indians. Actually, something along the line of red Indian decorative arts," Hermione clarified, trying not to stare at a row of alternating rings and spikes protruding from the young man's brow. 'I had no idea you could even pierce that part of the body.'

"Ah. Well, actually, they don't like to call themselves Indians. It's 'Native Americans.' This way." The store clerk showed Hermione to a bookshelf full of Native and Folk arts books from different regions of the world.

Hermione did her best not to be startled by the flash of metal from the clerk's tongue piercing.

After an hour or so, Hermione had a few books that depicted Native American arts and crafts, along with an encyclopedia of tribes that she had found in the culture section. She set out to find Ginny and see if she was ready to go to the checkout. Hermione really didn't want to go, but she knew if she started looking at books for herself, she wouldn't be home in time to cook dinner for Ron; if he was hungry enough, she might come home to find him eating the couch.

As she passed the mythology section, Hermione heard a familiar laugh, followed by some sniggering and a cackle. Peering down the aisle, Hermione found Ginny on the floor with a few books, turning a page before busting into stifled giggles once more.

"What's so funny?" the older witch asked, walking up to Ginny.

Ginny looked up and burst into a fresh batch of tittering. After she thumbed back a few pages, she held up an illustration for Hermione to scrutinize. "Who does that look like?" the redhead asked, trying not to burst into laughter once more.

Plucking the book from Ginny's hand, Hermione looked at it closer. It was a picture of a very beautiful male youth with fine platinum blond hair that fell down to his waist, and angular refined facial features. He was dressed in a pair of tights, a bejeweled tunic, and soft leather boots, while holding a bow and quiver of arrow standing amid an enchanted forest. It was upon second glance that Hermione noticed the pointed ears.
Ginny spoke up. "Muggles think that looks like an elf?" She started laughing harder, having a
difficult time talking at the same time. "Oh, just wait. I have to buy this book. He'll be mortified to
know he looks like what Muggles think passes as an elf."

The so-called elf looked exactly like Malfoy, except for the ears. Upon realization, Hermione
found it quite funny herself and started laughing until the implications of Ginny's statement sank in.

She stopped laughing and asked Ginny in a serious tone, "You're still seeing Malfoy?"

The laughter died on Ginny's lips.

Hermione swore under her breath at her uncensored question. The two witches had been having
such a lovely afternoon, and now it would be marred with talk of Malfoy and Ginny's infidelity.

Jutting her chin up challengingly, the younger witch said, "So what if I am?"

Squinting her eyes shut, Hermione hoped their argument would not get loud in such a public venue.
After taking a few calming breaths, Hermione slid down next to Ginny and looked at her square in
the eye.

"What about counseling? I know it's rough right now, but you yourself said these hurt feelings and
awkwardness take time to get over," Hermione pointed out. "Don't you want this to work between
you and Harry? How can you be serious about this when you're still seeing Malfoy?"

"You just don't understand," Ginny declared in her own defense. Meeting Hermione's eyes, she
spoke slowly. "Draco is the friend that Harry never could be to me. Just because I'm married to
Harry doesn't mean he understands me. There is a connection between Draco and me that defies
logic. It cannot be willingly severed because it is inconvenient. He's a part of me, but I guess you
wouldn't understand that, would you?"

Hermione looked away from Ginny's gaze. She had been having just these sorts of feeling towards
Calleo recently. The connection between them was undeniable, not only physically, but also
intellectually. It was with Calleo that she had first confessed her hesitant thoughts about marrying
Ron, and her agreement to be his wife out of fear of living as a lonely spinster. All things large and
small that she was too afraid of sharing with Ginny and Harry out of fearing their judgment, she had
shared with Calleo. And last night while at the Three Broomsticks, she had no desire to express her
thoughts on the play with Ron at all, but rather wished Calleo were with her in order to discuss the
play. Lately, whenever anything interesting, upsetting or humorous happened in Hermione's life, she wondered what Calleo would say. Mrs. Weasley felt no urge to share with her husband, as Ron had shown little interest in anything his wife had to say for quite some time.

Forcing herself to lie, the older witch replied, "No." Hermione started nervously playing with the small scar on her left hand, fixing her gaze of the smooth raised ridge of mended flesh that puckered around the edges. "But I do see your point," she conceded. "I just wish you weren't seeing…" Hermione stood up and looked around before casting a quick Silencing Charm and sitting back down. You never knew when another witch or wizard might be around. "I just wish you weren't seeing Malfoy."

Ginny glared at Hermione with accusing eyes, and the brunette felt as if she was being laid bare with her friend's stare. Hermione didn't know why she should feel guilty with the way Ginny was looking at her, as if she knew her visits with Calleo. She knew Calleo would never breech their confidence by telling Draco about her visits to him. There was no way for Ginny to know anything, but it still didn't stop the unsettling feeling in her gut that she was being hypocritical. If somehow Ginny did find out about her visits to Calleo, would Hermione stop seeing him if her friend asked? She doubted it.

They sat there for a moment before Ginny rose, picking up all the books she had selected, including the Muggle mythology one with the pictures of fair and comely elves.

"I'm ready to pay for these," Mrs. Potter announced in a chilly tone.

Hermione followed with the short stack of books she had selected for her friend. Once bought and bagged, the two witches walked quickly back to the Leaky Cauldron, their footsteps and the sounds of the city replaced by any conversation they might have had if Hermione hadn't confronted Ginny.

Once inside the Leaky Cauldron, each witch Flooed back to their respective homes after tentatively agreeing to meet for their usual Wednesday lunch.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 28 A/N: Kindest thanks to Azrael on British fashion in 2003 for this chapter and her input.

And let me take this moment to give my deepest thanks to HP-Lexicon.org, for without their wonderful site, I would have screwed up several canon facts, misspelled several names, and spent countless hours trying to hunt down certain passages in the books for information. So please go to the site, support them, do something to make
sure they stick around and don't go away. Even Rowling herself uses them in a pinch when she forgets some details.
“The Travails of Training Trevor"

Chapter Summary

Hermione has the burden of training Trevor, while Severus ponders the finer points of sex potions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Nine
“The Travails of Training Trevor”

Disclaimer: You know it, but I feel obligated to say it again. Rowling owns all characters and concepts, no money is being made from this, and no copyright infringement is intended.

Hermione sent off an owl to James Hoover, the marriage counselor Ginny recommended, before going to work Monday morning. Her day started out with Mr. Trevor Spawn showing up to work half an hour late with another lame excuse that Hermione cut short, making it clear in no uncertain terms that she would recommend his dismissal if he continued to show up late for work.

Hermione spent half the morning repeating herself as she briefed Mr. Spawn on department procedures, and found him not paying the least bit of attention to what she said. The morning training ended when Hermione unceremoniously dropped the Department of Standards & Regulation Guide to Testing Ingredients manual in his lap, which weighed exactly one stone, down to the ounce; the landing of the manual in Mr. Spawn's lap made him squeak and grimace, holding his groin in such a way that gave Hermione pleasure knowing she gave him a little discomfort to counterbalance all that he had been giving her.

When Harry showed up to take Hermione to lunch, making sure she wasn't starving herself again, Mr. Spawn fawned over the famous wizard in an attempt to ingratiate himself. The stunned Auror merely shook the smarmy git's hand and made a hasty retreat with Hermione, spending the rest of lunch listening to his friend complain vociferously about the circumstances of working with a cretinous little toad of Mr. Spawn's caliber.

The rest of Mrs. Weasley's afternoon was spent testing ingredients, while her new co-worker
relaxed in his new office "studying" the elephantine manual. At three seconds past the stroke of five, Trevor popped his head into the lab.

"I'll be going home now," he announced brightly, as he shifted from one foot to another, itching to leave work as soon as possible.

"Very well, Mr. Spawn. And don't forget to take your manual home to study tonight, as I expect you here bright and early tomorrow morning, and on time, ready to begin testing ingredients," she informed him with a firm lecturing tone. "I'll make it easy on you and inform you right now that you'll be testing aconite, daisy roots, moonstone, juniper berries, and Jobberknoll feathers."

"Awwwwww," Trevor whinged like a third year being told he had homework to do over the Christmas hols. "You can't be serious! I just finished school and I have to study more? I was expecting to at least have a break until I started my apprenticeship."

"Mr. Spawn, if you are not prepared to do what is necessary to do your job properly, then I suggest you hand in your resignation now. Take home your manual and study it. As I am the one with the unholy duty of training you, I order you to do it. Incompetence and ignorance are traits we cannot afford to suffer in this department. Good night, Mr. Spawn." Hermione turned her back on him and went back to testing the jackalope carcass laid out on the bench in front of her, making sure it wasn't a jackrabbit with some antlers attached to it with a sticking charm.

As Hermione dragged her weary self up the stairs to the main atrium some time around eight o'clock, she contemplated visiting Calleo, if nothing but to have a sympathetic ear to the horrendous day she had just had, putting up with her new co-worker. Then she realized she had not eaten dinner, smelled like the floor of an apothecary shop located in the seediest corner of Knockturn Alley, and probably looked like a fright.

Calleo did mention to her to feel free to swing by if she felt the need to talk, but she didn't want to seem clingy by stopping by at her first chance, or overstay her welcome by hounding him with her presence. 'He's probably thankful you're not stopping by so he can have a night to himself.' She did remember that he mentioned that he did enjoy her company for dinner, but it was probably far too late now for dinner. Also, she didn't want to impose herself on him, becoming one of those people who stops by and eats others out of house and home. Besides, he had not planned to cook for her that night.

Knowing all the grocery shops in Diagon Alley were closed at this hour, she Flooed home instead, praying Ron hadn't eaten the last of the leftover shepherd's pie from the night before. To her expected dismay, her bane of a husband did eat the last of the leftovers, including the two rolls she was counting on for breakfast the next morning, and the chocolate she had hidden behind a tin of corned beef.
After relieving Pigwidgeon of the marriage counselor's reply tied to his leg, Hermione dined on tinned peaches that were on the cusp of expiring, stale crisps, and a jar of pickled eggs. She swore to herself to restock the cupboard to bursting so she would never be forced to eat such an unsatisfying and appalling meal ever again. Halfway through the peaches, she gave up, chucked the rest in the rubbish bin, and walked away from her half-eaten pickled egg, while promising herself to look at Mr. Hoover's letter in the morning.

She had been tempted to eat the corned beef, but didn't, as it gave her some perverse pleasure to keep it there as a reminder to Ron to never critique her cooking ever again, like he did during their first year of marriage. It was when she was thoroughly fed up one night with his constant comparisons of her cooking to his mother's that Hermione threatened to make corned beef every night for a week if Ron didn't shut up. He never said he didn't like Hermione's food, but his comparisons galled her nonetheless.

Lying in bed with the lights out, her hair still wet from her shower, Hermione imagined what Calleo might be doing in his flat at that moment. Did he read most of the time? Did he stroll about Diagon Alley at night without his mask, wandering about as some faceless stranger? She did recall the tall cloaked figure in Flourish and Blotts, the way his hands turned the page, his boots, his long silhouette back-lit by the candles on the wall behind him. She wondered if he was there tonight, prowling the Potions aisle. Or did another witch come to his flat tonight, so he could offer her tea and comfort? Maybe he was now lying naked on top of her, moving between her legs, making her scream whatever name she wished to call him.

Hermione knew it was a silly notion that somehow she could be just a little bit more special than any other witch that had come through his door. Calleo had probably entertained hundreds of witches with their clothes on and off, and she was just another unremarkable face among the many. Still, the fact remained that her skin itched for his touch, and the sparks of electricity that passed between them when they did touch was a phenomenon that took her breath away. Ron's touch had never made her forget to breathe, or made her think that gravity was arbitrary beneath her feet. Whenever she was at Calleo's flat, she did feel as if she was the only witch in the world, and that the world could be falling down around them and he would still be fixing all his attentions on her and nothing else. It did seem like a very elaborate illusion, but she wanted it to continue, even if she knew it was false. The knowledge that she had been the only witch he had cooked for thrilled her, and that knowledge kept her silly notion alive.

Hearing Ron's return home, she closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep. As she heard her husband rummaging around in the kitchen, her mind wandered back to their upcoming anniversary.

'Four years... has it really been that long? It seems longer.' Snuggling deeper into the covers, the witch continued to silently explore her thoughts. 'Why does it seem longer than that? Aren't the best years supposed to fly by? But then again, these haven't been the best of years.' Hermione wondered if things were truly going to get better or if old habits were going to die hard, and if they
both were going to continue growing apart to the point where they led separate lives despite the fact that they shared the same bed and last name.

'Oour fourth anniversary. He's going to take me dancing.' She stifled a groan of despair. Ron was taking lessons; she thought that maybe she should as well.

Hermione had a little over four weeks to learn how to do the foxtrot, tango and swing. She couldn't think of anyone who could teach her on such short notice. Having been to all the Weasley weddings, she could vouch that none of the other Weasley men knew how to dance. Bill did a fairly good job of faking it with Fleur at their wedding, but she knew he wouldn't be able to teach her. Hermione really wanted to make an effort, since Ron was going through all the bother to "romance" her and do something special for once.

She began ticking off names left and right until her mind came to Calleo's. He certainly had the manners of a gentleman, and had a refined quality about him that exuded an air of good breeding. Of course, Hermione couldn't come right out and ask him for dance lessons. She didn't want to impose on him any further. He was cooking dinner for her, after all. Besides, he might not know how to dance. If so, she certainly didn't want to cause him any embarrassment, though there was nothing to be embarrassed about with not knowing how to dance.

'Lavender. I need to owl Lavender.'

If it wasn't for the fact that her husband was in the kitchen, Hermione would have gotten out of bed and sent a quick note off to Lavender explaining the situation. As it was, she'd have to wait until the middle of the night or do it first thing in the morning.

A vision of Calleo holding her close, his body pressed up against hers, popped into her mind. Her vivid imagination filled in the blanks, and her body suddenly felt warm, suffused with a fresh flush of hormones.

The door creaked as Ron came into the bedroom. There was the whisper of clothes being shed before she felt the bed dip, and the bedclothes tugged at and adjusted, as he settled in for the night.

Feeling emboldened by her hormones, and the knowledge that Ron wanted to make an effort towards rebuilding their relationship, Hermione stretched out her hand in the dark and stroked her husband's shoulder tentatively.
He stiffened, and took a sharp breath when her hand touched him.

"Ron?" she asked questioningly if she should continue.

"It's late. You should get to sleep," he replied tentatively before rolling onto his side, facing away from her.

Hermione felt deeply hurt at his rejection of her affections. She had wanted to touch him slowly, grazing her fingertips along his ribs and sides, hoping he understood that she would like it if he touched her like that too.

The tears started coming against her will as the now familiar cold numbness swept through her body once more, dowsing any arousal she had moments before.

Without waiting for Ron to fall asleep, Hermione rose and went to the kitchen to make a cup of tea and collect herself. No doubt he would either start talking when he figured out she was crying, which might make things worse; or he would ignore her, which would still do nothing to take away the pain he had caused by his rejection.

As she sipped her tea, she began writing her letter to Lavender. After three drafts, Hermione finally attached her letter to Pig and sent the owl into the cool summer night.

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Watching Miss Brown stir the cauldron in front of her, Severus contemplated when the best time would be to start asking the questions he wanted answers to.

"Should I wait until it comes to a rapid boil before adding maca, or while it is coming to a rapid boil?" Lavender asked. Her gaze was fixed on the swirling liquid in front of her as she counted the number of times she moved the spoon in a wide figure eight, creating tiny Corealis effects in the surface of the altered Beam of the Red Oak Potion.

From what the Potions master knew of maca, it shouldn't make much difference. What mattered was how long the potion simmered before bottling, as that would affect the potency of that particular root.

"You may put it in now, Miss Brown. Since the last batch did not have the quick effect we were searching for last time, I recommend we simmer on low for three days instead of one to see if that
will affect the potency," he instructed her.

After she added the sliced maca, Lavender stirred it three more times before setting the cauldron to simmer with a swish of her wand. "Three days? That will increase the price dramatically, as those cauldrons will be full for two extra days instead of being put to use making more batches of this stuff. Time is money, Severus. Is there some way to somehow stew the maca beforehand and add it during the final day of the potion?"

"Absolutely not," the dark-haired wizard replied. "We want the ingredients to mingle and act with one another, each ingredient acting like a catalyst for the other ingredients. If we were to skip a step and cut a corner here or there, as tempting as it seems, then this potion would be as effective as if a Muggle brewed it himself."

Lavender bit her lip and looked out the window. "Damn!" the blond witch muttered under her breath as she moved to sit in her chair by the fire. "I was hoping to manufacture this below a certain cost in order to reach a wider market. At this rate, only the rich will be able to use this with the frequency they expressed a desire for, based on our last customer survey."

As she drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair, trying to think of more ways of streamlining the production of the potion, Severus thought this might be a good time to casually bring up the subject of Ashwinder eggs. He would have asked her Monday, as she was in a far better mood than last Friday; however, she would have known he was up to something if he started firing questions at her while she was in a highly agreeable mood. Severus decided it was best to wait until Tuesday when they were back in the swing of work, and a constant smile was no longer gracing her face.

"Speaking of production costs, what about the price of Ashwinder eggs?" He steepled his fingers in front of him as he sat on his favorite lab stool, resting his elbows on the lab bench.

"Actually, they are the main reason why I decided it's time to start creating a line of sex potions in the first place," Miss Brown informed him.

"Oh, really? Please elaborate," Severus asked, wondering if irony would rule the day.

"Well, I've wanted to do sex potions for a while now, but with the cost of Ashwinder eggs, I figured the cost would be too prohibitive to the average customer. But lately prices have dropped and look to have stabilized," she explained. Lavender summoned Wonkle for some tea before they started a third test batch that morning.
"Do you have any idea as to the reason behind the price drop?" Severus hoped he seemed mildly disinterested, while not too aloof.

Miss Brown shrugged. "I'm not sure of the reason. All I know is that the price has fallen enough to warrant entering the marketplace."

Severus had contemplated telling Miss Brown the true reason behind the lower cost of that particular ingredient, but decided it might be best to hold on to that information for the time being. It might be a useful bargaining chip at some point, as information was always useful, and Severus was gathering quite a few chips in his corner with the people around him.

Wonkle came back with a tea trolley laden with a full tea service and the letters from the morning owls. As the house-elf finished setting the trolley between Miss Brown and the matching chair that Severus frequently occupied when they were discussing Potions, Lavender snatched up the top letter from the stack of parchments.

"Ah, a letter from Mrs. Hermione Weasley," Miss Brown announced, overly cheerful in her mannerisms.

His curiosity piqued, Severus purposefully strolled at a leisurely pace over to his favorite chair by the fire to pour himself some tea, glancing at the letter as he made his way to his seat.

Without lifting her eyes from the letter, Lavender commented dryly, "You don't have to sneak by and pretend you're not interesting in what Hermione has to say, Severus. You can read the letter when I'm done with it, seeing as this concerns you."

Chafed by Miss Brown's blatant call on his attempt to be stealthy, and vexed at himself over his waning talents in spying, Severus sat down in his chair, giving a small indignant huff. "Well, then," Severus snapped at her. "What does it say?"

Lavender grinned at him like a madwoman, which made the hairs on the back of his neck prickle, knowing it involved something unpleasant. "How do you feel about teaching again?" she asked with an odd glint in her eye.

Severus did his best to make sure his mouth did not gape open, but knew he probably had that blank look on his face he detested so much in his students while a professor at Hogwarts. "I beg your pardon?" he said with ill-concealed disgust, his eyes narrowing.
"Mrs. Weasley's husband is taking her to the Grand Royal Supper Club for their anniversary next month. She needs lessons in the foxtrot, tango and swing." Severus' employer leaned over the tea trolley and handed the letter to him for inspection. "She decided to owl me personally, so she wouldn't put Calleo on the spot with her request. Quite considerate of her, when you think about it."

Reading the letter for himself, Severus noted how she did not want to impose upon Calleo's generosity by asking for dance lessons herself, in case he wanted to say no but would not refuse her in person. He would have preferred it if Hermione had come out and asked him herself instead of getting Miss Brown involved, but then he thought of her nature to be more considerate than others. Remembering how Hermione let him pick his own alias, Severus figured she was just being polite; that touched him, since politeness was not a common trait when people interacted with him as Severus Snape or as a gigolo.

"So, Severus," Lavender spoke, bringing Severus back to the moment. "Do you know how to dance, and if so, are you willing to teach her?" She raised one questioning brow while suppressing a smirk, her blue eyes sparkling with glee.

"Of course I know how to dance, Miss Brown. You know as well as I do that any pure-blood worth his salt was taught how to dance by his mother!" he exclaimed.

"Not all," she countered. "Kingsley Shacklebolt and Alastor Moody are frequently seen at Ministry functions by the punch bowl or off mingling, but never on the dance floor."

"Moody wouldn't dance with another person for fear he'd actually have to touch the person," the wizard noted derisively. He couldn't speak for Kingsley and his reasons.

"So is that a yes? Shall I owl her back that dancing lessons shall begin this Thursday?" the blond witch asked.

Leaning back into his chair, he stirred his tea, despite having no sugar or milk in it, just for the calming meditative action of stirring. 'Dance lessons... another chance to drop more hints? Be realistic, another chance to touch her.' Albus and Minerva had never made an appearance while Severus was in the company of others, and now he hoped that habit would not change. 'Will you be able to control yourself? You barely did last Thursday night. Still, the opportunity to hold her close is quite appealing.' He suppressed a smug grin.
Severus had recently come to terms with the fact that he was physically attracted to Hermione, but he still denied that there was anything beyond the flesh that drew him to her.

"Severus?"

Still studying his tea, he said, "I'll need a music box."

"I have a spare one I can loan you for a while. It's a deluxe model. It does everything," Lavender began to explain. "You can ask it to play songs for any mood you wish: romantic, upbeat, slow — you get the point. You can ask it to play songs for dancing styles, like the waltz, tango and such. You can also select vocal or instrumental versions, and set it to play one song only or play continuously."

Severus was impressed. A few months after the Death Eater Decree, he obtained a week's room and board at a seedy boarding house in Knockturn Alley by bartering away his mother's music box, an older version without some of the extra features of Miss Brown's. Though his mother's could be charmed to play song genres, it did not have the feature of playing with or without the vocals. He wondered how much a music box of that quality cost these days.

"That should be adequate," he replied. Before Lavender could close off the discussion, Severus added, "I'll teach her on one condition. Tell me when you first discovered when I was a Death Eater, and then when you learned I was a spy for the Order."

Ever since Lavender's confession of her near rape and torture, he had been wondering when she had learned of his status as a Death Eater and spy.

The cup on Lavender's hand rattled on its saucer as she attempted to put it down before dropping it. Speaking with a hollow and shaken voice, she asked, "Why do you need to know?"

"There is no need, but I do want to know when my status as both was revealed to you. I prided myself on being able to keep many secrets away from my students during the war, most notably my secret status as a Death Eater. Even more so, my status as a spy for the Order," her old Potions professor replied, fixing her with a level gaze.

Closing her eyes as she tried to regain her composure, Lavender tried not to hyperventilate. Once she calmed down, she answered his question. "I cannot put it into words." She held up her hand to silence Severus’ protests before he could voice them. "But I can put the memory into a Pensieve
Severus nodded, agreeing to the arrangement. "Then I will wait until you are ready to present them to me in the near future."

He knew how difficult it could be to drag up painful memories, as on a few occasions he had come close to erasing the memory of his wife's death, by placing it into a Pensieve. He had stood holding the stone bowl, ready to tip the liquid contents out onto the floor so that they could never be retrieved ever again. Instead, he had put them back, knowing that to destroy the silvery threads of thought would be a desecration of her memory, and that part of his penance was to remember his moment of cowardice.

Once he drank his tea, the Potions master excused himself. He went to his office under the pretext of doing some more research for the latest potion, and not for the fact he needed to clear his mind of turbulent emotions.

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Hermione's fingers itched to grab her wand and hex Mr. Spawn to Hades and back. The previous day, the incompetent fool had not bothered to see what type of juniper berries he was testing. Upon double-checking his work and grilling him on his methods, she realized he had not bothered to see if indeed the shipment was comprised of Sierra juniper berries, as it said on the box's label, and not common garden variety juniper berries that filled a separate box next to it. The rest of Tuesday had gotten progressively worse from there.

Wednesday was not shaping up to be much better. Not only had Hermione had to double-check every test Mr. Spawn conducted, she had to supervise his cutting methods. She also had to correct him several times when he failed to clean his chopping board in between each ingredient, thus tainting the next batch of goods to be tested.

When Ginny swung by to pick up Hermione for their weekly lunch together, the supervising witch rousted Mr. Spawn out of the lab and locked it. Otherwise, she feared she might come back from lunch to discover he had burned the lab to ashes, by mixing a recent shipment of dragon blood with some phoenix feathers she was going to test later that day. Once she told the trainee to return promptly one hour later, after Mr. Spawn finally stopped ogling over Ginny's attributes, the two witches set off for lunch.

As they strolled through a little wizarding enclave near Wiltshire, Hermione had to periodically take a deep cleansing breath for fear she would bite off Ginny's head, as it was the nearest available warm body she could mutilate out of frustration.
"Why don't you just tell Madam Dushka that this… what was the term you used?" Ginny gave a low, throaty chuckle. "Ah yes. That *impudent little shit* is obviously going to put you and the whole department behind schedule."

"I would love to, but Madam Dushka has made it clear that my yearly performance review hinges how well I can train a monkey to do wizard's work," Hermione dryly remarked.

"You know, I think Percy may have some leverage with her. Do you want me to speak with him on your behalf?" Ginny asked, concerned that this job was driving Hermione into the ground, based on her own knowledge and what Severus had told her.

"As tempting as that sounds, I will not allow any nepotism to interfere with my job, be it for or against me," Hermione declared adamantly. "No doubt if she gets pressure from above, she'll make my life hell as a repercussion for it. It's better to just grit my teeth and bear it. He'll be gone in about six months."

They had reached the little café Ginny had been dying to try out. Once inside, they were seated quickly.

Hermione perused the menu and hoped nothing would take too long to prepare. She had forty-five minutes until she had to be back at work, or Madam Dushka would be harping on her about tardiness.

As they waited for their lunch to arrive, Ginny asked, "So are you going to take dance lessons? Maybe there is an etiquette tutor you could hire to teach you."

Hermione choked on her water. "Sorry about that," she apologized as she continued to hack and cough. Averting her eyes, she admitted, "Actually, I found someone to teach me."

"Really? Who?" The redhead placed her elbows on the table, interlaced her fingers, and rested her chin on her intertwined hands, while wearing a beatific smile.

"Oh, no one you know." Changing the topic quickly, Hermione said, "Ron and I have an appointment with James Hoover next Tuesday night at seven."

Ginny's grin broadened. "That's good news. I think you'll both like him."
The waitress returned with their lunches, and Hermione began to eat, thankful the service was quick. She made a mental note to add this place to her short list of lunch spots.

Ginny began eating, but she had to stop when she started laughing spontaneously.

"What's so funny? Have I got spinach in my teeth?" Hermione asked, her tongue searching for any errant bit of green that may have lodged itself between her teeth.

"No," Ginny assured her, shaking her head while trying to stifle more giggles. "It's just that you complaining about Mr. Spawn reminds me so much of Se-, um, Snape from school."

Hermione almost spat out the bite of sandwich that was in her mouth. "WHAT?" she said, around a mouthful of grilled roast beef, tomato, and cheddar.

"Oh, come on now. Think about it," Ginny chided her lightly. "You've referred to him as the hell spawn of morons, Sir Pinhead, walking proof that brains and beauty cannot go together, the slime that could talk, and the village idiot from the town of stupidity. That sounds just like the tirades that Ron and Harry told me about when Neville was in Potions."

Hermione was about to open her mouth and refute that she was not as bad as that, but retracted it before she opened her mouth. She did sound an awful lot like her old Potions professor, once she thought about it, and now she could empathize with why he had ranted and snarled that particular way. Looking back on it, if she had to teach roughly two hundred students each week, most of which paid as little attention as Mr. Spawn, she might wind up with a disposition as bad as Snape’s after several years of teaching.

"Speaking of which," Ginny added in a more serious tone. "You said you were going to look into how Malfoy and Snape were unjustly persecuted. Any progress on that front?"

Closing her eyes, Hermione let out a long-suffering sigh. "As much as I want to do something, everything has been just a bit too much for me. Between dealing with Ron, the attack at the Ministry, the narcissistic nincompoop, and the rest, I just haven't had the time or energy to look into the matter," she explained while wearing a pained expression on her face. "I do know that when I talked with Harry a few weeks ago, he said Moody told him that Snape and Malfoy poisoned Albus and let the Death Eaters into the castle."

"That's an outright lie!" Ginny exclaimed with outrage. "I am aware of the false charges, but the
"The problem is, there are very few people who have the credibility to address the Wizengamot on behalf of Draco and Snape, and who do not have direct blood ties to someone who was a Death Eater," the younger witch logically concluded.

Ginny furrowed her brow with a look of concern. Leaning across the table, she put her hand over Hermione's in a show of friendly support. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Sighing once more, Hermione groaned, "No." She patted Ginny's hand, which was still atop her other hand, in appreciation of her offer. After a moment's pause, she added, "How busy is Dobby?"

"Fairly busy, what with Fleur due in two weeks – but the baby could come at any time now – and Penelope is still dealing with fatigue and morning sickness. And then there's Harry's birthday party next week," Ginny answered.

"Never mind then. It was just a thought," Hermione said dismissively.

"I'll speak to Dobby to see if he can swing by and help a bit with your housework. He has a soft spot for you and all you tried to do with S.P.E.W. Besides, it shouldn't take but a few minutes to clean your flat and do anything else you need, with just you and Ron there," Ginny rationalized.

"I don't want to impose on him—"

Ginny cut the brunette off. "I'll speak to Dobby and see what he says. By the way, I was wondering if you could help me with a little shopping this weekend for Harry's party. I want to head into
Muggle London again. There's a shop on Portobello Road that sells cowboy and Indian antiques. If anything, I want a look at some of the stuff they have so I can get the charms and transfigurations right."

"I suppose I could go Saturday morning, before Ron's game which will start at one. Does that sound all right?"

"Perfect!" Ginny beamed.

The rest of lunch passed quickly, with talk of Harry's party, and arrangements to watch the children while Fleur was giving birth and for a few days afterwards.

As they strolled back to the pub with a Floo connection back to the Ministry, they passed an apothecary shop. The clerk was putting up a display in the window, with bottles of men's cologne and promotional material.

Hermione read as she walked by, not paying attention to what Ginny was saying.

"Haunt. The scent of you will haunt her. The newest men's fragrance from Valiant Wizard."

There was a picture of a voluptuous witch, nuzzling her nose along the neck of a dashingly handsome wizard with chiseled features and a chest to match, peeking out from beneath his mostly unbuttoned shirt. The wizard in the promotional ad looked up from the witch in his arms and gave a saucy wink to Hermione, whose mouth was slightly agape.

The memory of her last visit with Calleo came to mind. "It smells very nice. I remember you wearing it the first night I came here. Since then that scent has… haunted me."

Lost in thought, wondering if Calleo told Lavender what she had said about his cologne, Hermione almost plowed into an older witch on her way out of a shop. She would have bowled the elderly matron over if it weren't for Ginny's last-minute yank of Hermione's arm to steer her out of the way.

"You all right there?" Ginny asked, noting her friend's lack of attention.
"Yes, just got distracted for a moment. That's all," Hermione assured the younger witch.

The tome in front of him provided Severus with very little information. None of the books he had in his collection at work had much information on edible body paint, especially body paint that changed colors to match moods. Frustrated, he slammed the book shut.

There was one book that had extensive information on moonstone, which — when ground and impregnated into the fibers — could reflect the wearer’s mood, and was one of the components behind Severus' charmed bed curtains. However, the book had nothing on the mixing of moonstone into topically edible potions. There were potions that could be consumed or for topical use, but not both.

'If Hermione were here, she would probably have some interesting theories in combining a topical and edible potion into one. Especially one that should taste appetizing and not like chalk dust mixed with rancid library paste.'

The Potions master summoned another book that might have some information on making potions more palatable. Right after that, there was a knock at his door.

"Enter," Severus called out as he began flipping through the index.

Lavender entered his office with an intricately painted box in her hands. "I brought the music box you requested. I thought I'd bring it today, so you would have tonight to go through and pick whatever music you think is suitable for your… dance lessons."

Looking up from his book, Severus looked at the box and then to his employer. Nodding his head, he said, "Thank you. You may set it down over here." With his hand, he indicated a corner of his desk not covered in books and scrolls.

"May I sit?" she asked, noting Severus' distracted tone and how he probably wanted to be left alone with his books to do more research.

Sitting back in his chair, he indicated with his head and eyes that his employer could use the chair next to his desk.

"I was wondering if you had given any thought as to whom you might recommend for replacement when you go on holiday," Miss Brown queried, cocking one blond brow at her own euphemism of Severus' permanent departure.
"Not yet."

"Well, I would appreciate it if by week's end you could start giving me names and ideas on how to court someone into a position here," she said.

"Don't worry about them accepting. The money alone through a salary and negotiated royalties would have a number of Potion masters and mistresses willing to work for you. Now that your company is established and well-known, you won't have any trouble in recruiting a replacement," the Potions master informed her.

"How fast would it take to get someone here?" Miss Brown asked.

"Are you anxious to get rid of me?" he countered with his own question.

"No," Lavender replied. "As much as I would like to see you stay with me, I would rather see you free. I'm just wondering how fast your own arrangements will take to complete before you are ready to leave."

He had spent many nights calculating this very answer. If Hermione agreed to assist him, then the potion could be ready sometime in November or December, hopefully sooner. It depended on when certain seasonal restricted ingredients came in through Hermione’s department for testing, plus the twenty-one days required to stew the lacewing flies.

"By the time I am certain of my departure date, you will have plenty of time to secure a new Potions master," he answered plainly, turning his attentions back to the book in front of him.

"There is another matter I wish to discuss," Miss Brown said. Severus raised a brow and looked up from his book to regard his employer with a curious eye. "It is regarding the male enhancement potion. I have run the numbers through with the company goblin in the basement. He says that with ingredients, labor, distribution and promotional costs, if the potion has to simmer for three days, then there is no way we can make it for mass production. The cost would be too prohibitive for the demographic market we are going after."

Severus closed his book, knowing that he would not be able to do any more research until this matter was settled. "You've been reading that Muggle economic rubbish again, haven't you? Demographic market indeed," he added with a derisive snort.
"There are some very sound Muggle ideas based on the laws of supply and demand; laws that apply to the wizarding world as well. Commerce is commerce, Severus," Lavender asserted. "If you haven’t noticed, you have been working for me in a business capacity for four years come this October. During these four years, you have helped me build this business from simple soap and hair care elixirs to an empire I’m rather proud of. And before you leave our green and pleasant land to go unto your freedom, which you richly deserve, I want to finally break into this very lucrative untapped market.

“What I am afraid of is that, with a new Potions master, I will lose a level of creativeness that you have hinted most others lack. Your remarks over the years have told me that few others have any innovation left in them, instead doing the same thing year after year with nothing new to add to the world of Potions. And what I'm asking you now is, can we somehow free the cauldrons up sooner for the manufacturing of the male enhancement potion? Is there some way to speed up the last phase from three days to one? If there is no way, then we must end our research on this potion, as it would not be anything but a potion for a very small market, thus not worth the cost for such small manufacturing scale."

A much as he hated to admit it, Miss Brown was right. She had a business to run. If the short, greedy, pointed eared thing called the company's accountant had worked out the numbers, and if the cauldrons needed to be available after one day of brewing, then maybe this potion would have to be scrapped and a new potion would need to be researched and created instead. Still, Severus hated failure. From all the other potions he had read over, this one was the best and most effective one available. It would make men old enough to be Merlin's peers as virile and energetic as a stallion, while giving them the stamina of a long distance broom racer. He did not want to start from scratch once again when he had the perfect potion already simmering in a cauldron; if anything, he would find a way to make it work.

The Potions master wanted to see how well the potion lived up to his expectation after simmering for three days before deciding what was to be done. He made a compromise. "Miss Brown, I will test a sample of the potion tomorrow, seeing if the process can be pared down to two days, though I doubt it will be. If the potion does need to simmer for three days, the only solution may be to buy three times as many cauldrons, so you have the requisite number of cauldrons simmering on any given day to meet demand."

"I have already thought of that. And though I can write off the cauldrons, as they can be used for manufacturing any number of potions, I am at a limit for square footage. To have three times the number of cauldrons would require purchasing additional warehouse space. And since the end of the war, real estate priced in Diagon Alley has skyrocketed and would make the potion equally prohibitive," the witch explained. "I will talk with the goblin downstairs to run through the numbers and find the price point for each additional day the potion simmers."

"Yes, do that. I will continue to meditate on the matter to see if there is another solution," he informed her.
"Thank you, Severus. I have faith that you will think of something, as you always do." Lavender rose from the chair and walked towards the door. When she had her hand on the doorknob, she stopped and turned. "By the way, we just sent out the first shipment of your cologne, Haunt. You may want to check out the full-page ad we'll be having in the Daily Prophet tomorrow. In addition, we'll be having full-page ads in Quidditch Weekly, Wizard Sophisticate, and Salacious Sorceresses. If sales go well, Draco will look into other gentlemen's magazines for advertising."

"I don't care if he shouts it from the rooftops, as long as it sells and I get my cut," Severus informed her curtly, not caring for the business of marketing and promotion.

Miss Brown left without another word.

Severus felt no desire to do any further research for the rest of the afternoon. He felt peevish over Miss Brown informing him of Draco's advertising blitz. Severus wished he hadn't mentioned to Draco what Hermione had said about his cologne. It had given the Potions master pleasure to know that the scent of him and his cologne occupied her mind. And now, what had been said to him in confidence was to be used as advertising fodder for the whole world to see. No one would know the story behind the name, but Severus would – perhaps Hermione would as well. The script across bottle’s front reminded him of trashy romance novels he had confiscated from tittering fifth years at Hogwarts. And now every time he would see that name splashed in the gaudily ornate font on the bottle, he would think of Hermione. It was yet another way for her to invade his mind, the memory of her haunting him in return.

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As Hermione walked home along Diagon Alley Thursday afternoon, using the stroll as a way to ease the butterflies in her stomach instead of Apparating or Flooing home directly, she wondered if Ron was at the flat already. At least if she left before him tonight, Mrs. Weasley had the believable lie – or rather, a half-truth reason: it was for dance lessons.

Sprinting up the steps, she allowed the exercise to take away the nervous energy building up inside of her.

'Why did you have to ask him for dance lessons?' She knew exactly why she picked Calleo for dance lessons. If anyone would know how to dance and have the grace and patience to teach her, he was the one. Hermione also knew the lessons would give her a legitimate reason to touch him. But as seven o'clock and her time with Calleo drew nearer, she wondered if it was such a wise idea after all. 'Look what happened the last time you were in his arms! You assaulted his hand with your mouth and made a fool of yourself.' As much as she wanted to, the married witch didn't have the heart to regret it. It gave her a warm and pleasurable tingle in the center of her being to remember it.
The memory of it alone was the start of many fantasies she had when masturbating. When Ron wasn't home and she was sure he would not be for some time, she would lock herself in the bedroom and lie down on the bed. In the dark with her eyes closed, she would lick her fingers, imagining they were Calleo's. Thinking of him succumbing to the ministrations of her mouth, she fantasized he would undress her slowly, slipping his hand into her blouse, massaging her breasts slowly and deliberately, tweaking her nipples, then brushing his fingertips over the turgid peaks. Hermione would draw out the scenario in her mind, alternating between him taking her fast and hard, or slowly, making her relent to his advances, protesting, but wanting him to continue seducing her. The fantasy would always end with her coming while she envisioned herself impaled on him, trying to imagine what it would be like to orgasm with something long, thick and hard inside of her for her muscles to grasp at.

Hermione walked through the door to find Ron was already home and raiding the kitchen.

Ron called out from the kitchen, "I hope you don't mind. I was a bit famished, so I started to fix something for myself."

Standing at the doorway to the kitchen, Hermione gave a half shrug. "Not at all. In fact, maybe Thursday nights you could fix your own dinner for a bit. I'm taking a few dance lessons to get ready for our anniversary, and I don't want to eat just before the lessons or I'll get a cramp in my side."

It was a lie, of course. She was still planning on eating at Calleo's and taking dance lessons, but Ron didn't need to know about that. But the excuse for not eating with her husband on that night and future Thursdays gave her an easy out of cooking for him at least one night a week. Since she had restocked the cupboard earlier that week, she knew Ron would not go hungry, even if he did have to fix his own food.

Without waiting for a response from her husband, Hermione headed off to the bathroom for a decent shower. Though their brief conversation was the most friendly one they'd had since Ron's return, she was glad to leave his company for the sanctuary of the bathroom.

Dressing and putting a little makeup on in front of Ron felt utterly brazen. Here she was getting ready for an evening with a gigolo, with her husband fully aware that she was heading out for the evening. Granted, Ron thought it was for dance lessons, but it felt like she was flaunting the situation in her husband's face. And in some sick and twisted way, it gave her pleasure, which was quickly squashed by guilt. Hermione knew that if Ron were having an affair, she wouldn't want him to throw it in her face.

The thought came unbidden to her mind once more. 'What if Ron is having an affair?'
Before the thought even finished forming in her mind, she banished it. When he had taken off during their previous fights, she had hoped and prayed it was not to another witch's bed. Then, thinking on Ron's noble and loyal nature, she didn't think he would ever be the sort of wizard who would cheat on his wife. It seemed contradictory to everything his parents had taught him and the family environment he grew up in. Nice wizards from nice families do not cheat on their wives. This didn't explain Ginny, but Ginny was still in love with another man when Harry started courting her. For Ron, there was no other witch before Hermione, so she knew she didn't have worry about an old girlfriend. With her denial and logical conclusions firmly set in her mind, Hermione decided in the future to try and shower and dress in a more discreet fashion. It was not so much for Ron's sake, but for her own guilty conscience that she had been battling since the day she decided to start seeing Calleo on a regular basis.

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Severus left Draco and Ginny's company around five o'clock so that he would have time to finish preparing a few last items before Hermione arrived. During his hour visit to Draco's flat, there was talk about all things relating to Hermione. One thing that keenly caught Severus' attention was the trip to the Muggle bookstore. Since becoming aware of Hermione's job and its fortuitous relevance to himself, Severus had scoured Flourish and Blotts for books on the final destination of his escape. When no books could be found, he knew the Ministry had had a hand in making sure all the books on that particular locale were gone. During a few surreptitious trips to Knockturn Alley and a few sagacious questions, the only books he could find were published in the late 1800s. Whatever information those books contained that wasn't out of date, he most probably already knew himself.

It was agreed that Ginny would make another trip to the Muggle bookstore in the future and buy whatever books she could on the subject of their new home, that they were hoping to reach before the New Year.

Ginny had been the one to ask this time when Severus was going to reveal himself to Hermione. Her reasons for knowing were based more on self-preservation. When Hermione would finally realize that she had been secretly seeing Severus, the pieces would fall into place. Mrs. Weasley would also know that Draco and Ginny most probably knew of her visits "to Calleo" as well, surmised from the simple fact that both men had been spies for the Order, lived in the same block of flats and worked for Miss Lavender Brown.

Draco asked if it would be prudent for Ginny to start dropping hints herself about her knowledge of Severus' whereabouts, to which the older wizard emphatically said no. It would be another way of leading Hermione to the truth of his identity, but Severus had his own reasons for delaying it by doing it all himself. He liked his visits with Hermione. And when the day came when she knew who he really was, she would no longer look at him with warmth and kindness. He would no longer feel her lean into his lightest of touches. The long evenings of debate, discussion and laughter would be gone, replaced with talk of how she could help him and Draco escape. All the
friendly atmosphere that had developed between the two would instantly dissipate, leaving old memories of Hogwarts and work for the Order in its wake.

It was selfish of him to continue delaying his own unmasking, but he wanted to savor this fleeting time between them. Just as the Gallica rose blooms only once a year for a very short period of time, their friendship, as it currently was, would bloom only once in his lifetime. One thing Severus learned from his many nature walks and strolls through the Hogwarts greenhouses was to enjoy the seasonal beauty as it presented itself. And when Hermione learned that it had been her old Potions professor she had been visiting, their friendship would go to seed.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 29 A/N: The weight of 1 stone is equivalent to 14 pounds or 6.35030 kg.

For those of you not familiar with the great American mythical creature, the jackalope, you can read about it here: http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/tall-tales/jackalope.html

Welcome to my favorite OOC Severus… Dancing!Snape. So break out those old records/CDs your parents (or if you are young enough - your grandparents) listened to when they were young and still do probably, the crooners and song sirens (Billie Holiday, Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Dinah Washington, Etta James, Harry Connick Jr., etc.). For each chapter with dance lessons, I shall have a recommended list of songs to listen to when reading. Think of it like a soundtrack to this fic, or certain chapters of this fic at least. No, this isn't turning into a song-fic, but the right songs can enhance the mood of the fic when reading. I write with certain songs playing in the background to put me in a certain mood, why not listen to some songs while you read to give you the right mood when they are dancing? If you don't have the songs in your music library, you can always run over to Apple's iTunes, Amazon.com or whatever your favorite music download site is, and click for a listening sample. Or you can turn on your radio to the local big band station or some radio station that streams over the net.

Recommended songs to listen to while reading the dancing lesson portion of chapter 30:
"Nuages" (recommend the performance by Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grappelli)
"He's Funny That Way"
"Embraceable You" (Frank Sinatra is highly recommended)
"Manoir de Mes Reves" (recommend the performance by Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grappelli)
"Teach Me Tonight" (recommend performances by Ann Hampton Calloway, Dinah Washington, Ella Fitzgerald or Chaka Khan)

Sierra junipers grow at 9,000 feet elevation in the California Sierra mountain range.

In my use of moonstone in this fic, it is to provide a visual indicator of one's emotions. So in a way, I am using it in a similar fashion regarding a person's emotions. Here is the HP-Lexicon entry on moonstone:
"Used in various potions (including the Draught of Peace), sometimes in powdered form; Harry had to write an essay (12 inches of parchment) for Snape about the uses
Moonstone is found in a variety of colors. Its supposed magical effects include helping a person gain emotional balance. Since Harry spent much of book five emotionally unbalanced, it is perhaps fitting that he was forced to write an essay on the stone's use in Potions-making."

http://www.hp-lexicon.org/magic/potions-enc.html

Good chapter…enjoying Severus’ pessimism here at the end; so typical of him to take the doom-and-gloom outlook of things. ~ Horserider
“Teach Me Tonight"

Chapter Summary

The lessons begin. Wagers are made, desires considered and temptations dealt with.

Chapter Notes

Recommended songs to listen to during the dance lesson:

"Nuages" (recommend the performance by Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grappelli)
"He's Funny That Way"
"Embraceable You"
"Manoir de Mes Reves" (recommend the performance by Django Reinhardt and Stephane Grappelli)
"Teach Me Tonight" (recommend performances by Ann Hampton Calloway, Dinah Washington, Ella Fitzgerald or Chaka Khan)

Other slow big band or old standards of a slow and romantic nature may be used to “enhance” the mood.

For a little visual inspiration, I quickly put together a video of photos mixed with the fanart posted so far to the song “Nuages”:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty
“Teach Me Tonight"

Disclaimer: I just borrow the concepts and characters, I don't own them. May Miss Rowling continue to let us toy with her playthings.

Ascending the inner atrium steps of the Red Ginseng building, Hermione wondered if maybe she should have worn different shoes. While getting dressed, she had decided that if she was going to learn how to dance it might as well be in dress heels, since she'd be wearing a pair on the night of her anniversary. As she silently cursed to herself, annoyed at how the heel of her left shoe kept finding all the spots in which to lodge itself on her walk from her flat, Hermione was forced to take one step back and wiggle her foot to freedom once again.
"There's a reason why sensible shoes are sensible," the frustrated witch groused under her breath.

Once standing in front of Calleo's door, she let out one long relaxing breath. Beyond the door lay Hermione's wonderland. At night, she would replay her latest visit in her head over and over as she drifted off to sleep. She momentarily pondered what memories she would walk away with tonight.

*Knock-Knock. Knock-Knock.*

Calleo opened the door and welcomed her inside.

"It's good to see you again, Hermione." Severus meant it sincerely, though he hated to admit it to himself. He bowed slightly as Hermione entered his flat.

Severus could have dispensed with such a silly and old-fashioned gesture by now, but he enjoyed watching her bashful demeanor when he employed his most formal and gentlemanly manners.

Hermione always felt a little flustered by some of the little things he did for her. She wanted to tell him it wasn't necessary for him to be so formal with her, but she basked in the attentions Calleo gave her. It was those small things that added to the illusion of her place away from reality.

As Severus helped Hermione with her cloak, he noted that she seemed a little bit taller; his suspicions were confirmed when he caught sight of her shoes. Once her cloak was put away, they sat on the settee for a while, allowing Hermione to unwind for a bit.

"And how has your week been?" Severus asked, knowing it was nothing as bad as the previous week.

Slumping against the back of the settee, Hermione closed her eyes, tipped back her head and dramatically exhaled, "Jesus, Merlin and Circe! What have I done to offend the Fates to be saddled with Trevor Spawn?"

"That good? Tell me how you really feel," the dark-haired wizard dryly remarked.

Hermione began laughing, feeling the tension release from Calleo's lighthearted jibe. "Oh," she
sighed once more. "Thank you. I needed that." She beamed a warm smile at him, reaching across the settee and squeezing his hand in appreciation.

"That's what I'm here for." He enjoyed the momentary contact that she initiated.

"You wouldn't begin to believe the week I've had," the witch exclaimed.

"Try me," he countered.

"Well, we had a shipment of jacaranda dew come in, and the clumsy dolt spilled it all over my lab," she began explaining. Calleo winced noticeably. "Well, after he tracked his precious boots through it and left sticky footprints all over the place, I was tempted to tell him he had to clean up the whole lab… with no magic."

Severus chuckled heartily, realizing Hermione sounded just like him in the Staff Room when talking about Longbottom or the Weasley twins. He could empathize with the many times his Potions classroom had been temporarily ruined, covered in Merlin knew what sort of odd goo that some student had concocted in a moment of careless stupidity.

"It's going to be a week before I can walk through my own lab without needing to apply an anti-sticking charm to the bottom of my shoes. I just pray I remember to end the charm before walking back to my office, or I'll fall down arse over elbow in the hall. No number of Scourgfys and cleaning solutions will make it come up any faster until the dew dries and dissipates. No wonder just about every adhesion paste out there has this stuff in it."

'And people wondered why I was in such a bad mood all those years while putting up with those redheaded twin devils and Mr. "Oops" Longbottom,' Severus thought to himself.

"It is a very effective adhesive ingredient, though I might recommend using nail polish remover to get rid of it," Severus advised her.

"Nail polish remover?"

"Well, the dew is used as a bonding agent in nail polish to prevent chipping," he mentioned offhandedly, remembering how much Miss Brown complained about how she couldn't get the jacaranda dew off her hands when she had first started working with it.
"Really?" she asked, looking at Calleo quizzically.

'Damn, did I just tip my hand too much?,' the wizard thought, as he began to wonder if he had said too much.

"Or so I've been told," he added, hoping to throw her off his scent for the time being. The Potions master was not ready to reveal his identity yet. As much as he would like to get on with the business of obtaining his freedom, there was some solace in Hermione's visits that made staying in England a few weeks longer that much more bearable.

"I never would have thought of that. Thank you," Hermione said, smiling at him once more. "So then after that, the tedious twit botches three batches testing wool of bat. I mean, how can anyone not be able to do it correctly, especially anyone that was able to get into a N.E.W.T. level class to begin with?" Hermione said with a shake of her head.

"He shows up at the stroke of nine, and he's out the door before the clock finishes chiming five," she continued on her rant in a civil tone, too tired to raise her voice. "So I'm left there to finish up what he hasn't cocked up during the day, double-checking every test he has done to make sure he isn't going to be the reason for a mass outbreak of poisoning from common potions."

"Why don't you just recommend his removal?" Severus advised her.

"I would, but my yearly review is coming up, and it will be solely based on whether I can train this bumbling... incompetent... daft... narcissistic imbecile. It's been two years since I've had a raise, and I am more than deserving of one. Last year, my boss said it wasn't in the budget, but to 'keep up the good work.' Fat lie that was. She got a brand new custom carved oak desk. I hope she gets splinters in her arse from it the next time Mr. Spawn is banging her on it," Hermione said rather tartly.

Severus continued to chuckle through her tirade. "Oh dear," he said with as much sympathy as he could muster, until he realized it gave him a little pleasure to know he had not been the only one to suffer fools where Potions are concerned.

"Then during lunch yesterday, my friend tells me after a rather spectacular rant, that I sound just like my old Potions professor," she added with emphasis, in a not very complimentary way.
Severus stopped chuckling. Sitting up a little straighter while trying to remain jovial, he asked, "How so?"

"Let's see, I called Mr. Spawn an *impudent little shit* – though I doubt my Potions professor would ever use such language."

'*Only when the students were not around,*' Severus thought.

"Then I referred to him as an imbecilic, puerile nitwit," Hermione said smiling at her own remark. "A vacuous, sycophantic cretin, and – my favorite – an incompetent moron who would better serve the Ministry by standing in the corner as a cloak rack."

Severus laughed wholeheartedly. "I think he would have been rather proud of you for that last remark you made, based on your previous descriptions of him." He rather liked that last remark, and would have to remember it next time he had to deal with the extremely dim, who periodically plagued his life.

He was amazed. She had a rather sharp tongue when thoroughly provoked, but then, so did he, and he was much more easily provoked than most. Still, he was unsettled by the notion that Ginny was dropping blatant hints about him behind his back, when he had made it clear that he was going to set the pace of his own unveiling. Severus wondered if Draco put his lover up to it, or if it was a spur of the moment comment. During his meeting with Ginny earlier that day, the redheaded witch had made no mention of that part of her Wednesday lunch with Hermione. He pondered why she had left out that detail.

"Well, you are here now, safe from the Trevor Spawns of the world. And you say he has an apprenticeship lined up next spring? With whom?" Severus queried, curious as to who would be saddled with such a clueless oaf, or willing to take him on at the right price.

"Albert Dobmeir," Hermione answered glumly. "You know I owled him twice for an apprenticeship. The first time, he didn't even respond to my owl. The second time, he said that he wasn't going to be taking on any apprentices for the next ten years. All of a sudden, he changed his mind, and not even three years later. I think a few Galleons had greased his palm in order to change his mind; that, and Mr. Spawn's pure-blood connections that he so frequently tells me about."

Severus knew Albert Dobmeir personally under his real identity, and even had a correspondence with the man under his nom de guerre. He hated thinking that someone as incompetent as Mr. Spawn was going to be given a chance to study under a great master of Dobmeir's capabilities. Bribes were not exactly something Dobmeir accepted to take on an apprentice either. He would
"We are not sure of the reasons behind Mr. Dobmeir accepting Mr. Spawn as an apprentice," Severus said in defense of his colleague – while trying to remain impartially speculative, "but I'm sure there was a valid reason why he suddenly changed his mind." He wondered if Calpurnia Fudge might have had a hand in Dobmeir's refusal of Hermione's application for an apprenticeship.

"After this past week, I could use another trip to the spa for another massage," Hermione mused aloud, rolling her neck in order to help relax the muscles.

"When was the last time you went?" Severus asked, knowing exactly when she had gone.

"Last Saturday. A friend took me as a treat." Hermione brought her hand up to her neck, and began rubbing at the knot of tension that began building since Monday.

Severus wasn't sure if this was Hermione's way of hinting she'd like another neck massage, consciously or unconsciously, or if she was merely trying to self-alleviate some of the muscle tension. Either way, Severus was more than happy to help her and hopefully get another peek down the front of her blouse.

"Would you like another neck rub?" Severus asked, hoping not to sound too eager nor too disinterested.

"I wouldn't want to impose. You're cooking dinner for me, and then dance lessons later. Really, Calleo, you'll spoil me!" Hermione protested playfully.

"No trouble at all. If it's any consolation, I have very few clients now who ask for massage anymore," he explained. Katherine Bigelow was the last regular client to whom Severus would give massages, and he didn't want to lose his hand strength once again. "It's a way for me to stay in practice."

Hermione shrugged in a non-committal manner. "You're twisting my arm, Calleo. But if you really insist..." She flashed him a mischievous smile, letting him know the facetiousness of her statement, then added so that there would be no misunderstanding, "Yes, that would be heaven. Please."
Severus rose and walked behind the settee. Once he placed his hands on her shoulders, he immediately dug his hands into the knots of tension, nailing the trigger points, making her shoulders involuntarily seize and her breath shudder with pleasure on the verge of pain.

"Are you toying with me, Hermione?" he purred in a low and dangerous voice, yet keeping his tone equally playful. He accentuated his remark by digging his thumbs into the key area where Hermione’s upper Trapezius, Splenius capitus and the Rhomboideus minor met parallel to the second thoracic vertebra. Severus was rewarded with her stilted incoherent grunts due to the pain, but he knew that she would soon experience the release of pleasurable endorphins throughout her system.

When Calleo's fingers dug into her flesh, it felt like daggers being driven into her skin, but the tingling rush made it worth the moment of pain she endured as her breath hitched.

Once she found her breath, she groaned in half-misery and half-delight, "Are you angry with me for toying with you? If not, I'd hate to see what you could do with those hands if I upset you."

"Am I hurting you?" he asked gently, realizing he may have played a little too rough with Hermione.

"I'm just so tense, but I know you have to sometimes do a little intense pressure to get things loosened up," she said, still half-grunting. "The few times I have gotten a massage, I always have deep tissue work done in order to get the muscles to relax at all."

"Then I shall endeavor to do my best to cause as little pain as possible. I hope I wasn't too rough in my play with you," he admitted.

Hermione hummed a little. "I know it was all in jest. I did tease you a little, though, setting the tone, so it was entirely my fault," she confessed.

Severus flattened the heel of his hand along the top of her shoulder to spread the pressure along the muscle, while still hoping to cause it to relax.

"What muscle is that, that I can feel all the way down to the middle of my back, when you first pressed your thumbs?" the curious witch asked.
"Rhomboideus minor," Severus informed her. "I'm surprised you don't know. If you want to become a Potions mistress, one of the things you must learn is every muscle, bone, organ, tendon, artery, lymph and nerve in the human body." Then added at the last moment, "Or so I was told by a Potions master once."

There was a mutual silence as he continued to work on Hermione's neck and shoulders until the major knots had been loosened. Unfortunately for Severus, the cut of her blouse did not afford him any views down her front.

As he rested his hands on her shoulders, Severus asked, "How is that? Better?"

Craning her neck back to look at him, she grabbed his hand and rested her cheek along the back of his hand. Giving a soft smile, she said gently, "Yes. Thank you."

He studied her serene face and the look of contented happiness on her face. It tore at his heart that she would never look at him that way once he revealed his true identity to her. Severus Snape had made many women smile the same smile Hermione was wearing, but none just for the pleasure of his company; they were dreamy smiles caused by a few orgasms and some sexual gratification.

In need of a moment to collect his thoughts, Severus said, "I was just about to begin dinner. Why don't you read for a bit? I have a few Potions journals and the latest Eccentric Elixirs for you to read."

Something flashed across Hermione's face. Severus couldn't pinpoint the emotion, until she spoke.

"Do you need any help in the kitchen?" the witch asked, something akin to hope in her eyes.

"I don't want to bother you. You've been on your feet all day dealing with the likes of Trevor Spawn. You are here as my guest, and as such, you should relax," he replied. Severus knew Hermione did all the cooking at home, and he did not want to burden her with more cooking on the one night a week she could count on to rest.

"Could I at least keep you company?" she asked a bit more directly.

"But of course."
Frankly speaking, there was nothing for Hermione to do in the kitchen but watch. Severus had prepared everything before she had arrived, so that all he had to do was begin cooking. Once the water was boiling, Severus put in the rice and covered it, to let it simmer as he prepared the main entrée and vegetables. Unwrapping the trout fillets, he was pleased Marf had found fresh trout at the fishmonger's stall earlier that day.

Hermione stood, resting her hip against the kitchen counter’s edge, with a glass of Riesling in one hand while the other hand and arm rested across her stomach. Studying Calleo, she watched his fluid movements as with one hand he put a pat of butter in a large pan followed by a drizzle of olive oil, while the other hand was dusting the trout fillet with flour and coating it with egg before dredging it through the finely crushed pecans. Once the pecan-encrusted fillets were sautéing in the pan, he started sautéing the finely julienned carrots and slender haricot verts in a separate pan. He seemed so engrossed in such a simple thing as cooking, as if all his attention was focused on the cooker and nothing else. She smiled, watching his hands rhythmically shake the pan of vegetables back and forth with a slight jerk, stirring and flipping them without the use of a spoon or spatula.

"How do you do that?" Hermione asked.

"Do what?"

"Get the vegetables in the pan to flip without using a utensil?"

"It's all a matter of the rhythm," the dark-haired wizard explained. "Come here, and I'll show you."

Setting her wineglass down, Hermione edged over towards Calleo. He gently placed his hands on her hips and guided her to stand right in front of the pan in his spot, while he positioned himself right behind her.

"Here," he directed her, the edge of his Bauta mask brushing against a stray curl. Letting only a couple points along his body to make contact with hers, Severus guided her wrists to grab the pan's handle. He then placed his hand on top of hers and began moving the pan back and forth, keeping the vegetables moving along the bottom.

"The trick," he instructed, delighting in the feather touch of her skin against his, "is when you bring it back, it has to be a gentle jerk to cause the food to slide up and arc back into the pan. Like this," he said, demonstrating as he guided Hermione's movements.
The colorful mix of green and orange vegetables gracefully lifted from the surface of the pan to land back into the lightly browning butter.

"I did it," she crowed. "Or rather I did it with your help." Hermione felt a little triumphant thrill pass through her, knowing that she had done something new correctly the first time. With Calleo standing behind her, the thrill was gone and in its presence was the sensation of his body touching her at key points: her hand, her arm, a small spot along her back and her hip.

Severus did not miss how she subtly pressed her body against his, increasing the contact. He could have responded in kind by pressing himself and his growing erection against her, eventually pinning her against the cooker. If he didn't take control over his own body soon, he'd have her blouse open and skirt hitched up to her waist in no time flat.

Pulling away from her in order to regain control while under the pretense of fetching his own glass of wine, he said, "Those fillets look like they are ready to be flipped. Now you try it."

Hermione's body ached at the sudden loss of Calleo's body next to hers. Swallowing to regain her composure, she then looked at him with uncertainty. "Both fillets? At the same time?"

"You can do it." He tipped his wineglass at her. "I have faith in you."

"And who eats the one that winds up on the floor?"

Severus chuckled spontaneously. "We'll split it," he compromised, not really wanting to eat anything that had been picked up off the floor.

"Deal. Okay, here we go," she announced dramatically, taking an exaggerated stance as if she was about to leap over the Gringotts building in a single bound.

The first fillet landed beautifully back into the pan; the other one didn't fare quite as well, but at least half of it made it back into the pan. The other half had been thrown across the cooker top; this half was unsalvageable, as some of it had landed in the flame which was still sautéing the vegetables.
"This is your fault, you know," she ribbed him.

"Thankfully I got large fillets, or we would have starved," he joked back in kind.

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, her head bent in repentance, her lower lip jutting out in half-seriousness.

"It was a rather complicated maneuver. One fillet was enough for a novice to handle, but two is very advanced cooking. I'm sorry to have put you on the spot," he said, equally penitent.

"I never would have tried unless you encouraged me to. I will have to practice at home."

Moving back to the side, Hermione let Calleo finish cooking what was left of their dinner.

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As they ate, Hermione told Calleo about her trip into Muggle London, and how the world she grew up in now seemed overwhelming and strange to her. He asked a few questions about the bookstore she went to, before their talk turned to the play Hermione had seen last Saturday night.

"Have you ever seen 'Merlin and Morgan: The Lost Years'?" Hermione asked, hoping he had, in order to be able to discuss the play.

"Yes, a couple of times, actually. Once when I was very young, and another time about a decade ago. How well was it done?" Severus asked, sincerely curious.

"Well, the actor who played Merlin was a bit of a ham, but considering this was an amateur production, I was willing to let it go," the brunette conceded. "I could not see these actors in this play if this was produced in the West End of London."

"West End of London?"

"The heart of the Muggle theater district. My mother used to take me to see musicals with her when I was younger, though once I got my Hogwarts letter, I rarely went with her." Hermione sighed and sipped her wine, looking a bit contemplative. "I miss that." She shook her head. "Sorry, lost in old memories. At least I'll be seeing my parents this Sunday."
"Oh? Has it been a while?" Severus asked.

"Too long, actually," she said sadly, as she used her fork to push around a few grains of rice that had escaped the neat pile she had corralled on one corner of her plate. "I used to see them more often, but marrying into my husband's rather large family has put demands on my free time. Just when I recover from one of the family gatherings, it's time for another," Hermione said with an air of exasperation.

"Taxing?"

"To say the least," she said without hesitation. "But one of my good friends is my sister-in-law, who is married to another good friend of mine. As long as they're there, it's easier to deal with, or at least escape for a bit from the onslaught of unruly urchins and the raucous noise of almost thirty in-laws, wives and children."

Severus sat back in his seat and gave a low whistle. He'd had no idea Ginny's brothers had been so... busy. Order meetings with that many Weasleys, and the mother hen known as Molly, during the last days of the war was bad enough to endure, but to add to the mix all the wives and moppets? He didn't even want to fathom either the noise level or the damage from such a gathering.

"But back to the more pleasant subject of the play," Hermione said, steering the conversation back to the previous topic. "Tell me, how much of the play do you think is based on fact versus conjecture and literary license?"

Such an analysis had never occurred to Severus. He took the play on pure entertainment value, dismissing it as a piece of cultural frippery, but he did have a few of his own ideas that tied into the play.

"Hmmm, I haven't given it much thought, but now that you mention it... From what I remember, judging on what little actual historical documentation survived, Merlin and Morgana's relationship was based more on collusion to prevent Muggles from banishing the old ways as Christianity swept through the British Isles, rather than the more public façade they had which was adversarial."

"Really? Why the façade? In the play, it culminated in a battle of wills and who had out-maneuvered whom in the long run," Hermione asked, truly intrigued about Calleo's viewpoint, forgetting about her food for the moment. "If in actuality they worked together secretly, what is the purpose for being in opposite camps?"
"Think about it," Severus said, swirling his wine in his glass. "Christianity is a patriarchal-based religion, and the ways of the goddess are considered a threat to the male authority of the church. If you have Morgana play herself as the villain and Merlin in the role of hero, you set yourself up so that if Merlin is the victor, he is a man with just as much credibility as any male priest. But if Morgana was to work with Merlin as an equal, then you have to battle ideology in which the church has its own views of 'woman as the corrupter.' You then have to deal with a new generation that will turn its back on the ancient ways, once Christianity weaves itself into the culture within a few generations, if the female is portrayed as the equal of the male. Christianity is not the only religion to adopt rituals and folklore of the local people. The wizarding world had to adopt a few of its own from Christianity in order to survive, including a patriarchal society structure. If we lived fifteen-hundred years ago, a witch would have as many rights and privileges as any wizard, and in some ways was more revered due to the goddess religion and the ability to create life."

Severus took a long swallow of wine as his mood turned sour. "Now witches are treated these days as more like cattle, kept to breed heirs to carry on a family name, traded like livestock in order to gain prestige through alliances and money. Sometimes the sons as well." He knew he was starting to sound bitter, and decided to lighten the tone. "But I am waxing maudlin."

"So I've been informed you want to take dancing lessons. I'm surprised you didn't ask me directly," Severus said, trying his best not to sound accusatory, though slightly hurt that she did not ask him herself.

"Well," Hermione began, looking down at her plate, feeling somewhat abashed, "you've been so kind. I really didn't want to impose myself on you. You cook me dinner and listen to me complain about my husband and job. I didn't want to put you on the spot and make you feel pressured to agree to something you didn't want to do."

It was just as he thought, but it felt even better to hear it from Hermione directly. Was Hermione always this considerate of others, or was it merely the persona of Calleo that inspired her to be so thoughtful? Severus briefly wondered if Hermione would be this considerate to him if she knew who he really was. The cynic in him thought there would be a disparity in her treatment towards each persona, but another part of him believed she would treat Calleo and Severus with equal courteousness.

"Of course it is no bother to me." Severus paused and momentarily contemplated what he felt compelled to say next and the reasons behind it. He had spent most of last Saturday night suppressing his thoughts on the matter, and Sunday afternoon in internal struggle with whether he could admit it to himself, much less Hermione. In the end, when weighing the criteria for such a remark, the pessimist in him had decided to concede the point. Hermione no longer seemed like a client to him, and there were times when the thought of how to use her to his advantage slipped from the forefront of his mind. As a matter of honesty, the raven-haired wizard allowed himself to say the phrase that came naturally to others, but not to him. "That's what friends are for."
Hermione's eyes flashed with a mixture of surprise and affection. "I view you as a friend as well."

"I'm glad you consider me your friend, as I consider you mine," Severus replied with a courteous nod of his head.

The devil that sat on his shoulder, the same one that kept him alive as a spy, praised him for saying what he did, as the witch would feel even more endeared to him. But deep down, a small part of him hoped that Hermione would not throw away such a remark once she knew his identity, viewing it as manipulation in the end. Of course it was manipulation, but it was also the truth.

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Sitting on the couch, while waiting for dinner to settle before starting dance lessons, Severus was just about to pour a cup of his latest tea blend for Hermione.

"Since you seem to have a very discerning nose, let's see how well you do when other herbs are blended into a base of mint," Severus challenged her with a certain amount of prematurely triumphant glee.

The Potions master recalled Hermione's remarks about the smell of the cassoulet interfering with her deciphering the scents in his cologne. With mint as the base, it would most likely overpower most of the other herbs, rendering them unidentifiable to most. It was a bit underhanded, but so far Severus had not been able to stump Hermione's nose yet.

"Well, that depends on what type of mint you used, Calleo," she rallied to her own defense, jutting her chin out ever so slightly in defiance. Hermione was feeling rather confident that night.

"We shall see how well you fare tonight. Shall we make a wager if I succeed and you fail to name every herb in my tea?" he asked, hoping she would take the bait, knowing how Gryffindors rarely back down from a challenge.

"Only if you are willing to make a wager of your own if you lose and I do name every herb. And none of this infinitesimal pinch of something, a quantity so minute that no one – not even a Potions master – could discern its presence," Hermione clarified, knowing never to enter a bet without covering some of the loopholes that could occur.

"Fair enough. What shall we wager?" he purred in a seductive tone.
A chill raced up Hermione's spine in anticipation of what he might request. She was frightened it might be something a little risqué like a kiss, yet a part of her grew anxious in anticipation that he might ask exactly that and maybe more.

"How about if I win, you make us something chocolaty for dessert?" Hermione proposed, knowing it was a very safe and mutually satisfying reward. They could both enjoy the end result of the wager if she won. "That is, if you have any chocolate."

"Deal," Severus answered without hesitation. "I have chocolate, not to worry. And if I win and you miss just… one …herb, you must come to dinner next Thursday night and wear a blindfold the entire time you are here."

"What?" Hermione said in amused shock.

"You heard what I said. Sometimes it gets a bit tiring wearing a full-face all evening long," he explained.

"You could always wear a half-mask," Hermione advised.

"In time I may, but not yet."

"Do you wear a half-mask for other clients?"

"For some. It depends on the situation." Severus saw the momentary look of dejection in her eye, realizing that he wore a more revealing mask for others, but not her. He reached his hand across the settee and with the edge of his index finger, raised her chin to look at him. "Patience," was all he said on the matter. 

Hermione pulled her chin from his touch, trying to regain control of her emotions, one of which was jealousy. She knew she was being silly, but for the fact that other women had seen more of his face than she had, Hermione felt like she had been deprived of something others had had.

"Do other women see you without your mask?" Hermione knew she sounded possessive and petty, but she wanted to know.
"No." It was a simple and gentle reply meant to soothe her. "So, do we have an accord?"

Thinking about it, it actually sounded a bit daring and potentially erotic. Spending the whole evening deprived of sight and at Calleo's mercy, reliant upon his kindness, could prove an interesting adventure after all.

One question came to mind, though Hermione knew she should have more. "What about dance lessons? Will I be blindfolded during them too?"

"Absolutely." When her mouth dropped in mock protest, Severus added, "You will not be needing to watch your own feet while you dance. It should be something done by feel anyway. Consider it a way to learn to trust your dance partner."

Snorting in response, Hermione quickly replied, "That's easy for you to say. Your partner never dropped you during a dip."

"Who did that?!?" Severus had a strong feeling he knew who would be so bumbling.

"My husband," she said darkly. "And it was at our wedding reception during our 'first dance.' One thing is for certain, I'll never forget it." She shook her head. "I just hope Rogina is teaching my husband to not step on my toes this time." Hermione groaned in memory of the pain and humiliation.

"I shall do my best to prepare you so that he won't step on your toes. You never did say if you agree to the terms of the bet," he reminded her.

"Deal," she agreed, holding out her hand to shake his.

After shaking her hand in agreement, Severus picked up the teapot and poured Hermione a full cup. He handed it to her before sitting back and awaiting the opportunity to gloat to himself.

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Hermione couldn't believe she missed borage in the tea, but in her own little way, it was a thrilling prospect to lose and spend next evening blindfolded in the company of Calleo. Still, Hermione had a craving for something chocolate to nibble on after the wonderful dinner her host had prepared.
"Has your dinner settled enough for you to begin lessons?" Severus asked.

"Yes. Actually, it was fortuitous that I ruined half of one of the fillets. If I ate a whole one, I think I'd be too stuffed to do any dancing tonight," she said glibly.

Severus extended his hand to help Hermione rise from the couch, and escorted her to the middle of the floor. With a swish and a few flicks of his wand, all the furniture, except for the settee and the low table in front of it, folded itself up against the wall, giving the two dancers the maximum amount of floor space.

Severus Snape had not spent eighteen years as a teacher without knowing that each lesson must have a lesson plan. The previous night, he had listened to many songs and selected each one based on the progression of the lesson. He had selected instrumental versions of songs only, so the singing would not interfere with his instruction or any conversation.

"Lesson number one," he began, making sure he did not fall back into his usual acerbic teaching voice. "Where the man goes, the lady must follow."

"That's a rather sexist statement," she joked.

Rather than be annoyed, Severus allowed her that one quip, enjoying the fact that she did not revert into her typical bookworm behavior. That sort of attitude would only remind him of his days as her professor. He was no longer her professor, but he was still teaching her. The context and place was wholly different, and their relationship now was different as well.

"If you are done fooling around, we can get on with your dance lessons. Or would you prefer your husband to step on your toes all night long?" he joked back in kind.

"Sorry." Hermione squared her shoulders, ready to learn.

Severus went through the simple motions of the box step, eventually having Hermione mirroring his feet movements. When he felt she had mastered them enough, he announced, "Now we'll try this with music."
While swishing his wand, he said, "Programme number one." From the mantle, Miss Brown's music box began to play a slow song.

He stepped up to Hermione and gently grasped her right hand with his left, while slipping his right hand around her waist to rest on her back.

Hermione stiffened momentarily, trying to control the shudder that wanted to overtake her body. "Sorry," she muttered weakly. She lifted her head to look into Calleo's eyes through his mask. "My husband hasn't touched me since that big fight we had." She dropped her eyes "I'm just…" Letting the comment die on her lips, Hermione tried to blink back the tears.

"It's alright. We'll go slow," he assured her with a soft and calming voice.

Though they were almost arm's length away from each other, there was a crackling field of energy between them.

"Remember to begin with your right foot," the wizard quietly reminded her. "Ready?"

Severus stepped forward and was matched with Hermione's movement backwards. They stepped sideways in tandem followed by Hermione moving forward and Severus backwards. Back to square one, they repeated the same sequence of movements over and over.

As Hermione grew comfortable with the steps, she began to notice the soft warmth of Calleo's hand holding hers firmly and tenderly at the same time. He held hers with a certain grace, not awkward or hard like Ron had as if he was clutching his broomstick, but as if her hand was a piece of fine china; too loose and it might drop, too tight and it might crack. With his hand on her back, she could feel the subtle flexing of his fingers to guide her to and fro, finally understanding how a man was supposed to lead a woman in a dance, signaling where she should move without words.

The song progressed and Severus drew Hermione closer to himself, minimizing the distance between them until they were a hand's width apart. He positioned Hermione so that her feet slid between his as they moved. Moving back and forth, he could feel his calf brush up against hers, making him want to draw her even closer.

The witch and the wizard were so wrapped up in the sensation of being so close to one another, they almost missed the fact that the song had ended, the music box waiting for Severus' next instruction as he programmed it.
Hermione slowly took a step back, realizing just how easily she could take one step closer and be in Calleo's arms.

"That was very good," Severus remarked in a sensuously deep voice that made Hermione's stomach clench at the many ways that could be interpreted. "We'll learn how to turn together now."

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The lesson progressed quickly. By the time they needed to rest, Hermione had mastered how to turn and be spun around, ducking under Calleo's arm.

"Shall we take a rest and have some dessert?" Severus asked, awaiting Hermione's expression when she saw it.

"You planned dessert?"

"Of course! I thought we might dance a bit before having some," he replied. "Please." The dark-haired wizard motioned to the settee.

Hermione and Calleo sat as a fresh pot of Earl Grey tea and a cherry chocolate-chocolate cherry cake appeared on the table in front of them.

"Ungh!" she whinged. "You had chocolate planned for dessert anyway? If I had known that, I would have asked for something different for the wager!" Hermione protested.

"You'll just have to be more careful when placing a wager with me next time," he warned her playfully. "Figure it this way: we both got what we wanted. You have your chocolate, and I have you blindfolded for our next Thursday evening."

Severus served up tea and a large slice of cake for Hermione, knowing from experience that when it came to chocolate for most witches, rarely was there such a thing as too much chocolate.

Hermione eyed the slice that Calleo was handing her, her mouth salivating at the sight of the glazed cherries atop the dark, rich chocolate cake. As she took her first bite, she thought she had died and gone to the next ethereal plane of existence. The chocolate cake had cherries mixed into the cake as well as a layer of cherries on top, and there was a bottom layer of fudgy candied
In response to her primal groan of appreciation, Severus remarked with a smile, "I'm sorry you don't care for it. I'll take it back to the kitchen and get you something else." He made a mock grab for her plate.

Hermione gave a small grunt of protest, as her mouth was full of cake. After swallowing quickly and taking a short sip of tea, she said, "You'll do no such thing. This cake is absolutely divine. It's so moist, and the flavor is superb. And the chocolate bottom is pure decadence."

"Thank you." He bowed his head slightly in gratitude of her praise. "Yes, cooking does have the side benefit of praise that Potions making does not."

"We seem to be making good progress, but can I learn the tango, swing and foxtrot within the next three weeks?" Hermione asked, worried that she wouldn't be prepared at all for her anniversary. "That's just three more evenings."

"As I mentioned before, you could come on other nights. Though I might recommend we agree on a night before you come, as I may be out if you show up unannounced," Severus replied, remembering how Miss Brown wanted to work a few nights in order to get ahead in their work. "I know I mentioned you could stop by anytime on those nights before, but there's been a slight change in my schedule recently. You are still welcome to stop by and see if I'm here anyway."

"What nights are you usually free?" Hermione remembered which nights, but didn't want to presume it was the same nights he mentioned before.

"Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays."

After a moment of running through her mental schedule, Hermione asked, "Would next Monday be all right?"

"Yes, that would be fine."

"What time shall I come?"

"Any time after six would be agreeable with me, though I would prefer to know when you will
Thinking on how her Tuesdays evenings were now booked with counseling sessions and her usual Thursday night with Calleo, Hermione came to a decision. "Does nine o'clock work for you or is that too late?" She would have said seven, but she knew if she instantly dropped her late nights at the office from four days a week to two, Madam Dushka would be on her case, ignoring the fact that Mr. Spawn never stayed a minute past five.

"Nine o'clock is agreeable, though if we meet that late we'll have to concentrate on dancing alone, leaving our dinners and conversations for only Thursdays."

"I would come sooner, but for the fact that Trevor Spawn is about as useful as teats on a Centaur, and for the fact I'm to be starting marriage counseling next Tuesday evening; I'll need to stay late to catch up on work," Hermione explained rather glumly.

Severus found humor in her analogy in Mr. Spawn's usefulness. "Then we shall make the most of your lessons on Monday night."

They tipped their teacups in a semi-toast to their new arrangement.

By the time Severus was halfway through his slice, Hermione had polished off her cake and was sipping tea, looking as content as a cat with a belly full of cream lying on a cushion in front of a warm fire. He felt rather content himself as well, but he knew that as soon as Hermione was gone and out the door, he would begin to doubt his own growing feelings towards her. Under the scrutiny of Draco, Ginny and his employer, he felt compelled to deny any feelings of warmth towards her. To the visions of Albus and Minerva, and even his own reflection, he felt like he must behave in his usual manner and deny the fact that he did have a heart. But faced with her here in his flat, somehow the personas of Calleo and Severus were beginning to blur together. His dry wit was coming through with greater frequency, along with his more brutally honest opinions. The gigolo persona of Calleo seemed to come to him with greater ease with each meeting, politeness and patience becoming a more natural part of his behavior.

While she was in his presence, he felt more like himself than he had in ages. There was no expectation of him to be his sarcastically acerbic self, a persona grown out of frustration from teaching and his days as a spy to maintain his cover as a loyal follower of Voldemort. That persona also grew from the bitterness of walking the same halls he did as a teenager, while being degraded and teased by the likes of James Potter and Sirius Black; each corridor had brought back suppressed memories of humiliation daily.
Now, in the privacy of his flat with Hermione sitting next to him, memories of being called "greasy git" and "dungeon bat" were far away. Instead, he felt appreciated and welcomed for who he was now, not rejected for his past and fierce reputation as a ruthless professor. Just as Hermione could feel no expectations demanded of her during her evenings with him, he was beginning to feel the same way with her. He knew that once he took off his mask, old habits and preconceptions would fall back into place, and Hermione would no longer feel at ease with him like she was at that very moment. That could have been the reason why Severus was drawing out the time before he revealed himself to her. Whatever the case, these were the green and pleasant days of their blooming friendship.

Once the cake had been eaten and the tea finished, they continued with their lesson.

"Are you ready to learn how to be dipped?" Severus asked.

"I don't know if I'll ever be ready," Hermione stated with wariness. "Just don't drop me."

"I promise I won't drop you. You just have to trust me." As he led her back to the middle of the floor, he asked, "Do you trust me?"

Hermione stepped up to him, placing her right hand in his left and her left hand on his shoulder, lightly pressing her body against him. She beamed a smile at him as she said, "Implicitly."

The music began with a flick of Severus' wand, and a slow tune began to play.

As they moved about the floor, Hermione turned her head and tucked it next to the crook of his neck, laying it against his chest as Calleo drew his left hand closer to their bodies and pulled her closer with his other hand around her waist.

She could smell his cologne, though it was very faint tonight. Hermione had to restrain the impulse to nuzzle her cheek and nose against his chest. Being held this close, she could feel the hard planes of his body and she felt far removed from the world while enveloped in his arms. As they moved, she could feel the movement of his leg next to and between hers. Every move they made together seemed as if they moved with the same purpose. Dancing with Ron was never like this; it was more like battling with an uncooperative broomstick. But with Calleo, it seemed as though it was the most natural thing in the world, and being in any man's arms before had never felt so right as that moment. Her head began to swim with thoughts of taking things from a platonic to a completely different level all together. Though she had sworn never to be unfaithful to Ron, the idea was certainly beginning to become attractive to her. Hermione glanced up and saw that Calleo's neck was very close, so close that if she moved her head just a little, she could rub her nose
and cheek along that little bit of flesh that enticed her. She wondered what his skin would taste like.
Drunk on the heady sensation of being so close to Calleo and the scent of him, Hermione pondered if she could deal with the guilt of her own infidelity.

Severus reveled at the feel of Hermione pressed willingly against him as they danced. His feet moved of their own accord, while his mind warred with his body to behave. He could feel himself harden at Hermione's soft form, molded along his, her breasts pressed against his chest and one finger on her hand unconsciously stroking the top of his shoulder, the imperceptible nuzzling of her cheek against him. His hand tightened around her waist further, noting the taper and wanting to drop his hand further down to explore the curve of her hip. A stray curl of her hair that wandered under the edge of his mask brushed against his chin. The raven-haired man wanted to take the curl and bury his nose in it, followed by the entire mass of her mane.

Somewhere deep in the recesses of Severus' brain, the spy part of him spoke up, *'Keep this up and you'll shag her before the night's through. Do that and you can kiss your chance for escape goodbye. Either restrain yourself or reveal yourself. She'll be mortified if she realized after the fact that she fucked Professor Severus Snape.'* He wanted the voice in his head to go away, but he knew the voice was right. Things were getting too cozy, and it was time for a slight change of pace.

"Are you ready to be dipped? Just relax," he instructed her.

Hermione's body stiffened. "I'm not sure. I'll try."

Severus turned her, moving his left hand up her back for support while keeping a hold around her waist with his right. In a moment of panic, based on her previous experience with Ron, Hermione stiffened even more. Losing her footing due to her body going completely rigid, her feet started to scrabble, and she grabbed frantically at Calleo's shirt as he began to dip her.

From the unexpected weight of Hermione's flailing body in his arms and the fact that she was pitching over at an alarming rate while clutching onto him, Severus felt his own footing go.

They went down spectacularly in a heap of arms and legs. During the fall, everything seemed to go into slow motion for Severus. During the trip down, he was able to get one hand free to cushion the fall while holding Hermione tighter and turning her sideways so he would not fall directly on top of her. Hermione squeaked in fright.

"OOMPH!" Severus felt his breath leave him upon impact. He hoped he didn’t sprain his wrist upon landing.
When they both opened their eyes, Severus was partially sprawled on top of Hermione.

"That was not how it was supposed to go," he dryly commented. "I've seen pregnant hippogriffs make a better landing."

Hermione burst out into gales of laughter. The mood was so completely broken, but Calleo's comment was said in such a way that she found funny, and she was whooping in stitches.

Her laughter was infectious enough to make Severus laugh as well, as he moved off her and onto his side. He was now propped up on one elbow looking down on her still sprawled on the floor, their legs still slightly intertwined.

As he gazed down at her, he knew he had never felt such an overpowering urge to kiss anyone. She lay before him, face flushed from laughing, her eyes bright. As he reached one hand to move an errant lock of hair from her cheek, her eyes suddenly became intense and heavily lidded with desire. Her pupils were dilated, making her eyes look larger, while her mouth parted and her tongue moistened her lips.

There was a pleasant tightness and fluttering in his stomach; he hadn't felt a sensation like that since the first time he rode a broom successfully. Severus wondered if he should just rip his mask off and kiss her, or just get up and offer her a hand to get up off the floor. Would she kiss Severus? She would kiss Calleo, but he doubted she would kiss her old teacher. He could easily imagine himself ravaging her right there and then on the floor, making her beg and plead for him to take her. It was his doubt that propelled him to stand upright.

"You didn't relax," he reminded her as he helped her up.

"At least you didn’t drop me. We just fell… together." Then she giggled some more as she rose.

They tried it one more time and succeeded. The song ended, and Hermione noticed the time. It was getting late.

"One more song, and then I must go," she said with a hint of sadness.
He nodded. Just then, Severus realized he hadn't picked out enough songs and needed one more. As he waved his wand, he said, "Select random song, slow, foxtrot."

As the chanteuse's husky and suggestive voice filled the tense silence between the two dancers, they were both wrapped in their own thoughts, silently reflecting on the lyrics.

"Did you say I've got a lot to learn?  
Well, don't think, I'm tryin' not to learn  
Since this is the perfect spot to learn  
Oh, teach me tonight!"

'What was it that Mum called it? Oh yes, radio syndrome,' Hermione thought.

Wendy Granger had a theory that Hermione was finding some merit to. Hermione's mother told her when she was younger, every time she found a new boyfriend, the radio seemed filled with songs of love. When Mrs. Granger broke up with the boy, nothing but songs about heartache and lost love filled the airwaves. Whatever intense emotion Wendy Granger experienced in her youth, it seemed the radio played nothing but songs that reflected her mood.

Now Hermione was listening to words encouraging her to beg Calleo to teach her the ways of passion. She'd had that particular fantasy play many times in her head, it just wasn't until tonight that she had seriously considered making that fantasy a reality.

She clutched Calleo's shoulder a little tighter in order to keep her hand from straying to his neck or his hair.

Severus damned himself for not having enough songs selected. Now he knew why he programmed songs to play without the words. The song currently playing was almost lascivious in its connotations. And for the fact it reminded him of the fact that he was once her professor did not help the matter. But the smoky voice of the woman – imploring her lover to instruct her in the ways of making love – had a suggestive power over him, helped along by Hermione clutched tightly to him.

The song was short enough to prevent them from thinking too much, or from acting once the thinking stopped and hormones began dictating actions.

Hermione stepped away from Calleo and smoothed down her skirt in nervousness, knowing that if she did not part now she might not make it home with her self-respect intact.
"You're a very good teacher," she breathed.

It was Severus' turn to laugh lightly. "Now that is something I have never heard."

"Well, you are," Hermione insisted. "Even if we did fall. But if I hadn't frozen up, then we probably wouldn't have." Glancing at the clock on the mantle, her brow furrowed.

"You have to go." Severus wasn't sure if he was just repeating what she was thinking, or it was a command for her to leave before he lost control of his senses and did something rash.

"Yes," she breathed. "Dinner was lovely, as always. Dessert was especially delectable." She hummed to herself, then sighed regretfully. "The evening always flies by when I'm here."

"Yes, it does. But we have Monday to look forward to." He studied the way her hands clasped each other until the knuckles were almost white.

Severus fetched her cloak.

As he slipped the royal blue cloak over her shoulders, admiring the color on her, Severus casually mentioned, "Miss Brown has finally settled on a name for that cologne you commented on last week. It's called Haunt."

Hermione was right. The cologne being put up for display in the apothecary window was the same one she smelled on Calleo. She wondered if Calleo had told Lavender what she had said the previous week. It was a very strong coincidence.

Once he had helped her with her cloak, she turned and said wistfully, "Until Monday night."

Severus grasped her hand and bowed low, kissing her hand tenderly. "Until Monday."

Hermione felt like her skin was white-hot where his lips met her hand. She held her breath, and her head spun. Once Calleo released her hand, she turned to leave before temptation proved itself too
great to resist.

The door closed behind her, and Hermione let out a sigh. Smiling broadly to herself, a tune from one of her mother's favorite musicals came to mind. She began singing to herself, “I could have danced all night, I could have danced all night, and still have begged for more.”

As she lazily waltzed down the flight of stairs and passed the door on the third floor, still singing, Hermione was oblivious to the gray eye peering through the crack in the door.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: If you have ever had a jacaranda tree on your property, you know what I am talking about. It's a sub-tropical tree with beautiful lavender flowering in the late spring. While the tree is in bloom, a sticky "mist" falls that settles on everything. I used to park my car underneath one at my parent's home and had this sticky "dew" all over my windshield (which practically blinded me when driving into the sun). No matter how many times I washed my windshield with all matter of cleaning solutions NOTHING would take it off. The dew is basically aphid shit and takes forever to remove from glass, paint, everything. It almost has to wear off. I do NOT recommend using nail polish remover for removing aphid shit.

Haricot verts are skinny green beans.


From "My Fair Lady": "I could have danced all night, I could have danced all night, and still have begged for more." written by Frederick Loewe and lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner.

Severus was kind enough to share with me his secret cherry chocolate-chocolate cherry cake recipe. Since he figures few of you are skilled enough to know how to make a cake from scratch, he has given me the shortcut recipe.

Chocolate Cherry Cake
(Chocolate candy glaze recipe listed below)

1 box of chocolate cake mix
2 21oz. cans of cherry pie filling (one for the batter and one for topping)
4 eggs
1 Tablespoon of vanilla extract
Mix and bake the cake according to package directions, using the eggs, vanilla, cake mix, and one can of cherry pie filling. Remove from oven and place on a cooling rack bottom up. When cake is cool, pour candied chocolate glaze over the surface of the cake and smooth so it is an even layer. When chocolate has hardened, flip over onto a serving plate so the hardened chocolate is on the bottom, and top with the second can of cherry pie filling. Serve.

Fudgy Candied Chocolate Glaze

1 stick butter (1/4 lb, or 4oz.)
2 cups (16oz) granulated sugar (caster sugar in UK)
1/2 cup (4oz) whole milk (not low fat or it won't solidify)
1 12oz. bag of semi-sweet chocolate chips (recommend using a good brand, such as Ghiradelli or Guittard's available in the U.S.)

Bring butter, sugar and milk to a boil. Let boil rapidly for two minutes. You may let it boil for three if you want a harder chocolate bottom. Turn off heat and stir in chocolate chips until all melted and smooth. Pour over cake immediately before it starts to set.

B/N: Well, you accomplished what you set out to do…I am positively squirming in my chair! The tension in here is settling like that mist off the tree…how’s about another chapter that will hopefully bring a bit of resolution, even if it’s only a kiss? *Whew!* ~ Horserider
“Thou Art Fishified”

Chapter Summary

Draco confronts Severus about his nocturnal activities with Hermione. Danger, prurient produce ahead.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-One
“Thou Art Fishified”

Disclaimer: I really don't think Miss Jo thought we would take her characters and do what we do with them in our stories. So, I thank her from the bottom of my heart for letting us use her characters and concepts.

==========

Severus woke to more doubts flooding his mind, doubts that he had a sincere growing affection for the young witch who had visited him every Thursday night for the past five weeks. As the days passed, Hermione occupied more and more of his spare thoughts. First with dreams of her as a source for the Polyjuice Potion and his freedom, and now as a woman who he wanted to hold in his arms… and more.

It didn't help that most mornings, as of late, he awoke to find an almost painfully hard erection that could only be relieved with thoughts of Hermione. He had gone to bed the previous night after masturbating to fresh memories of earlier that evening; Hermione on her back laughing, smiling up at him, followed by a look of unrestrained desire. While recollecting the sensation of her body pressed closed to his as they danced, he imagined the feel of her body pinned beneath his as he stroked his own flesh.

Once relieved of his urgent physical needs, Severus rose and performed his ablutions. As he was drying off, his memory of Albus decided to visit him at that moment.

'Last night went well,' the vision of the elder wizard commented.
Severus grimaced and began toweling his hair dry. "And I was in such a good mood this morning," he grumbled into the extra plush terry towel.

'Don't tell me that after last night you don't feel a thing for Hermione,' the transparent Albus asked.

"You know, hate, disgust and indifference are emotions," Severus retorted.

'Yes, but you feel none of those towards her. Quite the opposite, in fact. If I was there to watch, and in a way I was, I would say you looked like a young man falling in love.' The Headmaster ran a ghostly finger right through the empty toilet paper tube, dismayed he could not play with it, making it spin around and around on its spindle. It was the simple pleasures in life one missed when one was incorporeal, even if he was just a figment of Severus' imagination.

"As I've said before, it doesn't matter. She will recant her feelings when she realizes it is me, 'the terror of the dungeons,' and I will go back to living this life alone until set free." Covered in only a towel wrapped about his waist, Severus began shaving; he lifted his chin up as he scraped away the hair growth on his neck. Talking through clenched teeth as he jutted his chin to keep the skin taut, he added, "I don't know why I should get my hopes up when they have been crushed with such regularity that the Department of Mysteries could set their Time Turners to it."

'It is the pessimist in you I always found so exasperating, Severus,' Albus sighed wearily as he peered over his glasses, a manner he used to stress his sentences. 'Surely the Fates wouldn't have planned a life for you without any joy? What of Voldemort's final fall? Was there no reward in that?'

" Barely," Severus muttered, craning his neck sideways and pulling his mouth to the side as he shaved his left cheek. "I went from Death Eater spy serving two masters – one current and one former – only to wind up a condemned man with no job prospects and less respect than when I was a professor."

'But what of Hermione? Surely she brings you joy.' Before Severus could protest, the vision held up a hand to urge the younger wizard to remain silent. 'You deny and refute, but I know what lies in your heart, Severus. She brings you the happiness I wish I could have seen you experience while I was still alive. You don't have to pretend with Minerva and me. You are not the same boy you were when you sat under the Sorting Hat, nor are you the same wizard as when you took the Dark Mark, or the same man as at the end of the war. The world changes, Severus, and so have you. Accept that you have changed, and that you do not have to play the same role with the same black moods that you have had for most of your life. Accept the fact you can feel happiness, hope and love, for those feelings are in you as they have always been. It is only that you have never permitted yourself to experience those positive feelings until now. Embrace them. To fight them will only be to deny what already exists.'
Severus liked to think that just before his mentor passed away, a tiny portion of the great wizard possessed Severus' mind; and that tiny essence of Albus now sat in residence in his head, guiding and helping him. That may very well have been the case, as Albus Dumbledore was the greatest wizard to live within the past several hundred years, possibly since Merlin himself. But the raven-haired wizard doubted that a portion of Albus was actually living on in the Potions master's mind. If he was, Severus knew he'd feel strong inclinations towards consuming large quantities of cloyingly sweet confections and have some perverse affinity with socks. Severus never wanted to know what the Headmaster did with all the socks he received. Still, he knew he had to accept that perhaps he was feeling something akin to friendship with Hermione. And though he had never been in love, he suspected he might be in the process of falling in love against his own will.

Wiping the dregs of the shaving foam off his face, Severus slumped against the tile counter. "She does have a certain charm about her," he reluctantly admitted aloud.

He closed his eyes and remembered the heady sensation of spinning about the floor with Hermione. There had been an exhilarating feeling that one can only find when two bodies move in perfect synchronicity in time to the music, their movements seeming instinctual.

'Admitting it is the first step.'

"First step to what?"

'That is something you'll have to discover for yourself,' the hallucination of the Headmaster said before dissolving away into nothingness.

Severus hated the fact his memories of Albus were just as cryptic as the old man himself had been in real life.

Severus wasn't aware of it, but there was a spring in his step. Draco noticed it, though.

They had just picked up their habitual baked goods to eat on the way to their Friday morning appointment with Shacklebolt at the Ministry of Magic. Severus noticed the odd smirk on Draco's face that morning, when the blond wizard answered the door and joined him on their walk to the bakery before Flooing to their parole meeting.

Since Draco was not about to start the morning conversation, Severus confronted him with a terse,
"Well, out with it."

There was no immediate answer from Draco, as their boots clacked and thumped on the cobblestones.

"Well?" the older wizard prompted him once more.

Draco stopped and turned to look at the cloaked man next to him. With a cool, measured tone, he began to quote, "Here comes Romeo. Without his roe, like a dried herring: flesh, flesh, how thou art fishified."

Severus snarled, "And just what do you imply with that statement."

"Just what it means," Draco threw back, matching Severus sneer for sneer. "I thought you weren't going to shag Hermione, or at least not until you revealed yourself to her. And since I doubt you did inform her of your true identity, I can only assume you've done something foolish and ruined our chance for escape."
Before the words finished issuing from Draco's lips, Severus had bodily grabbed the younger wizard and slammed him up against a wall, the younger wizard's body making a sickly thump as it make contact with the solid stone. The hoods of their cloaks fell away with the sudden movements.

"Be careful of what you accuse me of, Mr. Malfoy. One should be very careful about making claims that aren’t true," the older and quicker wizard snapped, over-enunciating each word with a
"What is one left to think," Draco retorted with distaste and icy calm, still shoved up against the slightly damp wall. "Last night, Mrs. Weasley left your flat with her face pink and flushed, her hair slightly askew, grinning like an a fool, waltzing down the hall and singing about dancing all night and begging for more. If that doesn't sound like a woman who has been properly shagged, I don't know what does."

Severus immediately let go of the front of Draco's cloak and stepped back, taken aback at the other wizard's description of Hermione on her way home last night. Had he not been under Draco's close scrutiny that moment, he would have smiled to himself, knowing that he had made her feel so elated.

"Explain that, Mr. Snape." He dared Severus to refute it.

Before Severus could react, Draco had advanced and bodily pinned him up against the opposite wall in the same fashion.

"How could you do this to us? Our first chance for escape, and you have to let your hormones run rampant like some damn teenager at a May Day dance," Draco growled with derision.

"I DIDN'T FUCK HER!" Severus shoved Draco away from him. Smoothing down the front of his cloak, he confessed with reserve, "I gave her dancing lessons last night." He ducked his head down, if only to make sure the cloak’s material wasn't ruined, and not for the fact he could not meet Draco's eye, as he had almost done what he was just accused of.

"What?" The other wizard stood there looking stunned.

"You heard me." Severus pulled his hood back up and continued his walk toward the Leaky Cauldron, his morning brioche now lying in a puddle, coated in street grime and forgotten.

Draco rushed to catch up, pulling his own hood back up. "What? Just last night she asked for dance lessons out of the blue?"

"No, she made arrangements with Miss Brown earlier this week to schedule it," Severus answered clinically.
"And you failed to mention this to Ginny and me yesterday because..." Draco left the sentence hanging, eyebrows raised in expectation, waiting for an answer to complete his statement.

Stopping in his tracks once more, the older wizard turned and said, "Because I don’t need you looking at me the way you do whenever the topic of Mrs. Hermione Weasley comes up. Don't give me your raised eyebrow and smug grins. Say it or don't bother me with your vainglorious emoting. Your father did that, and it was an irritation to endure all those years."

"Fine, I'll say it. You're falling for her." Draco crossed his arms across his chest waiting for Severus to deny it.

Severus turned and continued walking once more. Instead of rebuffing Draco's statement directly, he merely replied sardonically. "I think you and Ginny have read 'Romeo and Juliet' one too many times together; Your head is filled with too many romantic notions for your own good."

Just before they reached the Leaky Cauldron, Severus added, "And I don't appreciate your girlfriend dropping hints, under your guidance, that Hermione sounds just like me when complaining about her co-worker."

Draco threw Severus’ statement in back his face, "Be careful of what you accuse me of. One should be very careful about making claims that aren’t true."

"You didn’t urge her?" Severus questioned.

"No, and I know Ginny would not do anything unless Mrs. Weasley really was complaining exactly like you. This is just as important to Ginny as it is to us," Draco assured his mentor.

Draco's claim eased Severus' fear that his plan would be undermined out of haste. However, he still prayed Hermione would not realize his identity too soon.

As she rolled over onto her back in bed, Hermione grinned to herself. She could still envision Calleo lying on his side, hovering above her just after they had fallen down the night before.

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bed, staring unfocused at the ceiling. The witch still remembered how close she had been to grabbing Calleo and pulling him on top of her at that moment. The moment never came, as Calleo rose to his feet before she could act.

Her reverie over last night was broken when Ron snorted and smacked his lips before settling back into sleep.

The reason why she didn't just shag Calleo was lying next to her; the moment of indulgence was ruined.

Hermione rolled out of bed and padded into the kitchen for some tea and breakfast. Once she had eaten, she made herself a large lunch to take with her to work, so she could cut down the time away from the lab for her lunch break. If she was going to be leaving two nights a week at a decent hour, she was going to have to find a way to get the same amount of work done with less time. Since the Ministry was not in the habit of passing out Time Turners without what was deemed 'a very good cause,' Mrs. Weasley had to find other ways to find time to finish her work. One way was to bring her own lunch and eat it at the lab. At most, it would take ten minutes out of her workday, versus the minimum thirty required to leave the Ministry, buy lunch, eat and come back.

'First it was because of money, and now it's because of time. You can never have both,' Hermione thought gloomily as she made her lunch, remembering why she had started doing it in the first place. 'Calleo.' She let herself indulge in one more dreamy smile.

She had been willing to give up her lunches out to be able to afford to visit him. Now she was making her own lunches again to afford the time to not only see a counselor to fix her marriage, but to see Calleo even more.

Stepping into the bathroom, she saw the note stuck to the bathroom mirror.

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Hermione,

Thought I'd warn you ahead of time. Quidditch Weekly wants to do a story on me. Wanted to tell you in case you need to get anything ready or washed. Make sure you wear your nicest robes, as they might want to take your picture too.
The twins and their families are coming to the game tomorrow too.

Ron

------

'At least he warned me,' she mused before getting ready for work.

Once the owl took wing from Severus' office window, he walked over to the lab to supervise the bottling of the male stamina potion. It had been stewing for three days. The Potions master would test the two-day sample tonight by himself, and use the sample that stewed for three days for Miss Anne's visit on Saturday. When he could not find Miss Brown in the lab, he headed to her office.

He knocked on her door and was bid to enter.

Severus opened the door to find his employer standing at her desk, looking at the Thursday edition of the Daily Prophet.

"I forgot to show this to you yesterday, Severus. I just never tire of looking at good ad work," she spoke in a trance-like state.

Walking up to her desk, he peered down to the double full-page ad spread splashed across the center page of the newspaper. A witch with long flowing tresses was rubbing a large phallic shaped bottle of cologne between her breasts and along her neck and cheek while barely clothed in thin scraps of silk. A dream cloud hovered over her head featuring a classically handsome man with a Greek god physique, his shirt completely unbuttoned, the fabric flapping in some unseen wind. He kept reaching for the luscious witch who was just out of reach, trapped in the dream cloud.

The ad copy read, "Haunt. The scent of you will haunt her. Have a unique scent all your own with the new cologne from Valiant Wizard. Available now at finer apothecaries and haberdasheries."

"That is positively pornographic! I can't believe Draco picked a bottle that looks like that to sell my cologne. And that ad leaves nothing to the imagination," Severus complained with ill-concealed disgust.
"No, it doesn't, does it?" Lavender said absentmindedly with a far away smile.

He snorted.

"Severus," the blond witch began, still admiring the ad, "if you paid the least bit attention to our customer surveys in the monthly reports, more and more of our customers are either Muggle-borns or customers with one Muggle parent. These people still live with one foot in the Muggle world, and so we must compete not only with other wizarding companies, but Muggle ones too. Part of what we sell is an image. If you want to see ads that leave less to the imagination, go down to Piccadilly Circus where you can see pictures of naked women fifty feet high selling toothpaste or tights. We must use some of the advertising finesse of the Muggle world while remaining true to our wizarding roots. I did not hire you for your marketing skills but for your Potions expertise."

Lifting her head from the paper, she added, "Now what did you want to see me about?"

"I think I may have a solution regarding the brewing of the male enhancement potion," he announced crisply.

Lavender's eyebrows went up into her hairline, and a broader grin spread across her face. "Really? Please, have a seat. Shall I call for tea?" she asked while folding up the Daily Prophet.

"Yes, please." Severus seated himself in one of Lavender's overstuffed chairs decorated with pink picotte cabbage roses and violets, and a ruffled skirt. He hated sitting in something so frilly and feminine, but they were rather comfortable and reminded him of Albus' chairs in the Headmaster's office.

Once tea arrived and was served, Lavender asked, "So? What sort of solution did you have in mind?"

"Are you familiar with how Muggles make beer?" he asked before sipping his tea.

They were in a little London shop called Plains of Buffalo. Hermione kept checking the time, as Ginny was looking over a shelf of Native American headdresses and bead work. So far they had been to the Old West antique store on Portobello Road and a store that sold American food items. There, Ginny had purchased several large bottles of every type of chili, salsa and barbecue sauce available, including one called "five-alarm firehouse special." The label on the "five-alarm" bottle showed flames coming out of a cartoon mouth; Hermione assured Ginny that it was merely an exaggeration of the sauce’s effects. There was no need for Ginny to fireproof the backyard.
As Mrs. Weasley wandered the aisles, briefly thinking of what a dusting nightmare it would be to own a shop like this, she pondered Ginny's enthusiasm over throwing Harry's birthday party this year versus previous years. Was it because of Ginny's guilt over cheating on Harry, or could it be that counseling was really helping her marriage and Mrs. Potter was becoming closer to her husband? A third option popped into Hermione's mind, but she dismissed it quickly, though the thought would not go away.

'No, she wouldn't. Couldn't be.'

The idea that this was some sort of last farewell for Ginny before she left Harry would not go away no matter how hard Hermione tried to avoid thinking about it. Hermione remembered Ginny mentioning that if Draco found a way out of the country, she would go with him, family, friends and Harry be damned. Knowing that she would ruin another lovely outing with her friend if she confronted the redhead, Hermione locked the question away in the back of her mind and made a silent promise to keep her mouth shut regarding all things related to Malfoy.

"Do you think I could get Harry to wear something like this for the party?" Ginny asked, bringing Hermione back to the present.

"Hmm?" She looked at the items in Ginny's hands, uncertain of what the question was.

"I said, do you think Harry would wear this as a costume for his birthday party?" Ginny clarified.

Scrutinizing the items her friend held, Hermione looked first at the white-and-brown feathered headdress; the tag hanging from it said, "Sioux War Bonnet". The tan fringed suede pants in Ginny's other hand looked rather plain, but typical of what she remembered from the few Western movies she remembered as a child.

"What about a shirt?" Hermione asked.

"I thought Harry could go shirtless. Give it a more authentic look, like the illustrations I saw in some of my books."

"And when those cool London nights descend on the back yard? What if it rains?" the brunette witch prompted.
"Oh, you could be right. I'll see if they have any suede tunics to go with the pants," Ginny said just before she started ducking down another aisle.

Hermione went back to browsing the many items on sale, even eyeing a lovely silver and turquoise squash blossom necklace that would go well with the turquoise earrings her parents had given her. When she glanced at the price tag, she balked. The necklace was lovely, but not that lovely. She certainly hoped the price her parents paid for her earrings was less than the store’s prices, which were hopefully based on high rents in fashionable London.

While standing next to Ginny as the clerk rang up the pile of purchases, Hermione glanced at the clock once more.

"I'd better get going soon, or I won't make it to Ron's game," Hermione announced.

"All right then. I'll see you on Wednesday for lunch," Ginny said with a smile. "Oh, and if your parents do have any books of interest to loan me, you can just Floo them over whenever you have a chance. I still have some shopping to do. Is that bookstore we went to last week about two blocks over from here?"

Mentally pulling up a map in her head, Hermione confirmed Ginny's guess before giving her a hug and heading off to the Leaky Cauldron.

Every good experiment of two or more variations of a potion needs to be conducted with similar conditions. The previous night Severus had taken the male enhancement potion after ejaculating from masturbation once. Though the two-day version potion gave him the energy and stamina to orgasm once more, it did not have the potency that he and Miss Brown were striving for. Their hope was that the potion would give a man unlimited sexual power to keep going and going for at least two to four hours, no matter how many orgasms he reached.

Before Miss Anne arrived, Severus had already climaxed once through masturbation. Now that his client was undressed and tied down to his bed in a manner befitting a masochistic contortionist, he eyed the vial of three-day stewed potion, placed on the tray next to the rather large array of vegetables Marf had picked up at the farmers' market that morning.

Downing the potion, he felt the cool heat spread quickly to his limbs and loins. The reaction was instantaneous. Severus didn't expect his cock to grow so hard so suddenly, and found it to be almost painful. After making a mental note to reduce the simmering stage by a few hours, he
plunged himself into Miss Anne's wet heat. After he allowed himself to orgasm before Miss Anne could, the gigolo pulled out, wondering how long it would be before he would be hard again. It only took a few minutes before he was erect once more, and Miss Anne's cries of displeasure over his quick release were silenced when she saw him harden once more.

As he grabbed a bulky cucumber from the tray, he also picked up an impressively large courgette. Once he coated the vegetables in lubricant, he made Miss Anne beg to be stuffed like a turkey. Severus charmed the vegetables to slide in and out of her while he straddled her chest and fucked her mouth, to silence her mewling cries that were beginning to irritate him. He came in her mouth with a growl, gritting his teeth to prevent another verbal slip like the previous week.

Though he had orgasmed three times, Severus was hard again in a matter of a few minutes. However, the allure of Miss Anne in the midst of a multiple orgasm was beginning to wane for him. She howled with pleasure as the charmed vegetables continued to violate her. Sitting on the bed, Severus considered leaving her to the devices of the animated produce so that he could take a shower, masturbating to thoughts of Hermione instead of the reality of the wanton witch tied down to his bed. Instead, he rose to his knees and jerked off, spraying cum all over Miss Anne's breasts and stomach before retiring to the settee to have a glass of brandy and observe Miss Anne in the throes of being seduced by a salacious salad.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 31 A/N: Lizardqueen was gracious enough, back in 2005, to draw an illustration to go with this chapter and is available for viewing at this fic's Tumblr page, since the artist's original URL is now gone: http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/post/130955052375/art-by-lizardqueen-and-they-didnt-live-happily

Quote from “Romeo and Juliet,” Act 2, Scene 4: "Here comes Romeo. Without his roe, like a dried herring; flesh, flesh, how thou art fishified."

And I am so pissed Baz Lurhman cut out that one set of lines from his version of "Romeo and Juliet," as I think it is some of the funniest and dirtiest lines Shakespeare ever wrote.

I have no idea if there is a shop called Plains of Buffalo, but it sounded like trendy shop name.

Thanks to June for helping me with a title for this chapter. And three cheers for my wonderful betas: Horserider, Siren and JuneW.
“My Husband the Stranger”

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Ron go to the Grangers for Sunday dinner. Mario Andretti, look out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Thirty-Two
“My Husband the Stranger”

Disclaimer: I promise to only mildly use and abuse JK Rowling's wonderful characters and promise to return them in mostly working order. And no, the last time I returned Snape, I did not leave slobber marks all the way up the back of his thigh. That must have been another author who didn't bother to wash him up before returning him. I always clean my toys before putting them back. Except for courgettes; those get thrown out. Eww.

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While Ron was in the shower, Hermione pulled out her escape box from the back of her dresser drawer. Her husband had recently developed the habit of taking long showers, obviously moving his masturbation activities to someplace private. That meant she too would have a little privacy for a while.

With one ear listening for signs of her husband, in case his shower was shorter than usual, Hermione opened her escape box. She filed through the bank statements, her Cash Card, a credit card that she noticed would expire next month, her passport and Calleo's letter until she found what she was looking for. Lifting her driver's license from the box, she grimaced at the awful picture on it.

'It would figure that I had to try a new hair taming charm on the day I had my picture taken for my license,' she silently groused, noting the monumentally bushy mass of hair extending beyond the perimeter of the photo. The circles under her eyes and lack of make-up didn't help the matter.

Stuffing her license into her pocket, she put her escape box back into her dresser and replaced the very unobtrusive stay away charm on it, to keep Ron from coming across it and asking questions.
Hermione was thankful she never had to use her escape box during the war. Mrs. Wendy Granger had insisted that her one and only child have a Muggle means to leave England if the tide turned against the Order and things looked bleak. Immediately following Hermione's eighteenth birthday, Mrs. Granger dragged her daughter to several places, including the motor vehicles office for a license and the passport office. She wanted to be sure that her child could escape the country if she could not Apparate or Floo to safety in the event Death Eaters took over the Ministry of Magic. Mrs. Granger insisted that Hermione never tell anyone about her Muggle documents, having been informed from her daughter about Legilimency and the ability to read another's mind. And though the war was over, Hermione wouldn't have been surprised if another dark wizard rose within her long lifetime and she just might need those types of documents to move between the magical and Muggle world, making it possible for her to still escape. Hermione always supposed she got her sense of preparedness from her mother.

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Hermione and Ron stepped out of the fireplace to find a rather startled Wendy Granger holding a hand to her bosom.

"I'll never get used to that!" Mrs. Granger exclaimed, trying to catch her breath.

Hermione went straight to her mother and gave her a big hug, squeezing her extra tight in her arms. This was always Hermione's way of letting her mother know that everything was not all right.

After Hermione released her mother, Ron gave his mother-in-law a light hug. "It's good to see you again, Wendy."

"You too, Ron. Let's go out into the garden." Wendy directed her daughter and son-in-law towards the back of the house. Hermione wrapped an arm around her mother's waist and dropped her head sideways onto her mother’s shoulder as well, as they walked two abreast with Ron trailing behind. "Your father has a new gas grill he's dying to break in today, so we may eat a little earlier than expected."

It felt wonderful to be back at her parents' house. Stretching out on the grass under the elm tree, which was lopsided due to a neighbor with a grudge and a pair of loppers, Hermione reveled in the sensation of cool grass on her back and dappled shade. The tiny jewels of sun peeked through the leaves and sparkled as the gentle wind rustled the leaves. Birds twittered in the distance. Just the scent of her mother's roses blooming gloriously and proudly in the sun brought back the memories of carefree summers before Hogwarts and awareness of Voldemort.

As a child, Hermione had always wanted to have her wedding in her parents’ long yet narrow backyard. That dream was changed by the realities of the war, her desire to keep her parents' house
unplottable until fear of retaliation had passed, and the fact that all the Weasleys and the Order would not all fit. Instead, her and Ron's wedding was changed to the Burrow. This meant none of Hermione’s relatives could attend, other than her parents.

Before Hermione could get too comfortable and nod off while her father, Wallace, was explaining the finer points of BTUs and the heat conductive capabilities of his new grill to Ron, Wendy came out into the garden and looked for the witch.

"Hermione? I'm heading to the store. Would you care to come with me?" Mrs. Granger called out to her daughter, knowing this was their chance to talk alone.

Hermione practically bounded up the step and to the garage, thankful she remembered to bring her driver's license.

"Care to drive?" Wendy asked, dangling the keys, knowing Hermione's only chance to practice driving was during her infrequent visits to the Granger home.

Snatching the keys from her mother's hands like an anxious teenager, Hermione leapt into the car and, after belting herself in, turned the key in the ignition.

The sound of the car humming beneath her feet was an odd sound to miss, but it was a familiar sound. Driving a car was nothing like riding a broom. With a broom, there was the fact you had three-dimensional space to deal with and one was not moving in just two manageable dimensions. Besides, cars had seat belts, roll cages, safety glass, airbags and a half a ton of metal between the driver and a tree or building. Neville Longbottom's first flight on a broomstick and subsequent broken wrist gave Hermione a healthy respect and fear for flying cleaning gadgets. She didn't even want to go near the vacuum cleaner the twins had gotten a hold of during her seventh year.

Once the door to the garage was open, Hermione firmly pressed her foot on the accelerator and the car took off in reverse with a squeal, leaving tire marks on the smooth concrete floor.

As Hermione drove down the residential street barreling at eighty-five kilometers an hour (fifty-three miles an hour), Mrs. Granger held onto her arm rest with a white knuckle grip, her foot desperately pressing a brake pedal that wasn't under her foot, feeling five new gray hairs instantly sprout from her head.

"I'm so glad we could have some time by ourselves to talk, Mum," Hermione said, oblivious to her
mother's look of panic plastered across her face. "I really need to talk with you about Ron."

"Uh-huh," Wendy whimpered, half-listening to her daughter while praying no children would dart out in front of the speeding car. "Erm, how long did you say that special braking charm you added to the car lasts?"

"Oh, it'll be fine for another few years. I should check the anti- ding and scratch charms, though, when we get back home," Hermione blithely noted before yanking the steering wheel to veer around a mini that had pulled into the street in front of her. Completely unaware of just how much the Knight Bus had influenced her driving style, Hermione swung around a corner and managed to make the car go up on two wheels for a split second.

Glancing out of the corner of her eye, Hermione said, "You all right, Mum? You look a little pale."

"A LITTLE SLOWER, PLEASE!" Mrs. Granger screeched, finally finding her voice.

Once Hermione was going near the speed limit, Wendy Granger let out a huge sigh of relief and finally released the armrest from her death grip.

"Make a right here, dear," Mrs. Granger noted. "Right, RIGHT, RIGHT!"

Another quick jerk of the wheel and the car defied the laws of physics by turning without rolling over, cutting between two oncoming cars, a hair's breadth from hitting them. The car slowly rolled through the parking lot, and Mrs. Weasley parked her mother's Jaguar between a little red MG and a chartreuse Citroen.

"Mum? You all right?" Hermione asked, examining her mother's shaking hands still clutched to the armrests.

"No, I'm fine," Wendy lied, her voice still shaking. "I think I'll drive home, if that's all right."

Once she caught her breath and her heart had stopped painfully pounding against her rib cage, Wendy Granger said, "Now, dear, you mentioned something about Ron?"
Hermione pulled the keys from the ignition and handed them over to her mother. "Yeah." The dejected, morose look on her face said it all. "We had a really big fight about three weeks ago. He was gone for a week and came back right after the… the attack when he thought I might have been caught in it. When you Flooed, he had been back less than twelve hours." After unbuckling herself, Hermione continued to sit there, looking to her mother for some sort of guidance to deal with the situation.

"What was the fight about?" her mother asked, rubbing Hermione's arm comfortably.

"It almost seems stupid."

"Come on, now. What was the fight about?" Mrs. Granger coaxed, trying to encourage her daughter who had difficulty meeting her eye.

The tears started falling, and Hermione could feel her nose begin to run. Reaching for the box of tissue on the center console, Hermione grabbed a few and started to dab away the tears that came suddenly. "I wanted to talk, and he wanted to fool around. We hardly talk anymore. Ever since school ended and the war was over, we have nothing in common to talk about." She blew her nose before continuing. "So I told him to talk to me because that might get me in the mood for once, and then it all blew up from there. I told him what a lousy lay he was," she confessed, her cheeks burning hot with embarrassment, "and he called me a frigid ice queen. I stormed out to cool off, and when I got back he was gone."

Wendy Granger pulled her daughter into an awkward hug, twisting her body over the center console, ignoring the gear stick jabbing her in her ribs. "There, there." She rubbed and patted Hermione's back while shushing her. "He's back. Obviously he wants to be with you."

Hermione didn't know if this was the right time to bring up the fact that wizarding marriages are magically bound and unbreakable once children have been produced.

"He's been rather cold to me since returning, Mum. I touched him the other night, and he rejected me. It got so bad after he came back that I gave him the ultimatum of divorce or marriage counseling," Hermione confessed with a fresh wave of tears.

Pulling away from Hermione, Wendy Granger lifted her child's face to look her in the eye. "Be honest with me, Hermione. Has he been physically abusive?"
"No," she replied emphatically.

Mrs. Granger let out a huge breath of relief. "Good," she sighed, embracing her daughter once more for comfort and out of relief. Then she added as an afterthought, "He hasn't been verbally abusive to you either, has he?"

Hermione stilled in her mother's arms. She had to think if the snide words Ron threw at her would be considered abuse or just bad temper. "No, not really." She sounded uncertain.

"Hermione?" Wendy said with warning.

"It's not abuse, really. Just words said in anger while he was still upset at me. It's gotten better this past week. We've been civil to one another. We start counseling this Tuesday, which is something. The wizarding world looks at counselors and therapists like Muggles view Voodoo witch doctors. So it was rather amazing that he agreed."

"Yes, after you threatened to leave him. It's not like you gave him much of a choice, Hermione," her mother gently scolded her. "Promise me that if he so much as hits you or starts becoming verbally abusive that you will leave him in a heartbeat. Your father and I would take you back home anytime if that happened."

"Mother?" Hermione asked, wondering what prompted this line of questioning.

"Your Aunt Christine was married to a man named Mark before she married your Uncle Tim. Mark seemed like a nice quiet type, but in private he became abusive. Now I know Ron doesn't seem the type, but you never know. Mark never hit your Aunt Christina until after they were married a few years. He put her hand through a wall once." Hermione began to protest that Ron would never do such a thing, but her mother stopped her. "I'm just saying that if he ever treats you poorly, you're more than welcome to come home while you sort things out. Now, we better get inside and start shopping. You ready? Better?"

Hermione nodded her head and wiped away the last of the tears, feeling comfort in the fact her parents would be there no matter what happened. She momentarily wondered what her mother might think of her precious child going to visit a gigolo weekly, but never entertained the thought beyond imagining the look of horror upon her mother's face if she found out.

As the two women strolled up and down the aisle of the Sainsbury, Wendy Granger periodically
rubbed her daughter's back. It was an unconscious habit still ingrained from comforting her as an infant up through adulthood. The familiar rubbing of the back was a way of imparting security and love.

"Is that the only thing you fight about?" Mrs. Granger spoke, bringing up the topic of Hermione and Ron's fight out of the blue.

"No," Hermione sighed. "We've fought about money recently, but not so much. Oh yeah, I forgot to mention it. Ron is now the starting Keeper for his team. There's more money now, and he's going to renegotiate his contract at the end of the season."

"Oh, that's wonderful." Wendy beamed a bright smile at her daughter, showing her enthusiasm that hopefully things would get better, while reaching for a package of cellophane wrapped steaks. "Ron is probably thrilled."

"Yeah," Hermione replied somberly, her eyes gliding over the endless yards of prepackaged meats available for purchase without having to talk with the butcher. "It took until I asked him about the extra income before he told me about the promotion on the team."

Desperate to find some plausible reason to buck up her daughter's falling spirits, Hermione's mother added, "Well, since you said you've been so busy staying late at work, he just probably didn't have a chance to tell you until you asked." She began pushing the shopping trolley away from the meat department and towards the wine aisle.

"Yeah, that must be it," Hermione said with as much conviction as she could. She was grateful her mother was trying to cheer her up by reasoning away the growing rift between Ron and herself.

Dinner was slightly strained, as Hermione and Ron rarely spoke to one another during the course of the meal. Recognizing the lack of communication between the two, Wendy started many of the discussions.

"So, Ron," Mrs. Granger began on another topic, trying to keep conversation flowing, "are you still working at that pub on weeknights?"

"Actually, Wendy, now that I'm starting Keeper for the Chudley Cannons, the owners have started looking for a replacement, as I put my notice in last week," Ron volunteered.
Hermione's head shot up and she quickly masked the look of surprise at the news, but not before her mother caught it. It was another recent instance of Ron not telling his wife anything unless prompted.

"Really. What sort of things did you do at the pub?" Wallace asked, jumping into the conversation. "Is there a brewery on the premises, or do you just serve it?"

Hermione smiled, remembering her father's love of bitters and the subtle art of brewing it. Fond memories of helping her father's temporary hobby of home brewing came to mind. Visions flashed before her of her father siphoning his home-brewed beer from a plastic five-gallon bucket into several bottles she had helped him clean and wash out. She wondered if he still had the levered capping mechanism. Smiling to herself, she remembered walking Calleo through the process of brewing beer as her father had told her years before. In some ways, Potions reminded her of her father's attempts at home brewing.

It seemed an odd Potions discussion she’d had with Calleo; how to have several cauldrons of a particular potion simmering for a few days while freeing up cauldrons for more potions. Calleo's eyes behind the mask seemed to light up as she described the process of boiling the wort in large kettles for brewing beer. She wondered if Calleo had really worked in Potions in the past or was it just a hobby, as he had claimed. Knowing that thinking too much on a good thing would likely ruin it with over-analysis, she banished that line of questions from her mind and concentrated on the conversation between her husband and father.

"No, we just buy and serve it," Ron answered.

"So how long do you think it will be before you have your evenings back and be able to spend more time at home?" Wendy queried, giving a subtle knowing look to her daughter, implying this might be good for improving their relationship.

"Actually, that year of Auror training has come in handy. Not only am I a barkeep behind the bar, but I serve as bouncer when things get a bit rough. You'd be amazed at the number of applicants Rufus and Rogina have had who don't know how to block a common hex, which is pretty common if you get one of those wizards that get abusive when drunk," Ron answered nonchalantly.

"Do you think that maybe you could train the new barkeep in some of the Auror techniques you know?" Hermione asked, trying to find some way to interact with her husband during dinner.

"It's possible," Ron said with a shrug. "Neville would be a natural, but he has his nursery business. I guess they'll just have to interview until they come across someone they can trust who won't wind
up in St. Mungo's if caught in the crossfire of a wizard's duel."

Turning to his daughter, Wallace Granger asked, "So how's your work going, sweetheart?"

Hermione set down her fork, fixing her eyes on her plate for a moment, while she contemplated if she wanted to go into the aftermath of Marge's death, her churlish shrew of a boss, and the incompetent boob named Mr. Spawn she had been saddled with to train. She had listened to her parents' own tirades about dealing with the odd office manager who didn't have the slightest clue of how to keep an office in order, or properly invoice clients and order the right supplies in a timely manner. Knowing she could at least get a sympathetic ear from her parents, she realized suddenly she hadn't told Ron a thing about her situation at work.

"We found a replacement for my co-worker. He's not very good, and I'm charged with training him, but I have to deal with it. Other than that, nothing else really is happening at work." Hermione shrugged to signify it was a matter of no importance.

She could have railed all night long about the injustice of being expected to train the likes of Trevor Spawn with as much success as one could train a dog to quote Shakespeare, but with Ron sitting across from her, she had no fire within her to try. It was as if his mere presence was becoming a burden unto her soul, and she wanted to keep the ups and downs of her life private from her husband. There was some satisfaction in keeping information from him, finding twisted reason for resenting him for not knowing who she was or what was happening in her life. Maybe it was becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy that she and Ron had nothing in common by the fact they were no longer sharing in each other's daily joys and sorrows. But it seemed for every bit of information Ron didn't volunteer, unless prompted, Hermione wanted to keep another piece of her life to herself, sharing it with Ginny, Harry or Calleo. It gave Hermione vindictive satisfaction that Ron would learn from his friend or sister, and not from his wife directly, about how she had ranted with passionate fervor over the displeasure of having to work with such a vile nuisance such as Mr. Spawn.

Maybe Ron's reluctance to talk with her was the source of her spite, but the fact was her husband's growing indifference towards her seemed to only fuel Hermione's desire to keep more and more secrets from him that she had shared freely with others.

Leaning sideways, Hermione's father patted her hand. "I have faith you'll do your best, as always."

Hermione could have refuted her father to say it was a fruitless endeavor, but merely smiled and nodded her head, further perpetuating her parents' perception that she was not a quitter and could surmount any obstacle if she merely applied herself.

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Ron was in the study with his father-in-law, trying to grasp a concise description about the Internet. It was rather hopeless, as Ron was sure to mix up some of the details when telling his own father about it at some future point in time. Hermione kept smiling as her husband kept confusing the idea of electricity with the network connection cables, mixing up the telephone with the modem box and power cords.

She excused herself to go meander around her old room that her parents had converted into a guest bedroom.

As she trudged up the stairs, she noticed the sudden lack of photos of her once she began Hogwarts. It seemed all photos on the wall had frozen in time shortly before turning twelve, right when she got her letter. There were no school photos of her after age eleven, as her parents would have had a terrible time explaining to their Muggle friends and family why their daughter’s photos moved. There was the odd photo during her brief summers home or a Christmas snapshot, but those trips home during the holidays became shorter and shorter, what with her spending more and more time at the Burrow or Number Twelve Grimmauld Place and less time with her parents.

Opening the door to her old room, Hermione stood there and took in the new furnishings and wallpaper.

'I don't live here anymore.' It finally struck her that she was a stranger in her old home, though her parents still lived there. Of course she knew she had her own life with Ron, but the finality of it became clear in that moment.

She sat on the bed and looked about. Her mother had placed a lovely Chippendale reproduction of a writing desk and chair set where her old desk and bookcase combination used to sit. There was an antique Scottish wardrobe and a damask striped Bergère chair in the corner. It was tastefully and artfully arranged with all the right accents and knickknacks in all the right places. The room reminded Hermione of all the lovely rooms that everyone looks at in interior design magazines, but no one lives in.

Her mother did say that if she needed to live with them, she could move back in while she sorted things out with Ron. Would she live in this room like some guest that had come to stay for an indefinite period of time? The spinster aunt that wouldn't go away?

Hermione reached across the bed to the radio on the nightstand, wondering what Muggle music sounded like these days.

As she switched the toggle over to “radio,” a song instantly blared out over the radio at a startlingly
loud volume.

“Torn between two lovers, feelin’ like a fool…”

Hermione quickly shut off the radio, certain that she had been cursed with radio syndrome.

‘Mum must have been listening to that seventies easy rock station again,’ she surmised, not wanting to even ponder the meaning behind the lyrics and how they related to her.

Just as she was about to rise and leave, her mother came into the room. Quietly closing the door, Wendy turned to smile at her daughter.

“I heard you in here. I have some paperwork for you.” Moving to the desk, Mrs. Granger opened a drawer and removed a small stack of mail addressed to Hermione Granger.

“Oh, thanks. I almost forgot,” Hermione said as she looked through the monthly bank statements and found her new credit card to replace the one on the verge of expiring.

Sitting on the bed next to her daughter, Wendy Granger asked, “Does Ron know about your Muggle documents?”

“No,” Hermione breathed.

“Good. Your father doesn't know it, but I still put a little into your account now and then. I just feel safer if you have a little backup Muggle money in case anything happens,” Hermione's mother explained. “Knowing how long you're likely to live, and how you told me dark wizards tend to arise now and again, I just want to make sure you have a backup plan.”

“I know, Mum.”

“I know it's silly of me, but I worry that some wizard will come along with some grudge against you and your friend Harry, and cast one of those curses you told me about,” Mrs. Granger said more to herself than to her daughter. “It terrifies me at times, to think that something so simple as some words and a piece of wood pointed at someone could end their life so easily. It sounds too
“No easier than someone with a gun shooting at random people, Mum. If I were a Muggle, I could just as easily die in a car crash or be on the wrong train when it derails on the way into work in the morning. Or die of some horrible disease like cancer. I'm fortunate enough to be born with a natural ability to not die in the way a Muggle might, like by falling off a building or another commonly simple way. We witches and wizards are made of stronger stuff,” Hermione assured her mother, hoping to allay fears born out of lack of knowledge. “And if we do get sick, we have potions and charms to cure most anything except old age. I will most probably live a very long life. I just worry about you and Dad. You will age as Muggles do while I seem to defy the years. Ron's parents will be around to see their great-great grandchildren, but you won't.”

Hermione looked at her mother and saw the crow’s feet around her eyes. 'When did Mum start looking older?' The tears came quickly at thoughts of her parents dying someday in the future. A sudden thought came to Hermione. She would never die in a car crash, but her parents might. Once her parents eventually died, all her connections to the Muggle world would be severed. She had no childhood friends she had stayed in contact with, and no longer knew her parents’ neighbors.

Hugging her mother tightly, she began to cry. It scared her that after her parents died, she would be the only one left in her family. There were a few aunts and uncles, but they were so removed from Hermione's inner circle of family, they didn't even enter her mind.

“Shhh.” Wendy rocked Hermione and stroked her hair. “What brought this all on?”

“I don't know,” Hermione said listlessly. “Maybe it was my co-worker's death. Did you know she was born the same year Napoleon died?”

“Really?”

“Yes. There is no way you and Dad will live to be a hundred and eighty-two years old. I just worry that something bad could happen, and I'll lose you both.” Pulling away to look at her mother in earnest, Hermione said somberly, “Promise me if something does happen, anything, you'll contact me immediately. There is no rule with the Ministry that I can’t use a potion on a Muggle who is an immediate family member.”

Mrs. Granger smiled warmly at her daughter, understanding her daughter's fear of losing those closest to her. “I promise. Your father and I are not going anywhere for a long, long time, by either Muggle or wizarding standards.”
She gave her daughter one last hug. Then they rose and went to the kitchen for a spot of tea to cheer themselves up, before Hermione and Ron had to head home for the night.

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Sipping her tea in contemplative silence as she sat across from her mother, Hermione could still hear Ron and her father in the study. Her mind drifted back to the many books upon the shelves in the study, books she had browsed through as a child, when she was still not old enough to understand some of the language and terms.

“Mum?” she prompted, breaking the quiet. “I saw a few books in the study I’d like to borrow for a bit.”

“Really? Which ones, dear?”

“Well,” Hermione said, recalling the list of books and the conversation she had with Calleo during their last meeting, “Your old *Gray’s Anatomy, Introduction to Biological Psychology*, and *Guidebook to Mechanisms in Organic Chemistry*.”

“You're welcome to keep my old *Gray's Anatomy*, as that copy in there is from my pre-med days at university,” her mother offered. “You can probably keep my bio-psych text as well, as that is so outdated with all the research that has happened over the past thirty years. It's good for the learning about the function and structure about nerves and neuroreceptors, but they have learned so much about neurotransmitters since then, the book is positively outdated. If you're that interested, I'll buy you the newly edited version. I'm sure I could get a professional discount through my book supplier. Why the interest, planning on going pre-med?” Wendy teased lightly.

“Not exactly,” Hermione admitted. “You've always said that one can never stop learning. I’m just catching up on some of the things I was always interested in.”

Mrs. Granger set down her tea and smiled a secret smile to herself. “Tell me. I've always wondered. If you were just a regular Muggle or we never sent you to Hogwarts, dismissing it all as a hoax, what do you think you would have studied in school? What would you have grown up to be?”

Hermione had often thought that very same question many times over, but her mother was the first to ever ask. Not even Ron or Harry ever asked her. She wondered briefly if Calleo would ask such a question. Would she ever spend enough time with him so that he could get around to asking her, or would she stop seeing him when the temptation or the guilt grew too great to bear?
“Probably something in the sciences, Mum. I suppose I would be a researcher, discovering or inventing something important. I mean, I know what Chemistry, Physics and Biology are all about, but considering I never really had those Muggle classes, I couldn't say exactly which branch of the sciences I would choose. I had a hard time choosing in the wizarding world, knowing exactly what all those classes for Charms, Transfiguration, Arithmancy and Potions entailed. I just know that I feel happiest when exploring the possibilities of something new, never thought of or approached ever before.”

“You remind me of your father at times,” Wendy mused aloud. “I wanted to go into dentistry because it was a good job and I could put to use all that pre-med I took. Your father looked at it as a way to solve a puzzle, how to do something well and help people. He could have easily become a doctor, but dentistry allowed him to work with his hands more than being a doctor, and relieved him of the emotional strain of being a surgeon.”

Hermione was feeling suddenly melancholy, wondering if she spent more time visiting her parents would she would learn more things about them, like her mother's recollection of her father's reasons behind his choice of his career.

“I’m sorry I don't come over to visit more often, Mum,” Hermione apologized, though there was no call for it.

Wendy placed a hand over her daughter's. “It's all right. I understand. You're busy with work, Ron has his games on the weekend. Ron has a large family and there are all these wizard family gatherings. As long as you pop by for Christmas and the chance for your father to fire up the grill now and again, we're fine with what time you can spare, dear.”

“Oh!” Hermione suddenly remembered Harry's party and barbecue coming up later that week. “Ron's sister, Ginny, is throwing a cowboys-and-Indians birthday party for her husband later this week. Do you have any books you bought in America that she could look through for last-minute ideas?”

“Sure,” she assured her daughter. “Let's go into the study to see what we can find. Besides, I think we'd better stop your father before he tries to teach Ron how to play Minesweeper on the computer. Or we'll never get Ron off the thing, if he's anything like me.”

Once Hermione and Ron had stepped out of their fireplace at home, they went their separate ways. Ron went to get ready for bed while Hermione headed for the kitchen, desperately hoping there would be something that needed her attention to keep her there until her husband was asleep and she could slip into bed quietly.
She placed the large stack of her parents’ books on the kitchen table, looking over the titles on the glossy spines. There was a lovely coffee table book with pictures of Monument Valley and other picturesque spots of the Southwest, including majestic and ancient saguaro cactus, wind-eroded arches and snow-capped mesas. The book of cowboy poetry seemed a contradiction unto itself, an idea that seemed out of her place in her mind. Shakespeare, Browning and Yeats wrote poetry, not men with names like Curley, Red and Wylie. It seemed a little silly and might not seem very helpful to Ginny, but she had brought it home for amusement. *The Encyclopaedia of Barbecue Across the U.S.A.* appeared to be a good book for additional dishes that Ginny might want to add to the menu.

After segregating the medical books from the ones she was going to lend to Ginny, Hermione made herself a nice cup of tea. Meditating on the day as she sipped her hot beverage, she retraced the day in her mind. Noting her mother's pained expression after she drove, Hermione realized just how far she had drifted from her Muggle roots. The differences between her two worlds was further pointed out when she strolled through the produce section, noting the availability of apples that wouldn't arrive in the Diagon Alley farmers' market for at least another couple months, or the grapefruit that wouldn't be available for sale until the winter months. Hermione noticed tonight how her husband was friendly with her parents, like he had always been, but Hermione and Ron's strained relationship seemed to leak into his interaction with them. He didn't seem quite as jovial with them as he had been in the past. She couldn't exactly criticize, as she was not her usual energetic and assured self. Every interaction with her husband led to her second guessing herself for his reaction, whether it was handing him a drink or conversing in front of her parents.

Noticing the time, she figured Ron was probably asleep by now. As she slipped into the bedroom and removed her clothing, she dropped it into the dirty laundry pile in the corner and heard the sound of her clothes hitting the bare floor. Wondering where the dirty clothes had gone, a quick peek in one of her drawers answered that question.

'Dobby.'

Hermione surmised the house-elf must have come over today at Ginny's prompting, and she silently thanked him. It was one less chore she would have to face. She would have to send over a brand new pair of socks for the elf, or at least buy him a new tie to go with the garish purple and orange striped tunic he seemed to favor.

Once in her nightgown, she slipped into bed and hoped she didn't wake Ron. Knowing what a long day she would have tomorrow, between dealing with Mr. Spawn during the day and her dance lessons with Calleo at night, she forced herself to push all thoughts from her mind and go to sleep.

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*She heard the scream of Hannah Abbot in the distance. Hermione hoped the Hufflepuff had come*
across a dead body and not a live Death Eater. Stopping for a moment to lean against the wall and catch her breath, she didn't hear any curses shouted from the direction of Hannah and prayed the other girl was all right.

Pushing herself from the wall, Hermione continued down the corridor toward the Great Hall, where she had been told to go to if the fighting ever reached inside the castle walls.

Rounding a corner, she stifled a scream. Dozens of bodies laid across her path. Slowly stepping over the corpses of Union soldiers and Indians covered in blood, and marred with curse blasts, gunshot wounds and arrows, she looked down to see Remus Lupin stare directly at her, his dead eyes gazing blankly. He was dressed as some sort of Indian shaman with a wolf headdress, leather fringed britches and soft sole moccasins. As she stepped over more bodies in various Old West costumes with the odd Death Eater robe scattered about, a hand came around her mouth and pulled her quickly into a side room.

Hermione was about to scream until she saw Calleo standing there in his usual Bauta mask and long-sleeved shirt. Looking about, she was not in an abandoned classroom, but Calleo's flat. She could see the London skyline outside his window. How she went from Hogwarts to her masked friend's flat made no sense, but she didn't question it, merely accepting it without question, though it was strange.

Calleo asked her if she brought the barley for the beer. Looking down at her feet, a bucket of barley had appeared out of nowhere. Without prompting, Hermione handed Calleo the barley, then reached into her pocket to give him a fistful of herbs. She figured it was for some tea he would brew for her. There was no sense of why things happened.

Once the barley and herbs had been dumped into a cauldron that sat in the middle of Calleo's bathtub, he grabbed Hermione and kissed her fiercely. Hermione didn't fight it, kissing him back with the same passion. How it was that she could kiss him with his mask still on, she didn't know. All she knew it that he tasted like wine, and his tongue felt unbelievably good in her mouth. Never had kissing felt so erotic and intense. Her body felt like it was floating, and somehow they were suddenly standing by his bed. Guiding her down onto the mattress, Calleo ground himself against Hermione, pressing himself against her through his layers of clothes. She could feel the hardness of his cock against her thigh joint. As their kissing continued, her clothes had disappeared without her noticing. Hermione wasn't sure if this was more discontinuity of her dream, or that Calleo had used a spell to remove their clothes. Either way, she loved the feel of his skin pressed against hers.

Feeling his cock near her entrance, Hermione could feel herself panting wildly, a throbbing ache growing between her legs so intense that it almost hurt. Calleo was poised above her body, seeking permission to enter her, rubbing the tip of his cock around and around the rim of her entrance, making the pulsing between her legs intensify. As he was about to thrust into her, a loud rushing noise seemed to invade the room.
Before she could wonder what the noise was, Hermione found herself being shaken awake by her husband. The rushing noise she instantly recognized as her own ragged breath. Her heart was hammering in her chest, and she was still panting. The ache between her legs seemed more intense now that she was awake.

“Hermione, wake up. It's just a bad dream.”

Disoriented, Hermione sat upright in bed. She could still feel the phantom sensation of Calleo's cock pressing between her lips. If she wasn't so unhinged, she would have sobbed over the fact that she had been denied completion in her dream.

Ron, sitting up, rubbed her back tentatively, thinking his wife was still shaken from her nightmare.

It was a nightmare that had turned into the most incredible sex dream. Everything felt so real. Reaching a tentative finger up under her nightgown and between her lips, she was shocked to find herself incredibly wet and her lips engorged.

“You okay, 'Mione?”

Turning her head, Hermione could barely see her husband illuminated by the faint city lights. In the dark, his features were indistinguishable.

A sudden thought came to her. Taking action, she turned over and straddled her husband and kissed him while she snaked one hand down to see if he was erect or at least semi-erect.

Ron gasped and sat there dumbstruck while his wife plundered his mouth. Eventually, his hands snaked around her waist before gliding up her body to squeeze her breasts.

Hermione hastily pushed Ron's pyjama bottoms down just far enough to release his cock, and she hitched up her nightgown. Grabbing her husband's cock, she brought it to her opening and rubbed it around just like Calleo had done in the dream. The ache that was beginning to subside in her lower belly flared back to life. As she continued kissing Ron, she let out a low moan in the back of her throat before she impaled herself on him.
Releasing his mouth, the aroused witch threw her head back and moaned once more. It wasn't big enough to fully satisfy the ache in her, but it was better than her own fingers at the moment. Pushing Ron back down to lie on the bed, she began to ride him as Ron started bucking up from underneath.

“Oh, 'Mione,”’ he sighed loudly.

“Shhhh.” She urged him to be quiet. As long as they were in almost complete darkness and Ron didn't speak, she could imagine it was Calleo beneath her instead.

Ron started moaning even louder, which began to chip away at the fantasy Hermione was immersed in. She had never been so turned on in all her life. She knew if she could just keep Ron from speaking and climaxing for a few minutes, she would actually have an orgasm with her husband inside of her for once.

“Shhhhh, just be quiet,” she said in between her moans.

Ron continued to moan, which began to ruin the illusion.

“Shhhhh, just be quiet this once, Ron. I'm almost there,” she whinged in a rising pitch, feeling the white heat begin to curl in her belly as she picked up the pace.

Ron ignored her request and started his usual keening grunts, signaling that he would soon reach climax.

“Just keep fucking quiet for once, Ron, and let me get there first,” she pleaded with a frustrated wail, as she rode his cock with desperation, her eyes shut tight.

Before she could reach climax, Ron pushed her off.

“What do you mean, 'just keep fucking quiet for once?’” he questioned angrily, now sitting up in the bed.

Hermione curled into a fetal ball on her elbows and knees, and let loose a frustrated feral scream
into the bedclothes. The one time she was certain she would finally climax, Ron had to ruin it with the running of his mouth and now shoving her off just before she could orgasm.

Jumping out of bed, her body coursing with hormones, energy, sexual tension and now anger, Hermione spat, “Just what did you not understand?!? I was fucking you, and I wanted you to keep quiet!” She paced the floor frantically, her body shaking, trying to find some way to contain the near orgasm.

“What is wrong with you!” Ron screamed back.

“What's wrong with me? I'm horny!” Hermione hollered back. “You woke me up from a sex dream that was un-fucking-believable, and I mounted you. What? Wives are not supposed to initiate sex? We're supposed to lie on our back and let men do everything to please themselves, but if a witch does anything, there's something wrong with her?”

“No! What I have a problem with is you telling me to shut the fuck up during sex!”

“Just because I don't want to hear 'HEE! HEE! HEE!' like some squeaky wheel that needs some grease does not mean there's anything wrong with me! It's distracting, and it was ruining the mood for me!” Hermione threw back venomously with a growl.

“And what? Telling me to shut up wasn't ruining the mood for me?!” he snarled back sarcastically, his tone equally acidic.

“Would it kill you to let me have an orgasm?!?” she asked, her voice rising in volume once more. “You've had so many orgasms where you've left me unsatisfied, I think it's only fair you don't get to finish for once!”

“You bitch!”

“Selfish bastard!”

Hermione grabbed her wand from the nightstand and stormed off to the kitchen, to keep herself from walking over to her husband and slapping him soundly across the face.
Inside the tiny kitchen, she paced, taking great strides. It was even more frustrating, because she could only take two strides before having to turn around and take two steps in the opposite direction, only to reach another wall. Hermione felt caged. If they lived in Hogsmeade or some nice suburb, she'd throw her cloak on over her nightgown, put on some shoes, and go for a nice long walk.

As it was, she didn't feel like wandering about Diagon Alley in nothing but a nightgown and cloak. Agitated and unnerved, she looked about the kitchen desperately for some idea of what to do. Noticing that the cooker had a few bits of charred, cooked-on food, Hermione went to the cupboard and grabbed a pail, a scrub brush and a bottle of Mrs. Scower's All-Purpose Kitchen & Bathroom Cleaning Solution Magical and Otherwise.

Filling the bucket with water and adding the cleaning solution to the water, Hermione began cleaning the cooker with agitated fervor. Once the top was clean, she started on the oven, getting on her hands and knees, scrubbing away every last fleck of burnt food until the inside was sparkling.

The exhausted witch sat on the floor panting, her muscles aching from the repetitive motion of scrubbing with a brush, like a student who had served an all-night detention with Snape cleaning cauldrons. When the memories of her dream came back – the thrill of Calleo rubbing himself against her, hovering above her and between her legs – energy she didn't know she had returned to her as if she had never cleaned the cooker at all. Desperate to find something else to do to get rid of this pent-up energy, she started washing the walls, overlooking the fact that she had recently spelled the walls and molding clean. When that was complete, Hermione started reorganizing the pots and pans, ignoring the lightening of the sky in the east.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 32 A/N: I originally finished this chapter about a week before the terrible bombings in London on July 7th, 2005. I decided to post it without removing the talk between Hermione and her mother, keeping it as I originally wrote it.

This is the last chapter that I post originally in 2005 before HBP came out. Going forward, I chose to ignore most of HBP and DH canon, so that makes this story AU. I am still keeping in this story canon up through OotP as I originally planned it.

“Torn Between Two Lovers”: written by Peter Yarrow and Phillip Jarrell
http://www.oldielyrics.com/lyrics/mary_macgregor/torn_between_two_lovers.html

Why Minesweeper and not Solitaire? Because Rowling has admitted she's a big Minesweeper addict and uses it for relaxation when she has writer's block, or is avoiding her obligation to get back to writing the next chapter.

If you would care to explore the world of cowboy poetry, here is an excellent site to start with: http://www.cowboypoetry.com/
I don't know if there is a book called “The Encyclopaedia of Barbecue Across the U.S.A”, but it seemed like a good title.
"De Oppresso Liber" (To Liberate The Oppressed)

Chapter Summary

Severus arrives at a symbiotic solution.

It was at this point, when I originally posted this chapter back in 2005, that HBP came out and my story became AU going forward.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-Three
"De Oppresso Liber" (To Liberate The Oppressed)

Disclaimer: So long as J.K. Rowling allows me to use her characters and concepts, I'll forgive her for writing what she wrote in HBP regarding Snape.

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Severus groaned as he awoke Monday morning. He rolled over in his bed, desperately ignoring another plaguing erection.

At least he was doing far better than the previous morning.

Sunday morning he had awakened to muscles aching in places he didn't know he could strain. His cock was so sore from a marathon session of sex with Miss Anne the night before; just the slight pressure of an impending erection hurt. He had fucked himself raw. What was worse was that he was still sleeping in bedclothes spotted with various bodily fluids and Marf was gone, fulfilling his mandatory one-day off a month. Severus was left to change his own sheets that morning and fix his own breakfast, noting that on this morning, one of the few mornings he would have utilized the house-elf to his full potential, the creature was gone.

It was after having a snifter of brandy Saturday night that Severus had removed the charmed sliding cucumber from Miss Anne's arse and replaced it with his own cock (with the courgette still in her cunt), and fucked her until he knew she wouldn't be sitting comfortably for a few days. After his orgasm, his erection returned just as quickly as before, though it took longer to reach orgasm with each subsequent ejaculation. By the time the male stamina potion began to wear off three
hours later, he had ejaculated no less than eight times, and the last couple of times it had felt like his balls were dry heaving. Near the end, Severus was filled with so much ennui towards Miss Anne, he did not bother to hide his yawns.

Marf had helped to dress the thoroughly exhausted Miss Anne and escort her out the door. Noting her bow-legged walk with some appeasement for his strenuous efforts, the gigolo collapsed into a deep sleep, ignoring the several wet spots on the bed.

Sunday, as he hobbled around his flat like an old man, he regretted having Marf buy the mangoes for chutney the day before at the farmers' market. The Potions master knew the fruit wouldn't last until next weekend when he would have the time and the energy to make the chutney and can it. There were stasis spells, but he preferred working with fresh fruit when canning. He barely finished canning the chutney and showering just before his Sunday night client arrived. Thankful that she rarely asked for a shag and was in no mood that night, Severus hoped he could get rid of his client quickly and collapse back into bed and get a good night's sleep.

As he dressed for work on Monday, Severus instructed the music box to play a selection of light classical music. He was amazed at the selection that Miss Brown had charmed into the box, including Mozart, Beethoven, the Beatles, and Jimi Hendrix. Most wizarding families, even the pure-blood ones, listened to music produced by what the community called Muggle-savants. These savants were Muggles with a talent that qualified them as partially magical, but unlike Muggle-born wizards they lacked any real powers, and were on par with Squibs in every other way.

In addition to music by the savants and the few musical groups the wizarding world produced and supported, Miss Brown had a large array of regular Muggle music as well. Severus had gone through most of the Big Band era and swing music, selecting songs appropriate for dancing that were not too quick for the lessons he had planned. The Muggle music of that era sounded very strange to him. Swing orchestras just didn't sound the same without the harpsichord and the psaltry that were usually part of the wizarding orchestras, but for the most part, it sounded very similar to the music he remembered his mother listening to on her own music box when he was a child.

Since he was running late, having slept in for some well-deserved rest, once he arrived at work he ordered one of the house-elves to fetch him some tea and breakfast. Just as breakfast appeared on a spare bit of empty desk, an owl alighted on the Potions master's windowsill.

Removing the burden from the owl's leg, Severus glanced at the handwriting and immediately recognized it as Albert Dobmeir's. Ignoring his hot breakfast of egg, sausages, grilled mushroom, porridge, a teetering stack of buttered toast, and a pot of blackberry preserves, Severus opened his colleague's letter, anxious to read Mr. Dobmeir's response to the letter he had sent off on Friday.
Dear Sebastian,

It was so good to hear from you. Unfortunately, I am not doing as well as you had hoped in your letter to me. Since our last correspondence, my wife has passed away. It was rather sudden. I still consider myself lucky that we had eighty-seven wonderful years together.

However, with her passing, there has been some additional misfortune. Some rather unscrupulous cousins on her father's side of the family have come out of the woodwork and are contesting what should have been a rather plain and simple will. Meanwhile, until the will is settled, I have been ordered by an unscrupulous arbitrator to give room and board to these leeching marauders who have whittled down what fortune my wife and I had created together. They are eating me out of house and home while plundering my vault.

I was planning on doing private research of a medical nature, using my accumulated fortune to live off of for at least a decade before going back into commercial work, but those plans have been dashed and I've been forced to take on an apprentice, Mr. Trevor Spawn. I took on this apprentice only when enough money had been shoved towards me that I could not refuse, considering my circumstances. It pains me to learn after the fact that Mr. Spawn's Potions N.E.W.T. scores are far less than I was promised by the boy's father. However, the only way out of this contract is to return all the money, and I am in no financial situation to do that. Therefore, I must hold true to my contractual promise and take the boy on.

If you are aware of any opportunities that may allow me to be released from this situation, that pay well, please keep me in mind and pass along my name.

Sincerest regards,

Albert Dobmeir
Potions Master, E.T.F.C.

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Severus frowned. He was sincerely sad to hear about Albert's wife. From the few times he had met Mrs. Dobmeir, when he still taught at Hogwarts, she was a rather gracious woman of good wit and intelligence. Of all the Potion masters and mistresses out there who still had any creative spark, Albert Dobmeir was one of the few. Knowing now that the man was in such dire straits, Severus immediately put his colleague at the top of a short list of possible candidates to replace him when
he left. At least when he left the country, he could be sure Miss Brown was in good hands with a Potions master of equal or better caliber to himself.

After nibbling on some toast, while contemplating a reply, an idea came to him. If Albert were to start working for Miss Brown once Severus had departed her employment and England, then there would be no need to encourage Hermione to stay in her mindless and lackluster job at the Department of Standards & Regulations.

Pulling out a fresh sheaf of parchment, Severus began writing his reply in the careful angular script he used to hide his signature spidery scrawl.

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Dear Albert,

My deepest sympathies regarding the loss of your wife. From your correspondences with me over the past few years, she seemed to be quite a lovely lady by your description.

In regards to your current situation, I may be of some assistance to you. I have some plans in the works in which I may be traveling abroad for an indefinite period of time, perhaps permanently. If all goes according to schedule, I will be leaving the employment of Miss Lavender Brown, president and founder of The Lovely Lavender Company, by the New Year. She will be in need of a new Potions master. Miss Brown has already started asking about recommendations for my replacement when I leave. I could think of no better hands I could leave her in than yours.

Coincidentally enough, I have an acquaintance who is friends with Mr. Spawn's co-worker, Mrs. Hermione Weasley, née Granger. He has remarked upon her knowledge of Potions and her academic aptitude. My acquaintance has also mentioned in passing Mrs. Weasley's desire to become a Potions mistress. If you are not adverse to having an extremely talented and intelligent apprentice instead of Mr. Spawn, I'm sure I could negotiate on your behalf an up front fee from Miss Brown to relieve you of your contractual obligation to instruct the boy.

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Severus paused to consider how to make it clear that he would recommend Albert on the basis that he take Hermione on as an apprentice, but without making it sound quite like extortion and more like an incentive to take her under his academic wing.
He set the first draft of the letter aside to mull over the wording, hoping the elder Potions master would jump at the chance. The only thing he needed to make sure this deal would go into motion was to reveal himself to Hermione, and to have her agree to help him and Draco escape. Before, he only had her noble sense of right and wrong, and a stubborn streak of sticking up for the down-trodden to rely upon. Now he had the promise of a Potions apprenticeship if she helped him.

There was a moment when he wondered if he would do this for Hermione if she wasn't of future use to him and he was doing this out of the kindness of his heart, or if this was a maneuver based on pure Slytherin tactics. Scoffing at the idea that the word “kindness” could be applied where his heart was concerned, he still couldn't shake the notion that he might have wanted Hermione to move onto better things regardless. He remembered all too well what it was like to be denied what should have been rightfully his with the Dark Arts position and his freedom.

This letter would need to be crafted carefully, and he did his best thinking when he set the subject aside and allowed it to mull over in the back of his mind for a while. Tucking into the rest of his breakfast, the idea of a happy Hermione – gone from under the thumb of her shrew of a boss, and from the mundane monotony of her current job – appeared more appealing by the minute, making him unconsciously smile to himself.

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Glancing at the reference book, Severus jotted down a few notes. He scrapped the original formula he was thinking of for the edible body paint that used moonstone to reflect moods. During his conversation with Hermione last Thursday, she had brought up some very good points. One of which was that maybe it wasn't such a good idea to have the body paint reflect moods, but rather change color with body heat.

Hermione mentioned that some women may not feel the same sort of passion or love towards their partner that their lover might expect. If a woman was sleeping with a man she felt indifferent or resentful towards, the body paint would reflect that and actually backfire in terms of enhancing the mood between two lovers. Instead, to have the edible body paint change colors with body heat would leave much to open interpretation.

Severus agreed that it was an aspect he had not considered, silently thankful that Hermione brought up such a valid point before he invested too much of his time and resources towards a dead end. But before he presented his employer with a new direction in which to direct their research, he wanted to make sure that the ingredients he had in mind could be applied topically, and be both edible and palatable.

Once he felt he had collected enough information, the Potions master strode into Miss Brown's office to discuss the new variation of the body paint, and give her an account of the effectiveness of the three-day version of the male enhancement potion.
Knocking on Lavender's door, he barely waited for her reply to enter before he swept into the room, feeling quite pleased with his progress over the course of the morning.

“Ah, Severus. I was just about to come and visit your office, but I figured I'd best leave you to your work,” the blond witch said with a bright smile. “Tell me how the two-day potion worked versus the three-day.”

“I have good news and bad news,” Severus began. Miss Brown looked hesitant about the impending report. “The good news is that the three-day potion is too potent; however, the two-day potion is not effective enough. I recommend we brew several different batches starting at fifty hours of brewing, and increasing each batch's simmering time by four hours until we reach seventy hours. Somewhere between forty-eight and seventy-two hours is the right amount of simmering time. However, if we do want to have a weaker version for those who just want that extra little... energy, then a forty-eight hour simmer time would be fine. But since we have discussed the sort of effectiveness we should be striving for, we will need to brew for at least fifty hours.”

Miss Brown looked a little disappointed, but shrugged her shoulders after a moment. “Oh, well, if that's what it takes, then I guess we must accept it. I'll be heading over to the Muggle Alliance today just before lunch, to see if there are any contacts in the brewery business who can connect us with a manufacturer of those large kettles you described.” Leaning forward, resting her arms on her desk, she asked somberly, “Before I go and invest a good deal of money into this, are you sure that this potion can simmer in such large vessels? Some potions cannot be doubled or tripled without affecting the results.”

“I assure you, Miss Brown, it will not be a problem.” Severus sat back in his chair and thought this would be the best time to bring up some other matters regarding sex potions. “If this potion sells, what sort of profits are we looking at?”

“Well, considering initial financial projections, once we have amortized the cost of the new kettles and estimated sales within the first year, I could safely say that we're looking at a fifty percent net profit,” Lavender said, looking rather pleased. “It's all due to your idea about the kettles. If it wasn't for that, the net profit would run around five percent. And with the seasonal price fluctuation in ingredients, it would have been pointless to manufacture.”

Severus nodded his head at the news, certain this would be the best time to make a simple demand. “Well, since the net profit ratio will be so high, I don't think it would be out of order to give Mrs. Weasley a five percent royalty cut on that potion then.”

“What?”
“You heard me. It was Mrs. Weasley who came up with the idea of the kettles, as she explained to me how Muggles make beer. I asked her in the vaguest terms about how to get around a logistical problem of simmering lots of potion from small cauldrons, while needing to free up the cauldrons for other potions,” the Potions master explained calmly.

“Her idea?” she said skeptically.

“Yes, and since I'm not about to relinquish any part of my forty percent royalty, and you have kindly informed me that the net profits will be so high, I'm sure you can part with a meager five percent on your end. What is better?” he asked rhetorically. “Fifty-five percent of a small fortune, or sixty percent of nothing?”

Lavender looked rather uneasy before she sat back in her chair, petulantly folding her arms across her chest. “So you're consulting with Hermione now?”

“Jealous of her?” Severus questioned with a smug cock of his brow.

Lavender glared at her employee before taking on the cool air of indifference. “So, is this one way you are dropping hints about your identity? Thinly veiled references to Potion making? Tell me, Severus, are you still wearing the head scarf and the full-face mask, or are you down to nothing but a tiny half-mask?”

Severus knew what Miss Brown was doing. She was trying to raise his ire and deflect from the question, making him unsettled so he would no longer remember to press her on giving Hermione a rightful cut to the profits. Why his employer seemed reluctant to give a witch living on the verge of poverty a small royalty fee puzzled him.

“Why are you so hesitant to give her what is due for her input?” he asked.

“She is not an employee of this company!” Lavender retorted.

“And if she were?”

“Then that would be a different matter,” the witch answered with a clipped tone. “But you are not
about to ask me to hire her on when you need her to continue working at the Department of S & R for your necessary ingredients.” There seemed to be a small spark of boastful glee in her eye; she had won the discussion.

Severus knew that he had the upper hand in this situation. “That is true, but once I am gone, her employment at the Ministry will no longer be required. As a matter of fact, I think it is in your best interest to hire Mrs. Weasley once I have left.”

“And why is that?” Lavender wearily asked, recognizing the malicious glint Severus had in his eye. She knew that there must be something more for him to hold over her head than just a request.

“Several reasons.” He whipped out a small scroll in which his initial notes on the edible body paint were scribbled on. “Here are the beginning notes on the edible body paint you are so eager to develop. Hermione has brought to my attention during our lengthy discussions that a body paint to reflect moods might not be such a good idea, considering some women loathe the men they sleep with.” Severus was pleased when Miss Brown's face fell with the knowledge that that particular little fact that had escaped her attention. “In addition, since you have entered the sex potions market based solely on the drop in the price in Ashwinder eggs, you owe Hermione something on that basis alone. It is from her hard and thorough work at the Ministry that prices have dropped, due to a new testing method she has created and implemented during her tenure at the department. And though the new method is not sanctioned or approved by the Ministry, I'm sure with all your powerful connections, you can rectify that and have it made policy to test Ashwinder eggs using Hermione's new and improved method in order to keep the price down.”

Severus had to suppress a smirk at the way Miss Brown's face slowly morphed into one of shock and wonder as he delivered his ultimatum.

“And lastly, I believe I have a candidate to replace me who would be keenly interested in working for you,” Severus announced with a smile, noting how Lavender leaned forward in her chair slightly, eager to hear who he would name. “He is one of the few Potions masters that I could say is as good or better than I in this subtle art. However, I will only send my letter about your need for a new Potions master on the condition that you allow him to have Hermione as his apprentice while he works here... and that she is to receive a salary.”

He couldn't be more pleased with the way he delivered his news to the witch. Miss Brown sat there dumbstruck, unable to blink or respond, merely sitting there with her mouth agape. It was a moment before her mouth snapped shut and the blond witch regained her composure.

“And what if she doesn't want to be someone's apprentice and work for me?” Lavender asked, still sounding a little flustered.
“And why wouldn’t she want to work in a situation in which she could become a Potions mistress, rising to the potential denied to her by the conspiracy of others? Are you aware of Calpurnia Fudge’s underhanded manipulations of Hermione’s career? That that woman has single-handedly been responsible for Hermione being denied an apprenticeship with almost all the Transfiguration, Charms and Potions masters and mistresses in Europe? Just as I have been unjustly denied my rightful place in the world as a Potions master under my own name due to that machinations of a few people, I will not allow Hermione to be denied the ability to reach her true potential based on the grudge of some vindictive witch who has poor taste in friends.”

Lavender's cheeks colored in embarrassment and turned her head away, unable to look at Severus. “Yes, I was aware of Calpurnia's grudge against Hermione. But I knew there was nothing I could do about it either. Besides, you needed her to stay in her job; therefore I did nothing about Hermione’s situation in order to help you.”

“Well you can agree to help Hermione once I am gone by allowing my recommended candidate to take her on as an apprentice, and paying her a salary that exceeds whatever pittance they pay her at the Ministry,” he demanded with imperial authority.

“And if she refuses to accept such an arrangement? I cannot force her to become someone's apprentice or work for me,” Lavender pointed out.

“Well she has the right to refuse, though I doubt she will.” Severus’ eyes narrowed slightly as he continued. “Why are you so reluctant to hire Mrs. Weasley?”

“You keep dropping hints about your work in Potions. I’ve thought on the matter and have since realized that perhaps Hermione will be angry, once she realized I set her up to spill her heart out to you, her old professor,” she explained. “If she feels I have made a fool of her, then she could make life unpleasant with a few owls to the right people. Your consulting work could be exposed to the Ministry.”

Severus hadn't thought of it that way, but doubted Hermione would storm off and condemn him when he had been nothing if not a patient friend to her. Still, this deception was getting rather convoluted, exacerbated by the fact he still had not revealed himself to her. The half-lies, or rather concealed truths, he had spun to Hermione during their evenings together were getting to the point where he had to be very careful. At some point, she would no doubt confront him and ask why she should believe anyone who has so consistently lied to her. It was the fact that he had never outright lied to her, but downplayed certain facts that would have revealed himself to her. Still, a witch angered and felt to be made a fool of was a dangerous person indeed. He had a number of clients over the years that came to him in a moment of spite out of revenge against a lover or husband. He could only imagine what Hermione would do if she felt betrayed.
He had never meant to deceive her, but rather to slowly allow herself to trust him. Hoping that the friendship that he and Hermione wove during their evenings together would temper her and guide her to this fact, he prayed she would not abandon him when he needed her the most.

“She would not do that.” Severus hoped he understood Hermione’s noble nature enough to be guessing correctly.

Lavender called for Wonkle to bring some tea, exclaiming that some was desperately needed.

“You still haven’t answered my question regarding a five percent royalty from the male enhancement potion going to Mrs. Weasley,” Severus prompted her to respond to his unanswered question.

“And how will I explain why I am giving her a big pile of money?” she asked plainly.

“When she learns my identity, she will of course put all the facts together and realize that I consult for you. She is a bright witch. You can just hold onto those royalties until I have revealed myself,” Severus instructed her.

“And just when do you plan on revealing yourself?”

Again with the question of, “When, when, when?” The raven-haired wizard didn't know. He knew he should have a planned timetable, but the reality was he didn't want to know. Perhaps the opportunity would present itself and he would pull his mask off some night; or somehow, someway, his mask would slip; or Hermione would put all the pieces together and know it was Severus Snape that she was dining or dancing with. It was most unlike him to be so unprepared and not have a fully formed strategy in place, but the more he saw of Hermione, the less he wanted his time to be crowded with ulterior agendas. Why does the scent of a rose captivate? To analyze and dissect the reasons took away the mystery and elusive charm of nature. Sure, there was a reason for his meetings with Hermione, but why ruin those evenings dwelling on her purposefulness to his escape while she was there?

“In time.” Severus saw Wonkle bring in the tea trolley, and felt no desire to stay and have tea with his boss. “So will you give her the five percent she is due?”

“Yes, all right,” Lavender reluctantly agreed.
Severus rose without excusing himself, and headed back to his office to begin redrafting his letter to Albert.

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Hermione glanced at the ticking clock. For most of the morning, despite her weariness of rising early at three, Hermione's feet moved in rhythm to the clock. Mentally going over the foxtrot, burning the physical memory of the motion into her muscles, she shuffled her feet a few millimeters at a time.

When she found her energy lagging and exhaustion setting in, Hermione remembered her dream and thought of Calleo holding her in his arms as they danced. Her energy and mind would spike with a fresh wave of enthusiasm that kept her going through the morning.

Just as she was about to stop for lunch, Harry appeared at the door. “Care to join me for lunch today?” he asked brightly, looking more like the boy she remembered than the somber man he had been as of late.

Hermione drew breath and was about to decline, but came upon the realization that if she was going to stay late at work, she wouldn't have much time to eat dinner at home. If she ate just before going to Calleo's, she might get a cramp in her side during her dance lessons, so she decided to eat her bagged lunch for dinner instead.

“I'd love to, Harry.” She accepted Harry's offer, thankful to find some reason to get out of the lab.

As they walked to lunch, Hermione mentioned she'd have to make lunch a quick one, since there was a lot of work to do. She regretted having to cut short her time with Harry, but if she was going to make her nine o'clock appointment with Calleo, Hermione knew she would have to leave work no later than eight in order to swing by home, clean up, and make it to the Red Ginseng.

Lunch was at a little Muggle fish and chips shop near the Ministry of Magic's Muggle phone booth entrance. Over a shared basket of chips and two large orders of battered and deep fried cod wrapped up in newspaper, Harry told Hermione about Ginny's work getting the house ready for the party on Friday, and his wife's thanks for Flooing over some books that morning. Though Harry's birthday was on Thursday, they decided to have the party on Friday so family and friends could sleep over in the tipis in the garden.

She and Harry parted ways in the atrium, the Auror ascending the staircase while Hermione descended towards the basement. Hermione was rather pleased with herself that she was able to get
back to work in less than a half an hour. Her little bout of pride for her punctuality was dashed by the sight of Madam Dushka standing outside the door of her lab and impatiently tapping her foot.

“Where have you been?” Hermione's superior snipped at her with agitation.

“I was at lunch. I was gone for less than half an hour,” Hermione replied defensively, her back going rigid and straight.

“Well, that doesn't matter! We just got an urgent owl from St. Mungo's. It seems there's been a major breakout of Swamp Troll Flu. The Potions lab there has already run out of their supply of walking irises and shrinking violets, and they need more. I know we just got a shipment of both in this morning. Have you tested them yet?” the short, dark-haired witch asked frantically.

“No, I was planning on testing them tomorrow, but I can do that now,” Hermione answered, pulling out her wand to unward the door to the lab.

“Have Trevor help you. Four hands are better than two,” Madam Dushka said.

Hermione did her best not to physically flinch at the suggestion. “Yes, ma'am. That is, if he's back from lunch yet,” she added hoping to redirect some of her boss' attitude on her slothful co-worker.

“Oh, well,” Madam Dushka said dismissively. “You'll just have to do it by yourself until he gets back.”

Unsure whether to be relieved that Mr. Spawn was not there to ruin the rushed testing of the urgently needed ingredients, or furious over the fact her superior was so forgiving of Mr. Spawn's indolent behavior, Hermione merely nodded in reply. This kept her mouth from spewing a sharp retort about Madam Dushka's obvious double standards.

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Knocking on the door, Severus finally let out his breath when Draco answered. The ex-Death Eater hated going back to his block of flats during the middle of the day, but Ginny and Draco had arranged to have lunch at the younger wizard's flat. Severus had accepted their invitation with no small amount of grumbling about the time of day.

Once inside, he tipped back the hood of this cloak and removed the outer garment.
“Hello, Severus. You're just in time. Dheef was just about to serve us lunch,” Ginny informed her friend.

A table set up in the middle of Draco's flat was graced with a small vase filled with a few stems of alstroemeria and celandine. Severus wasn't sure if the flowers on the table were selected because of their symbolic meaning, or if it was just by chance. An arrangement noting devotion, friendship, and joys to come seemed a bit coincidental to him. It seemed to intone hope. Maybe Draco was feeling hopeful, or perhaps Dheef just picked a few flowers to make the table look presentable for his master and guests.

Severus exchanged a brief hug with Ginny before Draco helped her with her seat. Both wizards waited until she was seated before taking their places.

Before the older wizard had time to unfold his linen napkin and place it across his lap, Ginny asked, “So, what is this I hear about dancing lessons with Hermione?”

His hand halted its movement before it finished laying the square of cloth. After pondering what Draco may or may not have told Ginny, Severus merely replied, “She is preparing herself for her anniversary dinner with your brother. Evidently, there is to be dancing where he is taking her. Hermione wished to know how to dance, so that she may be able to enjoy her evening with her husband.”

It was a polite and correct answer, but it came out sounding a bit short and petulant.

“Why did you not make mention of this at our last meeting?” Ginny asked in a very calm voice that was devoid of any accusations or impatience.

“Perhaps for the same reasons that you never mentioned why you said Hermione sounded just like me during her rant about her co-worker when you both went out to lunch last week,” Severus replied with the same calm that Ginny had shown, but with a hint of recrimination.

Ginny rolled her eyes in mild exasperation. “Well, honestly, Severus. The way she was going on, if I didn't know any better, I would have thought it was you on Polyjuice Potion.” Severus just glared at her. “I'm sorry for not making mention of it. It slipped my mind, as it didn't seem that important,” Ginny admitted contritely.
“Well, it seemed important enough to her that she made mention of it last Thursday,” Severus noted.

“And yet you made no mention of dance lessons because it slipped your mind?” the witch asked once more.

“You know now. What difference does it make between knowing last week and knowing now?” the raven-haired wizard bit out defensively, feeling as if he stood accused of something the pair would not dare name.

“None,” Ginny conceded.

Everyone began eating lunch in silence, the tension of unspoken words and restrained thoughts choking the air.

Half-way through his rosemary chicken breast, Severus set down his fork and knife, unnerved by the silence. “Since we are so keen on knowing everything Hermione does at my flat, I suppose I should inform you she is coming tonight for additional dance lessons,” the older wizard informed them sharply. Ginny and Draco looked at Severus and then to one another in surprise before Severus added, “She does not feel that three more visits would be enough to be adequately prepared for dancing in a public venue.”

Draco finally spoke. “Will dinner and conversation be included?”

“No. She has too many demands on her at work, and since Hermione is starting counseling sessions with her husband this week, she’ll be coming late.” Severus thought that maybe it was best that perhaps Draco did know Hermione was coming and would be about the corridors on Monday nights, to prevent any accidental crossing of paths. To have Hermione run into Draco while she was coming or going could prove to be most disastrous.

There was another long pause while everyone finished their entrées and salads.

As Ginny picked at her roll, she regarded Severus keenly. After clearing her throat, she asked, “Severus, what do you feel for Hermione?”

His hand momentarily clenched around his glass of water. Thankful that he did not have his full
hand strength, as it would have shattered otherwise, he relaxed his grip and lifted his eyes to regard his luncheon companions. Draco was reclining back in his chair looking impassive as ever, while Ginny wore a look of gentle concerned worry on her face.

“My feelings, if I have any, are not a matter for discussion,” he addressed them curtly.

“Severus,” the redhead witch began delicately, “we’ll be leaving the country. What happens to Hermione once we leave? If you get attached to her, she will most definitely get attached to you as well. She's not coming with us. Hermione has a husband and a life here. This is where her family is, both hers and mine.”

“I never said I wanted her to come with us, nor have I even considered it,” Severus snapped, his eyes flashing with hot indignation. The thought had never occurred to him that he should have Hermione join him in his exodus, but now that the idea had been presented, he didn't see much reason why he should not have the choice to present it to Hermione if he chose to do so. “But if I did, what would be so terrible about giving her the option? What does she have to look forward to if she were to stay? A life shackled to your brother who ignores and insults her, leaving her frustrated, resentful, and lonely? A job that will never allow her to fulfill her true potential, suffering at the whims of Calpurnia Fudge?”

Severus made no mention of the possible apprenticeship he might be able to offer Hermione, but it still remained just a thought and a plan. If it came right down to it, he could give Hermione an apprenticeship if she joined him abroad.

“Hermione is married to Ron and wants to make it work!” Ginny countered vehemently.

“Oh, yes,” Severus derisively drawled with a sneer. “And she came to me in order to save her marriage from the intellectual boredom Ronald Weasley inflicts on her. He hasn't touched her since he returned from his week away. And just where was your brother housed during his week away from his wife?”

“A friend's,” she replied.

“Ha!” Draco barked sardonically. “Ginny, let's face it. Any man who returns to his wife after being a week away and does not touch her must be getting sex from another source,” he enlightened his lover.
“You really think Ron could be cheating on Hermione?” Ginny asked, stunned that her brother would betray his friend and wife.

“If he’s not, then I’d say he either greatly needs the new male enhancement potion I’m working on,” Severus said dryly, “or those calluses on his hands are not just from Quidditch practice. However, after hearing from many of my clients and all the signs of their own husbands’ infidelities, I’d bet my impending freedom on it.”

Ginny sat there, astounded by Draco and Severus' analysis of Ron. “You really think so?” she asked meekly, looking shattered at this revelation.

Studying Ginny, Severus felt a small amount of pity for her. Her familial love had blinded her to her brother's obvious faults, and now the illusion of trust and respect she had for her brother was destroyed by the overwhelming facts. He didn't exactly envy Ginny's family, as Molly was a bit overbearing. Still, the support they had shown one another made him wish on a few occasions that he’d had some of that when growing up, instead of fending for himself, alone against his father.

“Ginny, what would be so terrible to allow Hermione this one small joy, even though she will stay?” the older man asked. “How is it that you can sit here, in love with another man, married to a man you never loved and yet pass judgment on a woman who seeks some small amount of companionship with me? Is it the idea that Hermione could be unfaithful to your brother that upsets you, or is it just the fact that it’s me that makes you oppose what Hermione could feel for me?”

Ducking her head down, Ginny buried her face in her napkin. Draco moved his hand over her back in small circles for comfort. After a few heaves of her shoulders, she lifted her tear-streaked face to Severus. “I don't have a problem with the idea that it's you, Severus. Never that. It's just that I always hoped Hermione had the marriage I never had. I wanted Draco and was denied, forced into a marriage with someone I didn't want. I always thought Hermione had the ideal marriage I was robbed of. Now in the past few weeks, I discover just how miserable she has been, she has started seeing you, and now Ron is cheating on her? I'm just a bit... stunned.”

“Living your life vicariously through others is no way to live, Ginny,” Draco said, still rubbing her back.

“I know,” she said between sniffles. Looking at Severus once more, the redhead asked, “Do you love her?”

Severus had never dared to think what he felt for Hermione could be love. He had never been in
love. He had no basis for comparison, no previous reference in his mind to recall and guide him. He answered her question with what he allowed his mind to conceive was what he was capable of. “There is a friendship. I can make no assumptions if there is anything more.”

Ginny smiled, her face brightening despite the red splotches on her face and errant tears. “Hermione needs more friends, especially now.” Rising from her seat, she walked towards the loo to freshen up her face. As she passed by Severus, Ginny stopped and leaned over and gave him a chaste kiss upon the forehead. She murmured, “Thank you,” against his skin before continuing on her way towards the bathroom.

Severus didn't know what to make of Ginny's gesture. It felt tender to have her bestow such an affectionate token upon him, though he would be reluctant to ever seek such a gesture. In some odd way, it felt as if he had her blessing to allow something more to blossom between himself and Hermione. He didn't need permission, but Ginny's small kiss reassured him in ways he could not name.

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Severus was wrapping up his Monday at the office, still feeling a little tired from his Saturday night with Miss Anne. He planned on going home and getting in a short nap to rejuvenate himself before Hermione showed up. Shuffling around a few scrolls, he heard a rap on his door.

“Enter.”

Miss Brown, looking a little ashen, entered and sat herself down.

Regarding the witch, Severus patiently waited for her to speak.

“I've done as I've promised. In my office you will find a Pensieve on my desk. It has all the answers to your questions about how and when I learned you were a Death Eater and spy,” she informed him, looking drawn and tired. Lavender rose from her seat, using her arms to push herself up.

Severus considered lending Miss Brown an arm for support to guide her to where she wished to go, but the last time he had showed her any kindness, she had bitten his head off.

“When you are done with it, just leave it. I'll retrieve it in the morning. Goodnight, Severus.” Her voice sounded hollow and lifeless.
Severus watched her go and stood there for several minutes. He then walked to the empty office and the stone bowl that sat on Miss Brown's desk, beckoning him to view its contents. Hesitating, he peered over the bowl and wondered what he might witness.

Touching his face to the swirling ephemeral substance, the Potions master felt himself pulled into the memory.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 33 A/N: Evil cliffie? Sure, why not. Haven't given you one of those for a while.

If you cannot deal with the topic of non-consensual sex, then skip chapter 34 and go straight to chapter 35. I will post both chapters 34 & 35 tomorrow at the same time so you can skip over chapter 34 if you wish. Chapter 34 is very short, just 1,330 words.

Nothing in chapter 34 is graphically depicted, but there is enough heavily implied to make the reading unpleasant for anyone who does not care to read strong hints about non-consensual sex. There is a very brief recap of chapter 34 at the beginning of chapter 35 for those who wish to skip the unpleasant parts.

A Muggle-savant is the wizarding community’s equivalent of an idiot savant. You may ask why Jimi Hendrix qualifies as a Muggle-savant? Because legend has it that he could take an out-of-tune guitar and, without tuning it, play it in-tune. That's genius, the Mozart of guitars.

Potions Master, E.T.F.C.: That stands for “Extremely Talented, First Class”. It is my marking of a Potions master of the first order in my fic.

B/n: Give Betz props y'all. She’s an awesome writer and has given me time to gather my life and thoughts into some understandable muck. For that I give her much thanks and snaps. And she writes when she has a husband and two kids who need her. Damn, but she’s good. ~ Siren
The wizard found himself among the dank stone-and-iron environs of the Rookwood estate dungeons. Knowing that this was just a memory did not calm the rush of nervous adrenaline.

Looking about, he knew he should feel cold, but did not sense any temperature. This was Miss Brown's memory. He still shivered. Spotting two huddled forms in the corner, he moved over to get a better look and immediately recognized Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil.

In torn robes, they crouched on the floor while clinging desperately to each other, each a life raft for the other. Their eyes were puffy and red from crying, while their faces looked gray from shock. He could not tell which one was whimpering, but it was so faint that it could have been mistaken for a mewling kitten in the distance.
This was a memory and he was helpless to do anything about it, as it was a past event, beyond his control to change. With trepidation, he knew what would be coming next, based on the brief description Miss Brown gave him a few weeks prior.

The iron-and-oak door behind him slammed open, the thunderous noise echoing through the small chamber. Spinning around, Severus saw Walden Macnair enter the cell, with a malicious gleam in his one good eye.

Severus instinctively felt his wand hand flex, though there were no hexes he could cast to stop what was about to happen.

The Death Eater loomed over the two quivering Gryffindors. “Which one shall I have first? Decisions, decisions, decisions,” he growled. “I've always liked dark meat,” he said lewdly.

Reaching down, he grabbed Parvati by her hair and hauled the petite witch up.

Lavender grabbed for Macnair, latching her arm around his leg. “Please,” she wailed. “No, please! Don't hurt us! What have we done to you? Please, we won't tell anyone it was you. Just please let us go! PLEASE!” the bedraggled blond witch begged desperately.

Macnair hauled his one free leg up and kicked Lavender in the face, causing her to reel back and sprawl awkwardly against the damp stone floor. “Don't worry, I'll leave something for you. You'll get yours next,” the Death Eater told Miss Brown with a lecherous smile that made Severus shiver in repulsion.

The Death Eater left, dragging Miss Patil behind by her hair. She kicked and screamed fruitlessly.

“NOOOOOooooo!” Lavender shrieked piteously, rising to her feet to rush the door that slammed shut in her face.

As the remaining Gryffindor sobbed weakly, Severus watched her slide to the floor along the door, her frightened face swelling up along one side where Macnair's boot had made contact.

Off in the distance, he heard a piercing shriek that he could only place as Miss Patil's. The shriek morphed into a constant stream of screaming, only ceasing with what he could only assume was the girl getting another lungful of air in which to scream some more.
Miss Brown sat on the floor, rocking herself back and forth, her eyes glassy and distant.

Severus heard the first of many curses cast. “Crucio!” He heard Macnair’s voice chanting it over and over again as his grunting and primal yelling continued. His voice did nothing to drown out the constant wail of Miss Patil, whose repertoire of screams was now interspersed with pleas to kill her.

Lavender rose and stood on her tiptoes, pressing her face against the small open barred window that was two-thirds up the height of the door.

“No,” Miss Brown kept mumbling over and over again, her hands gripping the bars of the tiny window. “Blaise?” Lavender said with shock and hope. “Blaise! It’s me... Lavender!” She began with a fresh wave of sobbing. “Please, please, help me. Help me please. I'll do anything. Just help me get out of here, please.”

Severus saw the younger memory of Zabini pause in front of the door. Through the tiny window, he saw the young Slytherin scan his eyes up and down the corridor to see if anyone was watching.

“Lavender,” Blaise breathed in a whisper through the window. “I'm sorry. I had no idea they would... I didn't know... I'm sorry,” he said hastily and was about to walk away.

“No, please don't leave me here,” Lavender began pleading forlornly. “I beg you. I was always nice to you. Please don't leave me like this, please, oh God, please don't leave. Help me, something, anything.”

Severus watched as Zabini fought with himself internally, a look of fear, reluctance and finally determination flitting across his face in quick succession.

“All right,” he agreed.

“Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you,” the quivering witch began chanting.

Zabini opened the door and grabbed her by the upper arm. “I'll get you outside the manor walls, then you can Apparate away. But if anyone asks, I'm taking you for a bit of pleasure before Macnair has his chance with you. So if you see anyone, I want you to fight me,” he instructed her
as he pressed his wand to her throat in case anyone rounded the corner and saw them.

“What about Parvati?” Lavender asked before he started dragging her along the corridor.

“There’s nothing we can do for her now, unless you want to die trying to save her,” Zabini warned her. “You want to die?” He stared at her for some sign that she would change her mind and do something heroically stupid.

Hanging her head, she shook it. “No.”

“Then let’s go before someone spots us.”

Severus followed Blaise and Lavender's trek through the dungeons, bypassing a few wandering Death Eaters, until they reached a door that led to a bank of shrubbery along the manor's foundation.

The Potions master watched as Blaise dragged Miss Brown behind a thick and obscuring bush.

“Can you Apparate? Do you need a Portkey?” Zabini asked hastily. Lavender sat on the cold, wet ground in shock. “Answer me! Do you need a Portkey, or can you Apparate?” Severus flinched as Blaise's hand made a sharp crack against Miss Brown's face.

Lavender began to wail incoherently once more. The Slytherin boy clamped his hand over her mouth before whispering with a frantic hiss, “Bloody hell! Keep it down. You want all the other Death Eaters to find you here? If they come running and find us...” He paused while he pulled a necklace with a pendant from around his neck and placed it over Lavender's head. “Use this. It'll take you back to the gates of Hogwarts. This was my one way out, but I guess you need this more than I do.”

The boy tapped the pendant twice with his wand. As the Portkey took Lavender away, the memory ended abruptly.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 34 A/N: If I ever write another chapter like this again, it will be too soon. I did
not care for writing it, and I found it a rather nauseating experience.
Chapter Summary

Severus experiences how Lavender learned he was a Death Eater and spy. Hermione is late for her Monday night dance lesson. Confessions, realization and memories abound.

Chapter Notes

A/N: For those of you who decided to skip chapter 34, I will provide a very brief recap of what you missed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Five
“Inter Spem et Metum” (Between Hope and Fear)

Disclaimer: You know it, I know it. If you don't, go to a previous chapter for a better disclaimer.

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Severus was still shaking with anger, disgust and nervous energy after witnessing the Pensieve memory of Parvati Patil being hauled off by Macnair to be raped and subjected to Crucio. The memory was even more horrific with her screams from a nearby room still ringing in his head. His visual recollection of Miss Brown, rocking herself on the floor of the dirty cell like a lost child, added to the desperation of the tragedy.

Blaise Zabini had helped Miss Brown escape by dragging her away from the cell to a spot just outside the Rookwood manor walls. There he placed a Portkey he had originally saved for himself that would take her to the gates of Hogwarts. When the Portkey was activated, that memory ended abruptly.

Still in the Pensieve, Severus now found himself standing at the bedside of an unconscious Miss Brown in the familiar surrounding of Hogwarts' infirmary. He was unsure if Miss Brown was conscious when she arrived via Portkey to the gates of Hogwarts, or if she had passed out on the trip there. No matter, this was where the memory continued.
He was startled slightly when Miss Brown suddenly gasped, practically leaping up from the bed in a panic, her eyes wide and wild with fear. Watching her, he saw her look around, shaking violently, and appearing pale enough to confirm his suspicions that the girl was in shock. The young Gryffindor was obviously disoriented, for instead of going back to bed, she began to wander aimlessly around the infirmary, her bare feet shuffling and stumbling along the cold flagstone floor. Clothed in a simple white cotton nightgown, her face still swollen and disfigured from Macnair's kick to her head, she walked by the rows of empty beds towards a curtained-off area Severus instantly recognized.

Looking about, he wondered where Poppy was. Normally, when patients so much as shifted or sat up in bed, the school nurse was by their bedside to demand they lie back down and get some rest. Here Miss Brown was, in shock, ambling about with no sign of Poppy anywhere.

The borderline catatonic girl walked up to the curtained-off area and entered, pushing aside the cloth barrier. Severus gasped as he looked down upon Miss Brown's memory of himself during her seventh year. His memory-self was stretched out on a bed in a coma, recovering from a slew of curses and slicing hexes Lucius had delivered to him immediately after the Dark Lord left at the end of a meeting, when Severus' back was turned. One hex had punctured his lung, and Severus had barely made it back to Hogwarts before almost drowning in his own blood.

Listening to the rasp of his own breath coming from the bed, Severus' hand unconsciously went to his chest and rubbed at the now faded scars that were still fresh on his chest in the Pensieve memory. Severus stared at his memory-self, dressed in only a pair of pyjama bottoms with one of the legs cut off above the knee, as he saw where a slicing hex had severed a couple of the tendons in his leg.

'Was I really that thin?'

Severus barely recognized himself. He had been painfully emaciated, his ribs clearly outlined by the bluish-white skin stretched taut across his frame. Recalling that time in his life, the wizard remembered that he had slept very little and eaten even less at the time. He’d had no appetite due in no small part to the Invigoration Draughts he was constantly taking to keep himself functioning and not collapsing out of exhaustion.

He was unable to recall the exact timeline of events from almost six years ago. Before Severus could wonder how many days he had been lying there, his attention was drawn to Miss Brown once more. Memory-Lavender gasped audibly, both hands coming up to her mouth to stifle a scream. With a tentative hand, she reached out and traced the Dark Mark on the prone man's arm.
Watching Miss Brown, he saw the progression of emotions flash across her face, each one clear and unmistakable: fear, denial, anger, and desperation.

Her eyes looked to the wand that lay on the bedside table: Severus' wand.

Unable to do anything, Severus observed Lavender as she picked up his wand, then looked down at the comatose man on the bed before her.

After taking a few steadying breaths, he heard her whisper, “Avada Kedavra.” The ex-Death Eater knew what she was doing. Lavender was getting used to the words coming across her lips, practicing so that when she cast the Unforgivable her tongue would not trip on the curse. She said it a few more times, getting a little louder with each repetition.

Severus knew it was a memory and that he was alive, but it couldn't stop the fear building in his gut that his memory-self was totally vulnerable, unaware that he was about to be exterminated. The Killing Curse needs hate, a deep and completely consuming hate, in order to make the curse effective. Seeing and knowing what the young witch had just gone through, he did not doubt Miss Brown had the power, will, and desire to cast it successfully.

Miss Brown raised her hand, wielding Severus' wand as she pointed it directly at his heart. Severus could not stop the uncontrollable shudder from stealing through him.

'And where the hell was Poppy when I needed her to stop this?!?'

Severus held his own breath, as Lavender took a deep breath of her own. In a voice laced with consuming fury, she began to cast the spell. “AVADA–”

The spell was stopped as Albus swept into the enclosure in a flurry of pale purple robes and quickly grabbed Lavender's hand, pointing the wand away from Severus' prone body and interrupting the fatal curse.

The former Potions professor began breathing again, relieved, but still shaken that he had come so close to death and not known it until now. Looking around, he found a chair conveniently by his bedside that he could sit in, in order to catch his breath while the rest of the memory played out.

Lavender collapsed against the Headmaster, crying hysterically.
“Shhhh, my child.” The elder wizard began stroking the witch's freshly washed hair.

“No!” she screamed defiantly. She wrenched herself from the Headmaster’s embrace and tried to grab at Severus’ wand held in Albus’ hand. “He deserves to die! He's one of them! How could he do this to us! It's his fault! He probably told them where to find us!” Lavender screamed, her face still swollen, her twisted visage making her look like some berserker.

Severus wondered how a man as old and frail as Albus was able to physically subdue Miss Brown by just holding on to her, but he did. Lavender clutched to him in desperation as she sobbed some more.

“He is no longer one of them, Miss Brown,” the Headmaster told the broken witch clinging to the voluminous folds of his robe. The young woman looked up at him in confusion, and he continued. “There is no way Professor Snape would ever endanger the life of a student. He left Voldemort's service almost twenty years ago, after he realized what a horrible mistake he had made as a young man. There is not a day that goes by that he doesn't regret that foolish choice he once made to follow that madman. He now works for the Order of the Phoenix as a spy. Professor Snape risks his life daily.”

“But he's one of them,” she whimpered, her voice thick with emotion.

“No, he is not, my child,” Dumbledore said calmly, his hand going back to stroking Lavender's hair. “Though he still bears Voldemort's mark, he fights for what is right and good.”

“Someone has to pay,” Miss Brown wailed angrily, in between her hitching breaths.

“Professor Snape has dealt with his own losses at the hands of Voldemort and his Death Eaters,” the Headmaster said, looking burdened with the whole weight of the world upon his sagging shoulders. “A far greater loss than what you and Miss Patil have suffered. I have just heard word that they are bringing Miss Patil up to the castle right now. She is alive. Those that Professor Snape has lost are not.”

Lavender lifted her head from the Headmaster's chest to regard the frail ex-Death Eater and his labored breathing, his chest rising and falling with regularity despite the rattling of his lungs.

“Did the Death Eaters do this to Professor Snape?” the young Gryffindor asked, eyes bloodshot,
still clutching to the elderly wizard's robes.

“Yes.”

“Did they discover that he is a spy?” Miss Brown queried, a look of concern cast at the unconscious wizard on the bed.

“No, and hopefully they never will,” Albus sighed with a glint of hope returning to his tired blue eyes. “It is my hope that Professor Snape will live to see the end of this war, and end this self-endured penance he inflicts upon himself in atonement for the loved ones he lost years ago. I just hope to live long enough to see the end of this war, and see him happy and free of this guilt that burdens his soul. He has, in some ways, become the son I lost during the war with Grindelwald. And what father doesn’t want to see his son happy?”

It was one thing for Severus’ hallucinations of Albus to say these exact same sentiments, it was another to witness them in Miss Brown’s memory. Before Severus could reflect on how close his recent memory of Albus’ words compared to that of the real Headmaster, a commotion just outside of the infirmary attracted his attention.

“That must be Madam Pomfrey and the Aurors with Miss Patil. Please, child. You need to go back to bed and rest,” Dumbledore said, trying to usher the overwrought witch back towards her bed. “If Madam Pomfrey sees you out of bed, she will be most displeased and lecture me on how I should not disturb her patients. Later on, the Aurors will want to talk with you about your ordeal.”

“No! Please. I can't tell them. They'll know I left Parvati to die. They'll think I was a coward, not worthy of being a Gryffindor. I don't think I could stand to have them look at me when they know what I've done!” Lavender pleaded.

“It is all right, Miss Brown,” Dumbledore consoled her. “Considering the circumstances you were in, you probably did all you could to help your friend. Even a seasoned Auror would probably have very little more they could do if they were in the same spot.”

The sound of footsteps got louder and echoed against the walls, amid the urgent whispers and hushed tones that Severus recognized as Madam Pomfrey, Kingsley Shacklebolt, Tonks, and Bill Weasley.

“Has she said anything since you found her?” the school nurse asked.
“None. She was found wearing torn robes, curled on her side just outside the gates of Hogwarts from where she and Miss Brown were reported to have disappeared a few days ago.” Though Severus could not see her, he knew Tonks was shaken by the telling quiver in her voice.

Kingsley’s deep baritone could not be mistaken for anyone else’s when he added, “Unfortunately, it was more than just a few bumps and scrapes. I fear the worst, Poppy.”

“Poor little lamb,” Poppy whispered reverently. “Place her here.”

“Where is Miss Brown?” Bill asked, his voice carrying over the cloth divider.

Miss Brown and the Headmaster emerged from Severus' closed-off private section.

Albus cleared his throat. “Miss Brown woke up and became disoriented. I was just escorting her back to her bed.”

“What are you doing up?” Madam Pomfrey clucked. “Back to bed! You need your rest,” she instructed Lavender, before lifting the blanket and turning her attentions back to the trembling lump of flesh that barely resembled Miss Patil.

Lavender gasped. Her friend looked like some neglected rag doll that had been denuded, dragged through the mud, and repeatedly trod upon. The only thing that told Severus that Miss Patil was indeed a living being was the pair of vacantly staring eyes that seemed to focus nowhere and everywhere at once.

A piercing scream issued forth from memory-Lavender's throat, like that of a Jobberknoll which had lived its whole life among banshees and was in the midst of its death throes.

The Pensieve memory ended abruptly when Miss Brown passed out.

Severus found himself suddenly back in the safe surroundings of Miss Brown's office. He quickly made his way to the loo, where he emptied the contents of his stomach into the toilet bowl.
Sitting on the floor next to the toilet, Severus reflected upon why he became so violently ill after viewing Miss Brown's Pensieve. He supposed his reaction could be attributed to many factors. First and foremost, he was not mentally prepared to deal with the gruesome events of Miss Patil's rape and torture, and the sight of her broken body. During his years as a spy, he was constantly on guard, aware that every time he went to a Death Eater meeting or along for an evening of thuggery, such horrors could be expected; but he could prepare his mind and dull his senses to such events. Having not had to face such visions for the past four years and being unprepared for what he saw in the Pensieve, he now found himself sick to his stomach.

There were other things that added to his physical reaction. The adrenaline was mostly to blame for his illness. The ex-Death Eater had learned just how close he had come to death at the hands of Miss Brown. It would have been quite ironic if Severus had died at the hands of a girl he had fought to protect from the Death Eaters with his work for the Order. As he reflected upon how Miss Brown had wielded his own wand with a cold and calculating fury, another shudder passed through his body.

Looking out the door of the loo to Miss Brown's office and at the clock on her mantle, he saw that it was almost eight o'clock. There was no way he would be able to eat anything for dinner before Hermione came to his flat. He doubted he could get anything stronger than tea into his stomach for the rest of the night.

Hauling himself up off the floor, he straightened his vestments. After rinsing out his mouth one last time to remove the taste of acid and vomit, the Potions master went to his office and grabbed his cloak.

Walking back home to his flat, Severus did his best to get control over his body. By the time he reached home, the tremors had stopped.

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Exhausted, Hermione finally finished testing the last of the shrinking violets. She would have been done a few hours earlier, but Mr. Spawn had come back into the lab and tripped over the box of walking irises, setting them loose about the lab. In an effort to keep them from ambling off to the farthest corners of the Ministry, Hermione and Mr. Spawn spent the next couple hours wrangling all the errant plants back into a makeshift corral. Silently, she was thankful that it wasn't a box of Wandering Jew, or the rest of the day would have been wasted crouching under desks and looking in filing cabinets.

After she finished Flooing the last box of ingredients off to St. Mungo's and a very grateful Potions mistress, Hermione braced her hands along her back and stretched. Feeling several lumbar vertebrae crack, the tired witch sighed and slumped back onto her stool.

Looking at the clock, Hermione swore. “Oh, bugger!”
It was three minutes to nine. Looking about the lab, Hermione tossed her hand in a dismissive wave, ignoring the equipment that needed cleaning and putting away.

“’I’ll do it in the morning,’” she promised herself, and bolted for the door.

Swinging by her office, she grabbed her cloak and began a hobbled run for the stairs. After being on her feet all day and up since the middle of the night scrubbing her kitchen clean, Hermione's muscles and knees were protesting against the exertion. Using the railing to help haul herself up the stairs, she finally reached the Apparition site in the main atrium, from which she would leave work.

Concentrating so that she would not splinch herself, Hermione Apparated to the alley where the Red Ginseng was located. Standing at the foot of the stairs, she contemplated if she had the energy to Apparate up four flights. Knowing she might be pushing her luck since she was pretty tired, Mrs. Weasley decided it would be safer if she walked.

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It was ten after nine, and Severus was pacing the floor.

’It's not like her to be late! Not like her at all.’ Severus, no matter how hard he tried to convince himself, was worried. A terrible thought sprung to mind. ’Oh, please, not another Death Eater gone amok!’

He heard her knock, and in relief rushed to the door.

Opening the door, he let out his breath seeing that she was all right. She didn't look all right exactly, but she did not look to be harmed in anyway.

“I am so sorry, Calleo,” Hermione apologized profusely, looking as tired as she felt.

Forgoing the formalities of bowing, Severus helped usher her into his flat and guided her to the settee. “I was getting worried. It's not like you to be late.”

“I am so very, very sorry,” Hermione said regretfully. “It's been a really long day, and then there was this emergency at St. Mungo's and they needed some ingredients right away for an outbreak of
Swamp Troll Flu. Then Trevor knocked over a box of walking irises and that ruined two whole hours while we rounded them up, and the shrinking violets needed testing. I only just finished Flooing over the last box at three minutes to nine, and then I saw the time and—”

“It's all right. You're here, and the day is over,” Severus interrupted her, tempted to take Hermione in his arms and soothe her. Instead, he patted her arm. He knew she had rushed over from work to see him. It pleased him that she was so eager to see him, or at least trying to be courteous and punctual.

Looking over her person, he noticed her frazzled looking hair with stray hairs escaping the sagging bun at the base of her neck. She smelled of earthy elements: soil, crushed flowers, and sweat.

“Oh,” she sighed. “Can I rest for a bit before we start?”

“You look rather tired.” Severus noted the bluish cast under her eyes.

“I should be, after waking up at three this morning,” Hermione commented offhandedly. Scrubbing her face with her hands, she tried to wipe away the weariness she felt.

“Why were you up so early?” ‘No wonder she looks so drained.’

“I had a rather... vivid dream,” the blushing witch admitted, ducking her head down, unable to look Calleo in the face.

Intrigued by the sudden change in her demeanor, Severus felt inclined to ask her more on the matter. “What sort of dream was it that it kept you up the rest of the night?”

Hermione was in mid-yawn when Calleo asked his question. “Oh, pardon me,” she said.

Calleo dismissed it with a slight wave of his hand as if it was nothing and she was forgiven.

“Well, it started out as a nightmare. I was back at Hogwarts. There were all these dead bodies strewn throughout the corridors. I was trying to make it back to the Great Hall.” Calleo nodded, encouraging her to go on. “Then suddenly, you grabbed me and hauled me into an empty
classroom, but it wasn't a classroom. It was your flat here,” Hermione said with a sweep of her arm to encompass the room.

Severus wanted to know if in her dream she had felt safe once in his flat, but held his tongue.

“There it started getting really strange. I had a bucket of barley or wheat... some sort of grain,” Hermione said, keeping her descriptions brief, her vision focused on the pattern of the rug in front of her. “We dumped it into a cauldron in your bathroom where you were brewing some beer, and then...” She trailed off too late, realizing she stopped just before the sexual part of the dream began.

Knowing she had left her sentence incomplete, the brunette witch hoped Calleo would not prompt her to complete the retelling of her dream. Then again, perhaps telling him what happened next might be a way of letting Calleo know she was very attracted to him, though she thought he had some idea by now. She figured that women probably threw themselves at him all the time, and Calleo was probably relieved that at least one woman wasn't trying to bed him. Hermione still couldn't repress her desire for him.

“Then what?” the raven-haired man said, indicating she should go on. The deepening color on her cheek could not be dismissed.

The woman swallowed nervously twice before she looked up to Calleo, embarrassment or shame making it difficult to regard him. She couldn't decide which of the two emotions it was. Her breath quickened, and Hermione found that familiar warmth in her lower abdomen blooming as her memory of Calleo above her, seeking permission to enter her, returned. “Then we were on your bed... making love.” Hermione closed her eyes and turned her head farther away from Calleo, dreading how he might react to her revelation. She hoped that she had not ruined her friendship with him with the disclosure of her subconscious thoughts. “Or just about to,” she added. “My husband woke me up, thinking I was having a nightmare.”

Severus felt a smile creep across his face. Hermione was dreaming of him, dreaming of him in such a way that made her blush. He pondered why she should blush over a simple dream, though it did sound rather intimate.

Hermione wanted to sink into the cushions and disappear. Calleo's silence confirmed her suspicions that he could never find her beautiful or be even remotely interested in her that way. Her appearance tonight, freshly coated in the grime of her daily work, only solidified the fact she was indeed a silly, foolish woman for even having told him about her dream, and that he could never sincerely want her.
“Why are you embarrassed?” he asked tenderly. Severus would have tipped her chin up to look at him, but from her body language, he thought it best to wait before touching her.

She wanted to Apparate from the spot. Calleo had obviously noticed her embarrassment. Hermione found her throat had refused to work. She tried to swallow, but found that to be an impossible task. Finally, she found her voice. “I'm sure you have women throwing themselves at you all the time. Here I am, a friend with no ulterior motive to bed you, and now I tell you I'm having erotic dreams about you. You're probably sick of women like me, and would love nothing more than to not have to put up with any more advances.”

There. She had said it. She admitted that she understood if Calleo wanted nothing more than friendship. It still didn't quell the fear that her confession may have ruined her amicable relationship with him.

Severus wanted to laugh at the absurdity. Hermione feared he would not want her, want her like a man wants a woman! 'Oh, that she only knew.' This man wanted her so completely, that his bones ached for need of her.

Reaching out his hand, he gently grabbed her hand. His touch startled Hermione, who now looked at him with a mix of hesitation and hope. “You fear that I would not want you?”

Hermione nodded meekly, feeling her limbs starting to shake from anticipation of what Calleo might say. “I treasure our friendship. I would not want to jeopardize it for anything.”

Something warm lit within Severus' chest with her words. It was like a fire had spread throughout his lungs, though he was still able to breathe. To quell the fear plainly written in her eyes, he said, “I have restrained myself, as you have made it quite clear from the beginning that you wanted conversation only.” He saw confusion, comprehension, then understanding dawn on Hermione's face. “I have been made to understand that you are trying to save your marriage. If you were to make advances to me, they would not be rebuffed. If I did not welcome such intentions, I would clearly make it known that I was not interested. The question is, do you want to make such advances, and would you want them returned?”

'Oh, God. He wants me.' Hermione found it even harder to breathe. She felt herself hyperventilating with the prospect of Calleo wanting her as well, welcoming her touch. There would be no more stolen touches without him knowing her intent behind each caress now. But the question remained in her mind. Could she deal with the guilt of being unfaithful to Ron? She felt dizzy and flushed.
Hermione didn't know if she could envision herself as one of those women. A woman who cheats on her husband. Mrs. Ronald Weasley always considered herself morally superior to many of her contemporaries, avoiding the pitfalls of what she thought was a result of poor moral constitutions and bad choices. She thought girls who dated more than one boy at a time were “loose” and emotionally shallow, unable to consider the feelings of the other boy, making him vie for her attentions by competing against another male. Now she was faced with the dilemma of taking the next step and diving into the messy and confusing option of becoming involved with two men at once, or denying herself a chance to feel more alive than she had ever felt in her whole life.

The song blaring out over the radio at her parents’ home came back in her mind and taunted her – “Torn between two lovers...” It was mockingly poignant, but accurate. She was married to Ron, but Calleo made her feel things she thought herself incapable of experiencing a few months ago. Hermione now felt appreciated, mature, sensuous, passionate, desirable, and enlivened. How cruel indeed that she did not meet Calleo before she had married Ron. If she had formed a friendship with him when she was younger, perhaps she would have reconsidered marrying Ron, instead of becoming a resentful wife who dreaded the thought of having children, for fear of being stuck with her current husband for the rest of her life. She could have discovered who she might have been with Calleo by her side.

“I... I... I...” Hermione’s head began to swim. Exhaustion was pushing her to the edge.

’Is this what Ginny went through? Married to Harry, but in love with Draco?’

It struck her body like a curse; her body briefly twitched. The thought that maybe she loved Calleo made her heart thump loudly. She was sure Calleo could hear it beating its way out of her chest. What frightened her even more was the thought that she might just be in love with Calleo, feeling more love and passion for him than her own husband. Instead of reveling in the joys of first recognizing love in all its wondrous glory, the moment was marred with guilt that she had fallen in love with one man while being married to another. Ginny was blameless by comparison. Ginny was in love with Draco, and had never stopped loving him when her family had coerced her into dating and then marrying Harry. Hermione had sought solace and comfort with another man to ease the pain of her own failing marriage, and had fallen for this other man in the process.

’I’m a wicked, wicked woman.’

Severus saw her body falter, and thought she might pitch over and fall off the couch. He pulled her into his arms as she started crying.

“I... I don't know what I want,” she sobbed openly, clinging to Calleo. There was no place else she wanted to be than where she was, but she felt ashamed for wanting it so badly. “I want you, but...” She stopped to gulp air as her breath hitched. “But I'm married. I'm so confused.”
Severus rocked her, his chest tightening as he watched her struggle with her moral bind. He knew Hermione always bent the rules when it suited her tastes and end goals, but something as absolute as cheating on a spouse was a line to cross with no recanting.

“Sheh,” he soothed her. “There's nothing that says we have to act on this now... or ever.” He did not want Hermione to flee for fear of breaking her marriage vows, never to return again to his flat. “Think on this,” he cooed. “If you decide that you cannot pursue this, I respect that.” Hermione lifted her head from his chest to regard him for a moment before setting her head back down against his chest. “However,” he said with solemnity, “if you do wish to take things further, I will not think less of you. I value our friendship as well. I do not want to coerce you into anything you will later regret.”

Hermione listened to Calleo's words of how any future course of action would be guided by her initiation. As her head rested against his chest, she listened to his heart beat, calmed by its steady rhythm. Calleo's assurances of his friendship, no matter what, chased away her fear that she would drive him away, disgusted with her yearning for him.

Her body was beyond drained. All the energy spent that day, plus lack of sleep, and the emotional roller coaster she just finished riding with the physical expenditure of crying and shaking, Hermione could barely hold on to consciousness. The warmth and security of Calleo's arms about her and the gentle stroking of her back, compounded with the lulling qualities of his heart beating in his chest, drove her to the sandy shores of sleep. Rest. The bliss of escape, lack of thought, and awareness of her tired limbs – they all dragged her deeper into those warm and calming gravid waters. Like a stone, she sank.

Deep and steady breaths told Severus that she had drifted off to sleep. There would be no dance lesson tonight, but it didn't matter. He was in no mood for dancing after the trying experience of Miss Brown's Pensieve. The wizard felt rather tired himself. The weight of Hermione against his chest and her warm body curling against him felt wonderful... natural.

He reclined back on the settee, feeling Hermione shift and settle against him once more, her head still resting on his chest. Fighting a yawn, he thought it wouldn't be such a bad idea to rest his eyes while Hermione got a little rest, before he woke her to go home for the night.

Sleep took Severus quickly.

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“Severus, let me go!” she squirmed against him trying to get free. “I mean it, I have to go to the loo!”
“But you just went,” the young man teased, using the one hand not restraining his wife to push his lank hair out of his face.

“You know how it is,” she insisted, grabbing at his hand firmly clamped around her waist.

“No, I don't. Men can't get pregnant.”

“Urgh! Let me go!” Gabrielle made a valiant effort to pry free his hand that was securely wrapped around her waist. “If you don't, I swear I'll wet the bed and make you clean it up.”

“Fine,” the raven-haired man acquiesced, releasing his hand and flopping back on the bed with a mock pout. “Leave your husband, go take care of your bodily needs while I'm left here all alone in this bed with no wife!”

The witch glanced back over her shoulder at Severus, who laid sprawled on the bed in just his pyjama bottoms. “I'll return to you. I promise,” she said, tossing back her long, light chestnut hair.

“You'd better,” he growled playfully.

Reclining back, he watched his wife walk to the bathroom. Severus wondered how long it would be before he could see the swell of his wife’s belly carrying his child. He didn't particularly want children, but being married, he knew he was expected to produce a child, preferably a male heir. They had not been trying to have a child, but neither of them had tried to prevent conception. It was only a matter of time before they had children anyway, so they had both decided to let nature take her course.

All in all, Severus could not exactly complain about his circumstances anymore. Of course he was reluctant to be forced into an arranged marriage, and at the beginning he and Gabrielle had resented each other for the predicament they were forced into, saddled with each other “until death do they part.” But being married to a Ravenclaw meant that she could see the logic of a situation when he was too stubborn to face it. Realizing that they would have to face each other every day for the rest of their lives, they agreed to try and not be hostile towards each other. If they couldn't be in love, then at least they could be friends.

Once that had been agreed upon, the sex was definitely better. Instead of having a witch lying on her back while suffering through her wifely duty, she began instructing him on how to pleasure her.
Having a willing and active partner in bed was much more satisfying than doing all the work with a woman glaring at him, asking when he would be done.

Severus didn’t want to admit it, but he was starting to think of her as more than just a friend. Her company was becoming more than pleasant; it was becoming necessary to keep him in a good mood. It certainly helped his attitude that, after a long day working for a Potions master like Reginald Chuff, he had a wife who would rub away the aches in his back and remind him that he had less than a year left to his apprenticeship.

“Where are you, woman? What is taking so long?” Severus called out.

The young wizard rose from the bed and walked over to the bathroom. Pushing the door open, he froze.

Severus was no longer standing in his bedroom, but in the middle of a field. Clothed in long black robes and a silvery mask, he immediately fell to his knees before the Dark Lord. The fabric of his robes and trousers were immediately soaked through to the skin, as he knelt on the icy wet and spongy floor of the mossy moor.

He didn’t dare glance up until he was instructed to. The young Death Eater knew what he saw before he fell in prostration before his master.

Gabrielle lay on the chilly damp ground. She was bound, her eyes wide with fright, her blouse inching up over her slightly swollen midsection.

“Choose!” the Dark Lord commanded.

Staring at the ground, Severus opened his mouth, but could not find his voice. He tried to speak, but fear paralyzed his mind. His wife and impending child – or his own life. Self-preservation is a very strong instinct. Facing his own death at the youthful age of twenty was not something Severus had thought he would have to face. All men in their green and vibrant years believe themselves immortal, and Severus was no different. Now faced with the prospect that he would no longer draw breath or have thought, he could not offer himself up in their place, his life as payment for his wife’s activities.

“Choose, Severus, or I will let Lucius choose for you,” his master hissed with malicious glee.
He could not breathe to give his response. Something was pressing down on his chest, preventing him from gaining breath in order to respond. The fear-struck Death Eater tried to breathe so that he might beg for his wife’s and child’s lives, while hopefully finding some way to spare his own, but the heaviness in his chest prevented that. He was suffocating under his mask, and under the pressure to choose between cowardice and the desire to live – or what those idiot Gryffindors called “noble self-sacrifice.”

Severus gasped. “Gabrielle.”

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Hermione felt the warm body beneath her shift. It felt so good to close her eyes, but then she heard the labored breathing in the chest beneath her head.

Once her eyes opened, she realized that she had fallen asleep atop Calleo. Unsure if she was crushing him with her weight or if he was having a nightmare, the drowsy witch sat up straight and heard him take a deep breath.

“Gabrielle.” He said it in a half-panicked sigh.

“Calleo?” She gently stroked his arm, and he woke with a start, falling off the settee.

Severus woke to the feeling of disorientation. He was still wearing a mask that completely covered his face; it was stiflingly hot and he felt he couldn't breathe. Looking about in confusion, the ex-Death Eater tried to discern where he was. He almost ripped his mask off before he heard her voice.

“Calleo? It's okay. It was just a dream,” Hermione assured him, descending from the settee to stroke his arm, as he sat sprawled gracelessly across the floor.

“Excuse me,” Severus said a bit curtly, before rising and going to the bathroom in haste.

Once the door was shut, Severus ripped off his mask. His chest heaved as he braced his hands against the tile counter, trying to regain his breath. This was the second time today he had needed to run to the loo to collect himself. Too many painful memories for one day, much less a lifetime.

It had been years since Severus had dreamed of his wife.
Severus knew exactly why he had dreamt of her. Between a brief moment hoping that Hermione was not caught in another Death Eater attack, falling asleep with her in his arms, and his own growing attachment with her, it was only natural that memories of Gabrielle would resurface so long after he had repressed them. It did not help matters that when he awoke, he still had on his Bauta mask, adding to the confusion between his dream world and reality. It had felt as if he was still wearing his old Death Eater mask.

Looking at his Casanova mask, he strongly debated whether to emerge from the bathroom sans mask, or to put it back on and continue this charade. Hermione was not falling for Severus Snape; she was falling for someone he pretended to be. Was it all an act? Not entirely. Granted, he had needed to make himself be patient and “understanding” at the beginning, but he no longer had to try. It was as if this long-suppressed person of the man he could have been was being drawn out with each of Hermione's visits.

He decided he could no longer delay his own unmasking.

At their next meeting, Hermione would be wearing a blindfold. This would provide prime opportunities to reveal himself further. He vowed to wear a half-mask at their following meeting on Monday. If she did not recognize him as his true self, Hermione would be in complete denial, or she suddenly would have become completely thick in the head. Of course, not noticing all the similarities between his gigolo persona and that of Severus Snape told him that she was probably already in denial.

Turning on the taps, he splashed some water on his face to remove the sultry, sticky feeling still clinging to him. Feeling a little refreshed, but still no less unsettled, he put his mask back on and returned to the living area.

Hermione sat patiently on the settee waiting for him. She rose to greet him when he returned. “Are you all right?” she asked, looking very concerned. It touched him.

“I'm sorry to have left you so abruptly,” he apologized, his voice still a little stilted.

“I understand,” Hermione replied warmly, placing her hand on his forearm. “I always find myself a little disconcerted when waking up from the middle of a dream.” Her hand rubbed back and forth until it reached his upper arm. It was a surprisingly intimate touch that he found calming. “Do you want to talk about it?”
“You wish to listen to my troubles?” Severus asked, having never been offered comfort by a woman in his days as a gigolo.

“That’s what friends are for,” she answered lightly, before moving away to sit back down.

He felt a smile tug at the corner of his mouth for her kindness. “I appreciate the offer, but not this time.”

Hermione watched him stand stock still. He could have been a statue for the lack of movement of his body. With the exception of the imperceptible rise and fall of his chest, he was as still as midnight.

She wanted to ask him who Gabrielle was, but held her tongue. Aware of how her curiosity had ruined several moments between friends on other occasions in her life, she decided to not ask Calleo about the name he had called out in his sleep. Perhaps she would never ask.

To fill the silence, Hermione looked at the clock. “It’s getting late. I suppose we won’t get any dance lessons in tonight.” It almost sounded as if it were an apology.

“No. But I suppose it was for the best. You look refreshed. I think you were just too tired,” Severus rationalized.

“I’m sorry to have wasted your time, coming here tonight,” the penitent witch said.

Severus moved to the couch to sit down next to her. “It was not a waste of time.” Extending a hand out, he trailed a finger along the line of her jaw. “Time spent with you is never a waste.”

Hermione closed her eyes and suppressed a shiver. His voice was low and rumbling, like candy so sweet that it caused one’s teeth to ache. The simple touch of Calleo’s finger tempted her to become foolish and start suckling on his finger again. But if she started doing that, where would it end?

“We still have three more weeks. That’s six more meetings,” he reminded Hermione.

‘Six more meetings? How will I be able to resist? I can’t think on this now,’ Hermione decided,
knowing she would have to meditate on all she had learned tonight.

Severus rose and extended his hand to help Hermione up from the settee. Escorting her to the door, he was surprised when she embraced him in a brief hug.

“Thank you,” she breathed. She inhaled Calleo's scent one last time. It would have to sustain her until she could see him on Thursday night.

“For what?” He wrapped his arms about her, resisting the urge to bury his face in her curls.

“For being patient. For being understanding,” Mrs. Weasley replied. Before she released Calleo, she added, “For being my friend.”

“You're welcome.”

As she left his arms, she already missed his warmth, even as the heat of his body still lingered on her skin. Hermione could still feel the phantom sensation of his voice rumbling through his chest against her cheek.

Severus opened the door and watched as she hesitated at the threshold.

Turning to look at him one last time, she whispered, “Good night.”

“Good night, Hermione,” he responded in kind.

Ron was already home when Hermione opened the door.

“Where were you?” he asked, a hint of worry in his voice.

“I had a late night at work.” Deciding to add a little truth to her deception, Hermione amended her statement with: “But fell asleep at my desk just as I was on my way home.”
“They're working you too hard, Hermione,” Ron commented. “You should find another job.”

The preoccupied witch merely nodded her head before going to the bedroom. As much as she wanted to think about what happened at Calleo's, Mrs. Weasley was too exhausted to even keep her mind focused on the idea.

She quickly disrobed and climbed into bed, not caring when Ron joined her.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Ginny showed up at her usual time. And, as was becoming the habit, Hermione shooed Mr. Spawn out of her lab and locked it.

As the two friends sat down to lunch amid the many patrons of the Three Broomsticks, Hermione let out a troubled sigh upon remembering the previous night.

“So tell me how your first counseling went last night,” Ginny prompted.

Hermione groaned and hid her face under her hand. “It was not pleasant.” Lifting her face up with a look of embarrassment and disgust, the older witch confessed, “Mr. Hoover has a new policy now, thanks to us. All couples are to relinquish their wands at the beginning of session.”

Ginny's mouth dropped in confusion and surprise before Hermione clarified. “We hexed each other.”

“You didn't!” Ginny hoarsely refuted in disbelief.

“We did,” Mrs. Weasley mumbled morosely.

“Merlin! Whatever brought it to that?” Ginny asked, still looking appalled.

“It descended into name-calling rather quickly when James started the session with asking why we were in counseling. It got very nasty. I think I just lost it when Ron called me a royal cunt with as much warmth as an iceberg. Ron didn't care for my Spider-Bogey Hex any more than I cared for the Medusa Jinx he laid on me.”

Mrs. Potter just sat there with her mouth hanging open, aghast.
Hermione was about to continue her tale, but was interrupted when Madam Rosmerta swung by their table to take their order.

“My goodness. It's nice to see here you again so soon, Hermione.” Rosmerta looked to Ginny. “And it's good to see you too, Ginny. It's been a while.” Turning her attention back to the brunette witch, she said, “Sorry to run off on you like that the other night, but some punters in the corner were starting to burn effigies of the entire Falmouth Falcon's Quidditch team in the corner. Lucky I got to it in time, or we would have had a harder time getting the fire under control. What will it be today, ladies?”

“The onion soup, please,” Ginny answered.

Hermione gave her order. “The leek casserole, please, with a side of Scotch egg.”

“And two butterbeers,” Ginny added at the last minute before Madam Rosmerta swirled away in a swish of her ample peasant skirts.

Glancing towards the corner, Hermione caught sight of the faint scorch marks along the rafters. Shaking her head, she turned her attention back to the redhead who seemed lost in thought.

“How have your sessions been going, Ginny?”

With a little shake of her, Ginny muttered, “As good as it can be, I guess. We'll be skipping a session this week for Harry’s birthday, as nobody wants to spend their birthday rehashing unpleasant memories.”

Hermione realized that Ginny's marriage to Harry was no more salvageable than her own. She could now empathize with Ginny's desire to continue seeing Malfoy, although she did have trouble thinking of Malfoy as the attentive lover and friend. Remembering the look of tender longing he’d had for Ginny when they had parted that afternoon when Mrs. Weasley saw them together, Hermione realized that no matter how hard she would try, there was no way she could force Ginny to love Harry in the way that a wife should, any more than she could love Ron.

There were no words of encouragement for Ginny that it would get better, or that they were trying. Hermione's thoughts for the rest of her lunch were dominated by the resignation and bitterness that comes when realizing that Fate is cruel.
A/N: And you guys thought Madam Rosmerta was nervous, as if she knew something.

There really is a plant called “walking iris”. For more information on the plant, you can visit: http://www.emilycompost.com/walking_iris.htm I have a lovely clump in my backyard in a deep royal purple. Why do they call them walking irises? Because at the top of the stem where the flowers bloom, areal roots will grow. In time, the stem will bend, weighted down by the seed pods; and eventually touch the ground, the roots growing in a new location nearby. In essence, the plant “walks” by growing in a new spot where it can reach. I've also heard this referred to as “waltzing,” though I cannot find any garden dictionary using that term.

If you are not familiar with the term “wandering Jew”, here is a picture of this common houseplant.
http://www.desert-tropicals.com/Plants/Commelinaceae/Zebrina_pendula.html
Entering his office Thursday morning, Severus saw that owl post had already arrived. With anticipation, he went through the short stack of letters until he came upon the one he was hoping to find.

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Dear Sebastian,

*I was most pleased to find such a quick response to my owl. I would be most agreeable to taking on Mrs. Weasley as an apprentice based on the conditions you described. I remember her application letter to me from years ago and would have gladly taken her on, but as I was planning on doing private research, and had just finished training an apprentice who dragged out his apprenticeship with procrastination and sloth, I was hesitant to take another one on, even with Mrs. Weasley's outstanding academic record.*

*To discover that she is still interested in an apprenticeship after so many years out of school*
surprised me, but your recommendation of her has removed any doubts I may have had. In response to your comments about Calpurnia Fudge, I was approached by her years ago with the threat to not take the witch on as well. However, I have disregarded her warnings, since I do not dabble in Ministry grants, and I find the threats of a public official's wife who will no longer have influence once her husband is out of office pointless.

In answer to your other question, Mr. Spawn paid me four thousand Galleons to take the younger Spawn on as an apprentice. I believe that since the boy's apprenticeship is a ways away, I can recommend a less scrupulous Potions master who is willing to turn a blind eye to the wizard's incompetencies so that the boy may still receive an advanced education in accordance with his father's wishes. As I have spent a thousand so far in maintaining my household and paying my lawyers' exorbitant fees, I will need an upfront fee of fifteen hundred in order to return the full four thousand and sustain me until Miss Brown can start me on a regular salary. I am willing to negotiate a lower salary as royalties begin rolling in, but in the meantime, I need as much money possible to grease the arbitrator's palm in order to release me from these lampreys that I refuse to recognize as family.

I am excited to learn of your plans to go abroad, and I am rather anxious to begin working for Miss Brown, if she were to hire me. If there is anything that I can do in order to help you hasten your arrangements, please do not hesitate to ask me for anything. It is not that I wish to shove you out the door, but that I am eager to find a way out of this situation that I am placed in.

Remember, I would be more than happy to fulfill any request, no matter how small, to help you.

Sincerest regards,

Albert Dobmeir

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'Anything to help? How about a cauldron full of Polyjuice potion,' Severus thought wryly. Of course he couldn't come right out and ask for such a request, though it was simple. It was too suspicious, and with the Ministry regulations on specific ingredients and Polyjuice potion, he did not want to put Dobmeir on the spot. Though, knowing the elder Potions master, he most probably had those ingredients in his private stores.

Severus' plan was in motion, and there was no need to alter the scheme. However, if Hermione did balk when it came time for her help, Severus had a possible back-up plan with Dobmeir.
The Potions master went to Miss Brown's office to discuss the latest developments with Dobmeir's letter. When he knocked on the door, he found she was not there, and headed to the lab.

Lovely Lavender’s lab was bright and spacious, with large windows overlooking the London skyline and ample sunlight spilling across the room. Here, he found his employer bottling the latest test cauldron full of the male enhancement potion. It was the batch that had simmered for fifty-eight hours.

Waiting until she finished, the tall wizard cleared his throat.

Miss Brown glanced over her shoulder at him. “Yes?” she asked, her voice flat.

Since Severus' trip into the Pensieve, Lavender had been withdrawn and less than sociable. As much as her convivial attitude could be grating to the wizard's nerves, it was one of the constants in the world in which anchored him, much like Dumbledore's twinkling eyes and insatiable cravings for sweets had.

“I have news on my replacement,” he announced formally.

A weak smile graced the withdrawn witch's face. “That's good to hear.” She turned back to stare down into the empty cauldron.

He could have walked away and let Miss Brown wallow in her self-pity, but Severus didn't. Instead, he walked over to Miss Brown and stood beside her.

“There was nothing that you could have done. No wand, Apparition wards up. Consider yourself lucky that you are alive and were left relatively untouched. It could have been worse... much worse,” the ex-Death Eater told her, a touch of compassion in his voice. He knew what it was like to be in a position of powerlessness, yet regretting every action and inaction afterwards. Today was not the day to address the fact Miss Brown had almost killed him as well, though he would have completed the curse if their positions had been reversed.

“It still doesn't change the fact that Parvati was raped and cursed, and sits in St. Mungo's like a vegetable,” she plainly replied.
“No, it doesn’t. But it doesn’t help if you continue to stand here crucifying yourself for the fact that you were the one to survive and she barely did.” It seemed rather hypocritical of himself that he should lecture Miss Brown on moving on, and getting past regret and guilt, but Severus figured it was his own dog-eared guilt and he’d cling on to it until he was done with it.

“You have news for me about a Potions master who will take over for you?” Lavender asked wearily.

Severus respected the fact that she had changed the subject, and decided not to press the issue. Albus rarely let a discussion end until the elder wizard was satisfied. The Potions master would do what the Headmaster did not do by letting the topic end.

“Yes, however, there is a small matter of money involved,” Severus began, hoping Miss Brown would part with the money, so that all parties would benefit.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Hermione found it hard to concentrate on the pickled cockatrice gizzards in front of her. She almost cut her hand twice, not paying attention to the knife, nor to how she was wielding it. The witch didn't need another scar on her left hand, one was plenty.

Her thoughts drifted to the night ahead with Calleo. He had told her that she would be the one to initiate any possible intimacy between them. Part of her was thrilled at the prospect that someone she was so strongly attracted to was equally interested, but then – remembering he was a gigolo – she subverted those heady thoughts. She wondered how many women he had slept with. Hermione knew that if she did take things farther, she would not be the last witch in his bed. Not only did the nervous witch have to think about infidelity, but she needed to accept the fact that she was one in a long line of many witches. As much as her head protested that this was insanity, her heart and body kept up the debate all day long, never ceasing from their slew of arguments, citing the grounds and warrants for becoming physical with Calleo.

'I could always use it as an excuse and chalk it up to research. How to properly seduce my husband with advice from a professional.' Somehow, just the thought cheapened the whole prospect. If she was going to sleep with Calleo, it would not be under the self-deluded lie that it was to save her marriage. It was because she wanted to be with Calleo intimately, because she wanted him. Hermione had gone to Calleo to save herself from intellectual boredom in order to save her marriage, and her marriage was no better now than it was weeks ago.

Mrs. Weasley did her best to focus on the cockatrice gizzards once more, knowing her lack of attention could result in a ruined test batch, further lengthening her workday.
As his workday drew to a close, Severus looked forward to his evening ahead with more and more anticipation. Tonight he would be free of his mask, while Hermione would wear a blindfold.

When the raven-haired wizard wore a mask for clients, he felt confident. No one knew who he really was; that knowledge gave him courage and license to be whomever he chose to be. If he truly contemplated the psychology of putting on a physical mask, he would have to admit that he had worn a mask of some sort or another for years, hiding his true self behind a facade of indifference, sarcasm, and disdain. Tonight, he would be stripped of both masks. Vulnerable and naked were not the only words to describe his state of mind. There was a sense of anticipation that bordered on nervousness.

As much as he was never a clock-watcher, and loathed those that were, Severus found himself checking the time frequently. The clock chimed five. Convinced he was not rushing home, he still hurried to put his research materials away for the day.

Severus had descended a flight of stairs before he remembered that there was a new Potions journal he wanted to lend Hermione for the weekend. Turning around, he headed back up to his office.

Near the top of the stairs, he halted and retreated a few steps. Peering over the edge of the landing, the former spy saw Miss Brown and another man just outside the doors of her office.

“Oh, Kingsley!” Lavender exclaimed. “Is it really true?” Severus saw Miss Brown rush and embrace the black Auror. “You don't know how long I've waited and hoped! Finally!”

“I was beginning to give up hope, too. There are no guarantees, but there is a strong possibility,” Shacklebolt assured her, returning her hug.

“Please, let's take this inside and talk some more,” Miss Brown said, ushering the bald wizard inside her office.

When the door clicked shut, Severus stealthily snuck back to his office and grabbed the Potions journal he had returned for. Descending the stairs once more, he wondered if the wizard he heard with Miss Brown that Saturday night had been Kingsley. Remembering that Kingsley was married with children, he speculated what sort of arrangement Kingsley had with Miss Brown. Perhaps he was leaving his wife, both leading separate lives though remaining married. It was an arrangement that was as close to divorce in the wizarding world, since children bound Kingsley to his wife for
the rest for their lives. It was not uncommon for wizards to live separately from their wives, taking up residence with their lovers, their paramours becoming mistress of their new home and the hostess of parties and functions. However, it was only when a wizard could afford to run two households that such an arrangement could be undertaken.

Miss Brown was wealthy enough where she did not need another man to support her. Still, nothing about the overheard conversation proved one way or the other that his employer and parole officer were romantically linked. It was just pure coincidence that Miss Brown was rushing into another man's arms, seemingly relieved over something.

Severus made a mental note to watch Kingsley's behavior at his next several parole meetings, and Miss Brown's demeanor after today.

Sweeping through the muggy alleys on his way home, the wizard cloaked in black was thankful he had remembered to put a light cooling charm on his cloak, as the summer sun pressed down, laying long slivers of bright heat on the cobblestones in between the buildings.

Inside his flat, Severus cast several more cooling charms. Though he enjoyed the heat, he doubted Hermione would appreciate the warmth after spending the day with her head stuck over a steaming cauldron. When he was still teaching at Hogwarts, he was fortunate enough that most of the sweltering days of the year occurred while the students were away on their summer holiday. Having to endure the heat of ninety cauldrons boiling throughout the day, on top of a summer heatwave, would have made his temper more volatile than it already was in those days.

Severus moved about the kitchen with purpose, preparing everything for dinner. Since Hermione would be without sight, he planned a dinner that would not require eating utensils.

Once the b'stilla was in the oven and the honey lamb basted one last time, he showered and shaved once more, feeling the tension in his muscles mount as each minute ticked by. Dressed and ready, with Marf briefed on how to serve the dishes, the wizard hated the fact that he felt more like an anxious suitor than a person waiting for a friend to show up for dinner.

Mrs. Weasley suddenly realized she had been shaving her legs weekly on Thursday night for a while now. She remembered when she and Ron first started dating, she would shave her legs on Friday night, just before Hogsmeade weekends and late-night snogging sessions in the Head Girl's quarters. Now she was preparing herself for evenings with Calleo, as if they were dates.

She couldn't deny that they did feel like dates as of late. The only thing missing from their evenings was physical intimacy and clear intent of romance. With each passing visit, she felt herself drawn
to him; each visit intensified the attraction between them.

As Hermione dressed, she heard Ron rummaging around in the kitchen. Still feeling chafed over how poorly their first marriage counseling session with James Hoover went, she remembered her old familiar, Crookshanks. 'If Crooks was still alive, I'd leave one of his hairballs in Ron's shoes.' The witch missed her old half-kneazle. Perhaps if she could get a decent co-worker once Mr. Spawn left for his apprenticeship, she could start working more reasonable hours and buy a new pet. At least then she'd have someone to talk to at home.

Ron was in an exceptionally good mood that day, as Hermione could hear him singing the latest Monty and the Mad Muggles' song in the other room. Having received the latest copy of Quidditch Weekly that day with his picture on the front cover had made her husband's day. The cover photograph, featuring him catching the Quaffle during last weekend's game against Ballycastle Bats, was rather flattering. It showed him astride his broom, wind whipping through his hair. One could say he looked athletically appealing, but Hermione's personal tastes in men ran towards the dark-haired set, and not red.

During a trip to the loo while at that game, Hermione had heard some female fans a few stalls over squealing about how cute the Cannons Keeper was, and that it was such a pity a wizard like that was married. One witch mentioned she didn't care if he was married, she'd still “ride his broom anytime.” Mrs. Weasley rolled her eyes, and dismissed it as the by-product of her husband's new popularity in the Quidditch world. All these years before, never had she heard any witch swoon with delight about her husband, during or after a game.

Now dressed in low heels and a simple new skirt and top she had bought during a brief shopping foray during her lunch break that week, Hermione stepped into the kitchen to bid her husband goodnight. As she cleared her throat, Ron pulled his head out of the ice box, holding the leftover turkey she roasted the other night.

“I'm going now. Give my best to Rogina and Rufus,” Hermione said plainly.

Ron gave her a brief smile. “I don't have to go in tonight. We found a new guy last night, and I think he'll work out just fine. A fellow by the name of Pete. Good chap, can deflect a curse pretty well. Hopefully, he'll work out for them. If he doesn't, they may call me back for a bit until they find someone else who does.”

“Really? So, no more nights at The Listing Broom?” Hermione asked, feeling a bit nervous. How was she going to explain her Thursday nights out after their anniversary dinner?
“Well, hopefully not. But since they've been so good to me over the past few years, I offered to help out if they get in a pinch. But I think Pete is the right bloke.” Ron shrugged casually.

“Oh, that's good news,” she answered in what she prayed was a hopeful tone.

“Yeah, that means I won't be so knackered during practice,” the redhead commented before diving into the breadbox for a couple of slices of bread in order to make himself a sandwich. “Have a good dance lesson. Don't step on anyone's toes,” Ron said as a parting jest.

“All right. Don't wait up, class might run late tonight,” Hermione said, aspiring to not sound guilty.

“Have fun,” he replied with a mouthful of sandwich, and a half-wave of his hand.

“I will.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Originally I wrote this segueing into the blindfold date, but the chapter was getting so long, I had to break it into two chapters. And Chapter 37 is so long one to make up for it.

Recommended songs for the dance lesson portion of chapter 37, second half of the chapter:
Corazón De Oro
Por Una Cabeza
Caminito
I Left My Heart In San Francisco
“Dancing Around the Truth”

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Severus skirt around the edge of truth and temptation. Food, the tango, more close calls with the truth, followed by more temptation.

Chapter Notes

Recommended music for this chapter:
- Corazón De Oro
- Por Una Cabeza
- Caminito
- I Left My Heart In San Francisco (Performances by Tony Bennett or Nancy Wilson recommended)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Seven
“Dancing Around the Truth”

Disclaimer: It's getting hard to be original with these disclaimers. Rowling owns it all, except for the plot.

There was a note and a length of black silk attached to the door of Calleo’s flat. After removing both items, Hermione read over the note.

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H,

Good evening, and welcome. Place the blindfold over your eyes and tie it loosely about your head. It is charmed to adjust to your head, and to remain in place during your stay. The only times it may be removed are when you are in the bathroom, and when you are outside my door at the end of the
evening.

*Once you have placed it on your head, knock on my door; and I will escort you inside. I look forward to a most unique evening ahead.*

*Kindest Regards,*

*C*

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Nothing could hold back the broad grin that brightened Hermione’s face. Thankful that she had decided to wear her hair up due to the sultry evening, the intrigued witch placed the swath of black silk about her head and loosely tied it in the back, feeling the tips of the charmeuse tickle the nape of her neck. The blindfold tightened around her head until it was snug, yet still comfortable.

Reaching forward blindly with one hand, she found the door.

*Knock-Knock. Knock-Knock.*

Severus opened the door and saw that Hermione had put on the blindfold according to his instructions. He noticed she hadn’t bothered with a cloak, chalking it up to the warm summer night.

“Good evening, Hermione,” he greeted her warmly, reaching forward and gently guiding her into his flat.

Once the door was closed, he pulled off his mask, now that he was sure her blindfold was on.

“Good evening, Calleo,” Hermione greeted him in kind while still smiling, her voice just above a whisper.

Severus could hear the slight tremor in her voice. Still holding onto her hand and forearm, he tucked her hand into the crook of his own arm and escorted her to the settee. There, he gently
turned her around until the edge of the seat was touching the backs of her calves.

Once seated, Hermione let out a huge breath.

“Nervous?” Severus asked lightly.

“A bit.” Hermione swallowed nervously once more. The butterflies in her stomach were having a parade that included a couple of elephants, too.

“There is nothing to be nervous about,” Severus said soothingly, his voice calm and reassuring.

Deprived of sight, Hermione fixed all her attention on Calleo’s voice. She had always loved the sound of it, and now that it was her beacon in this dark world, she could not help but find it sensual and smooth.

The raven-haired wizard had not let go of Hermione’s hand since she sat down, since she did not seem to want to release it. His thumb began rubbing in lazy circles around the top of her hand, occasionally stroking along the top of her knuckles before exploring the tender flesh between her thumb and forefinger. He thought she looked a bit vulnerable. He stared openly at her slightly parted mouth, drinking in the color and shape as she was anxiously licking her lips. The way her chest rose and fell with each breath drew his gaze down to her brassiere, its outline visible beneath the pale cotton fabric.

“You did say you trusted me,” he said, hoping to find some way to allay whatever fears she might be harboring. He sounded just like when some nervous witch came to him, asking him to deflower her. Hermione was no virgin, but she displayed all the signs of a witch who was about to embark on her first trip into carnal pleasures.

“I'm sorry,” she breathed. “I'm just not used to being blindfolded or blind.” Hermione gave a nervous little laugh.

Severus smiled. It was thrilling to see Hermione in such a state of anticipation. Watching her at the mercy of his whims gave him a rush of power, and he equally felt awed by the trust she was placing in him. There was no way he could ever trust anyone enough to blindfold him and lead him around for a whole evening. He had spent enough of his life in a position of powerlessness that he would never give up what little power he had gained.
“Just remember to relax,” the wizard instructed her. “Remember what we discussed on Monday. I will do nothing unless you initiate it first.”

Hermione wilted under the velvet caress of his voice. The ball was in her court, but she barely trusted herself in not initiating something with Calleo. If she touched his arm, would she stop there? At what point would it stop being touching and start become fondling?

“I trust you,” she said, trying to keep her voice from sounding strained. “It's myself I don't trust.”

Severus smiled even more. She was completely his to toy with; though he had promised not to make the first move, he did need to help her about his flat, and so that would give him license to touch her. Scooting over closer to her, he noticed her body shift and tense momentarily.

Leaning close enough to whisper in her ear, he murmured teasingly, “And why do you not trust yourself?”

His warm breath grazed her neck and curled about her ear, making a hot chill race though her body. Though the blindfold covered her eyes, Hermione shut her eyes tighter and turned her head away from temptation. “Because,” she barely choked out, her breaths becoming even more shallow and rapid.

He could have grazed her neck with his nose or finger, but he let the sheer proximity of his body heat be enough for the moment. Severus had suffered enough evenings being tempted beyond the limits of his endurance with her; he felt she should suffer a little as well. It was only fair, and Gryffindors were known to be notoriously fair. “Because why?” he asked, letting the warmth of his breath graze her skin.

“Because I want you so badly, and I still haven't made up my mind,” she confessed with a sigh, trying not to moan from the excruciating pleasure of Calleo's breath on her skin.

The strain of his playful seduction was having its toll and so he sat back, giving Hermione a chance to relax.

“Tell me, Calleo, and please be honest,” Hermione began with hesitation. “I'd rather have the truth than some candy-coated lie. And I hope I'm not offending you by asking this... but how many other clients have you become friends with over the years?”
Remembering Ginny's words about Hermione becoming attached, Severus could understand her hesitation. She wanted to know if she was one of many, or was she the first to develop this type of rapport with him.

“I will answer your question if you answer mine first,” the raven-haired man replied. “And I demand the same amount of honesty in your reply that you seek with mine. If you wish for complete explanations, then you will have to be thorough in yours as well. Do you agree?”

With her stomach tightening, Hermione could scarcely think of what Calleo might ask of her to demand such an equal *quid pro quo* exchange. Hoping she would not regret her decision, she answered, “I will to the best of my ability, as long as you do as well.”

“Fair enough.” Still, he wondered if one question would be enough for Hermione, and if her pending question would lead to the revelation of his identity. “You mentioned that in your dream we were almost making love. Explain in detail what happened in the dream.” Ever since her hesitant answer the other night, Severus' curiosity had been piqued.

Hermione blushed unabashedly. She had been hoping he would not ask about her dream anymore, but since she had questions that she desperately needed answered in order to help her decide on becoming intimate with Calleo or not, she agreed. It helped that she had a blindfold on, as she would not have to see the look on Calleo's face. The blindfold also helped her with her courage, as she found her conviction worked best under the cloak of night. Even at Hogwarts, it was only at night, with its concealing qualities, that she ever felt like engaging in sex or going on rule-breaking adventures. By the light of day, she behaved as any good witch should; but the blackness of night gave her a different kind of confident bravery she didn’t normally have.

Feeling her mouth gone dry, she licked her lips several times before she could form an answer. “Well, as I mentioned before, in my dream we were in the bathroom. After you added the grain to the cauldron, you turned to kiss me.”

“How did I kiss you?” he asked, wanting details. If he was going to confess what she wanted to know, he should at least have the pleasure on having a new fantasy to keep him satisfied while he masturbated later that night, once she had left his flat.

“Passionately.”

“Did you enjoy it?”
“Yes,” she exhaled. It was most distracting to answer Calleo's questions, as he kept stroking her hand, making little electric shocks run up her arm, taking a short detour to her brain before heading straight between her legs. *If he could do this much to me with a simple touch of my hand, imagine what he could do to my body!*

“Go on,” he prompted her.

“‘You were kissing me, but you still had your full-face mask on. I don’t know how, but we were still able to kiss while you wore it.’ Hermione paused before adding, ‘You tasted like wine.’ Just remembering the dream was getting her turned on. ‘Then suddenly we were on your bed, still kissing. We still had our clothes on, but you were on top of me...’”

“Yes?”

“You were grinding against me.”

“And did you like that, Hermione?” Severus asked, letting his voice drop an octave.

Letting out her breath, the brunette witch replied, “God, yes.”

Severus turned her hand over and began stroking tiny undecipherable patterns on the inside of her wrist. “Then what happened?”

“Suddenly our clothes were gone,” she admitted, suddenly feeling the room get warmer, helped along by the tantalizingly subtle touch of Calleo's finger along her pulse point.

“And then?”

“You were rubbing yourself.”

“Where?”

Hermione fought to find the words without sounding vulgar. “Down there.”
Severus was having such a seductively amusing time watching Hermione struggle with the words, yet found himself growing even more aroused with each detail he extracted from her. “Down where?”

“Around... just near... outside...”

“Of your entrance?” Severus queried, completing her thought for her.

“Yes.” She let out a huge sigh of relief, now that she had finally been able to give voice to her dream, and expecting Calleo would now answer her question.

“Then what happened?”

“My husband woke me up,” Hermione said, pleased there was nothing too erotic or uncomfortable to tell him with that statement. “I have answered your question; please answer mine.”

“Since you were so honest with your answer, I shall be with mine. Though I have been on friendly terms with many clients before, I have never been friends with any of them before you,” he said without reservation.

“Though I am your friend, do you still see me as a client?” Hermione asked warily, hoping he would say no.

“That is another question,” Severus said, hoping to get more information out of her. “Answer another question, and I shall answer yours.”

If Hermione was not so desperate to know the answer, she would have dropped this game. Praying he would not ask another equally embarrassing question, she acquiesced with a nod of her head.

“Very well. Do you still see me as a gigolo or as a friend?” Severus decided to go easy on her, gaining her trust and hoping she would continue this exchange of information.
“As a friend,” Mrs. Weasley replied without hesitation.

“As do I,” he admitted freely.

“But Lavender said when she waived your fees that you were being compensated in other ways,” Hermione replied with another question.

'Damn, Miss Brown would have to let her know that! No wonder she thinks I still see her as a client,' Severus silently mused. Deciding to give her a free answer without exacting one in return, he said, “Though I am being compensated, I have not thought about the money in a long time,” he said, twisting the truth slightly. Of course the money crossed his mind every time he worked on a new sex potion with Miss Brown. “When I see you sitting here, I do not care about the money, just the pleasure of your company.”

If he could have truthfully told her that he would forfeit his “fees” to make her more comfortable, he would have, but he was not about to give up a forty percent share in royalties. It was the truth to say that he did not think of the money at all when Hermione came to see him anymore.

Hermione bit her lip, unconscious that an old forgotten habit was returning. 'If Ginny has to pay to see her own lover, I suppose it's not too out of line that Calleo is receiving some sort of fee for my visits.'

“One last question,” Hermione announced, trying to find the strength to ask it. “How many other witches have you slept with while in this occupation?” If she was going to sleep with him, she wanted to know how many had shagged Calleo before her. “Please be honest with me; don't downplay the numbers.”

“I have always been honest with you, Hermione. I may have downplayed how much I know in order to conceal my identity, but I have always been as honest as I can with you,” Severus disclosed. “And I have one last question for you.”

“Go ahead.” Hermione nodded her head, feeling a little confused over Calleo's statement.

“If someday I were to reveal myself, would you still consider me a friend?” Severus asked, waiting with apprehension of her answer.
“Of course I would!” Hermione insisted.

“Truly?” Severus challenged her gently.

“Yes,” she declared. “You have been a friend to me in a time of need. I would not reject you based on knowing your identity.”

“Very well,” he said, sounding a little pleased by her answer, though secretly doubting it. “I do not know the exact number of my past and present clients, but it probably ranges somewhere between dozens and a couple hundred.”

Hermione gave a small gasp of surprise.

“More than you imagined?”

“I had no idea what number to expect, to be perfectly honest.”

“Does it bother you?” Severus asked.

“No...” Hermione paused, not sounding too convincing.

“Hermione? Honestly.”

“A little.” She began regretting asking Calleo about how many others he had bedded. “I suppose it's none of my business. And I guess that if I were to take things... further between us, then I would not be the last.”

“That is a safe assumption.” The ex-Death Eater wondered how long it would take before his last question about her unfailing friendship with him would sink into her mind, and her keen intellect would begin piecing together the puzzle pieces. “Do you have any more questions?”

“No. Thank you for answering them, Calleo. I truly appreciate it,” she said gratefully.
“Now, there are a few things that need to be taken care of in the kitchen before we can begin dinner. Would you care to join me? Perhaps a glass of wine before dinner is served?” Severus offered courteously.

“That would be lovely, Calleo. Thank you, I think I will,” she replied with equal formality, bowing her head and not realizing that he had done the same gesture to her as well.

Severus had placed Hermione along the familiar stretch of counter where she had stood at the previous week while he uncorked the wine.

Blind, but finding appeal in the mystery of the noises about her – the pot of water simmering on the cooker, the sizzle of something in the oven – Hermione heard the pop of the cork.

“I think you'll like this. It's a nice Gewürztraminer; it goes well with tonight's dinner,” Severus told Hermione as he poured her a measure of the pale, spicy wine before pouring for himself.

“And what are we having for dinner tonight?” Hermione smiled.

Approaching her, the wizard touched her hand to let her know he was near so she would not startle and knock the glass of wine. Severus went to stand behind her, grabbing her other hand and placing the glass of wine in it. Bending down so that his mouth was near her ear, he asked slowly, “What do you smell?”

Hermione could sense Calleo standing behind her and the heat radiating off of his body. 'If he's going to play this game, I'll teach him!' she thought, setting down her wine glass without taking a sip.

Moving back slightly, she let her body make contact with Calleo's, her back pressed lightly against his chest, her bottom brushing against his groin. Inhaling deeply, Hermione said playfully, “Hmmm, so many smells.” Pleased by the sudden change in Calleo's breathing, she turned around so that she knew she would be facing him. Hermione leaned in to bring her face closer with his neck, letting her breasts brush up against his chest. The sheer thrill of the contact made her nipples pucker so tightly, it was almost painful. Nuzzling her nose along the base of his throat, she purred confidently, “I smell patchouli.” She paused to inhale deeply once more, dragging her nose and cheek along his throat. “So many good smells,” she sighed, desperately trying to keep her hands at her sides, and not reach up to stroke his chest and loop around his neck. “Is this what we're having for dinner?” the witch asked coyly.
Severus felt his eyes roll up into his head as he tried valiantly to not grab Hermione, strip her of her knickers, and ravish her on the spot. Instead, he decided to return Hermione's teasing in spades.

Hermione felt two strong hands about her waist spin her about face so she was facing the counter. Before she could brace her hands on the counter, Calleo's hands grabbed her wrists and pinned them high above her head to the cabinets in front of her. He pressed his whole length along her body. What shocked Hermione was to feel his erection pressing hard up against her bottom.

Bending his head so his mouth was close to her ear, he purposefully breathed along the shell of her ear not covered by the blindfold. In a dangerous growl, he murmured, “Didn't your parents ever teach you that it's not nice to tease the animals?”

To make his point he rolled his hips, grinding his hard cock into her bottom. Though they were both wearing clothes, the sensation was unmistakable.

Hermione could not believe how much her body took over and disconnected from her mind. She was still pressed snugly between the counter and Calleo's body, his strong hands keeping her body taut with her arms stretched above her head. Her own body wanted to surrender like a dog rolling over and exposing its belly. Gasping, she let her head roll back along his shoulder and arched her back, pressing her bottom more firmly against his groin. She could not breathe. She felt like she was drowning in some exotic cocktail of lust, dizzy and floating amid the sensation of Calleo's body so close and hard against her own, the scent of him, and the hypnotic sound of his voice.

Exhaling in a half-moan, she explained, “I'm just returning what you were dishing out to me.” Hermione pushed back against him to spite his deliciously cruel teasing.

“So you think I started this?” Severus confronted her, moving back against her.

“Yes,” she sighed, finding rhythm to their motion. “When you asked me what I smelled.” Hermione's breath was becoming quick.

Moving in time to her movement, he continued to rub himself purposefully against Hermione's rather nice, round backside. His own breaths were getting quite short. Burying his nose into her hair, he inhaled her scent and pressed himself against her with a slight jerking motion this time. “Consider this... payback... for the time... you sucked my fingers,” Severus retorted as he panted heavily into her curls.
Whimpering against her will, Hermione said plaintively, “I said I was sorry. A moment of weakness.” She wanted to reach behind her and rake her nails thorough his hair, but she couldn't, with her wrists still firmly pinned to the cabinet. Hermione hated herself for not wanting this to end. As Calleo picked up the pace, she continued rubbing herself against him with less restraint.

“Tell me, is this as good as in your dream?” the wizard asked huskily, not realizing he was dry-humping her like some desperate teenager.

“This is better... much better,” Hermione groaned, bucking her hips back.

“Just give me the word, Hermione,” Severus pleaded. “Just say the word. Tell me you want me to go on,” he said, sliding his hands down her arms. Reaching down, he cupped her breasts and dropped his head on top of her shoulder. “Tell me if you want to go on, or if you are not ready yet. That you've made up your mind. Tell me,” he begged with desperation.

Hermione's hips ceased rocking. With her hands still in place on the cabinets in front of her, she felt her chest rise and fall in great gasping breaths as Calleo stopped moving. “I don't know yet.” She sighed. “Where is that damn wine glass?”

Severus moved away and reached around, scooting the glass into her hand while avoiding contact with her.

Moving to the other side of the kitchen, he took a swig of his own wine, trying to regain his composure. Noticing the water boiling away on the stove, he added the couscous, sultanas, sautéed carrots and onions, gave the pot a quick stir and put the lid on it.

He noticed Hermione had not moved from her spot, as she clutched her wine glass with a slightly shaky hand, which had been drained of half its contents.

“I'm sorry.” Severus paused before he added, “That was uncalled for.”

“Please don't apologize,” Hermione stopped him, her body tensing as she began speaking. “As much as I hate to admit it, I have to be honest with myself too. I wanted it.” After taking a few steadying breaths, she said, “I can't tell you how many times I've fantasized about what it would feel like to straddle you, fully clothed, rubbing myself against you like that. Sometimes more than that. It's one thing to fantasize about it, it's another to do it. If I wasn't married... I suppose my
curiosity and desire got the best of me.” She took one more long swallow of wine before adding, “Please don't regret what you did.”

Realizing there was nothing left to do in the kitchen, as Marf would get everything ready for serving, Severus walked back over to Hermione.

Gingerly picking up the hand not holding her wine glass, he announced, “Dinner is served. Let's move on to the dining area.”

Hermione let Calleo's hand guide her as she walked, while feeling her body thrum with energy and tension. Her senses were hyper-aware of everything: the scent of cinnamon mixed with savory meat, the feel of her skirt brushing against her legs, the movement of air from the door being opened, and the sound of classical music from the other side of the room.

“Here,” he instructed her, helping her to sit at the table.

Hermione noticed that he did not sit across from her but placed himself to her left, giving her bearings.

With a twitch of Severus' wand, a large basin appeared with a jug of warm water. Guiding her hand once more, he instructed her, “Place your hands out in front of you. There's a basin for washing your hands.”

Another flick of his wand, and the water poured over their hands.

After washing and drying their hands, Severus suggested, “Have some bread to start.”

Reaching out, she found the rim of the cloth-lined basket and grabbed a piece of soft bread. Hermione could smell the scent of warm yeasty bread and sesame seeds. “Hmmm, sesame seeds and cinnamon. Middle Eastern cuisine?” she asked.

“Close. You'll have to be more specific than that.”

“Persian?” It was a wild guess.
“Persian cuisine uses many of the same ingredients, but tends to use a lot more rice. Let's have the next course, and you can guess again.” As Hermione began eating the bread, he said, “I didn't have a chance to ask you last Monday; how was the visit to your parents?”

She was thankful that Calleo brought up a topic to keep her mind off the fact that the nearness of him made her appetite disappear, as her stomach was knotted with anticipation to the point of near queasiness. Hermione said, “It was nice to see them. My mum let me drive the Jaguar to the market, so I got in a little driving practice.”

“A very fast model of car; though after the way I drove, I don't think she'll let me behind the wheel of her car ever again,” Hermione confessed bashfully.

“Well, let's just say that no Muggle car should be driven like the Knight Bus. I keep forgetting that as a witch my reflexes are faster than most Muggles. My mother looked like she was about to have a coronary after I drove. Oh, well. It's not like I want to drive anyway. Floo and Apparition are so much faster,” the witch rationalized.

“And brooms,” Severus added.

“No. I don't like flying. Period.” Her tone brooked no argument. Time and time again, Hermione had told Harry and Ron her personal reasons why she had not mounted a broom after her first year. She was not about to start another lengthy debate about her refusal to fly.

“So what else happened with your parents?” Severus set down his bread and silently gave Marf his cue to bring out the salad course.

“My mum and I got to talk a bit. It suddenly struck me while I was there that by the time I'm in my fifties or sixties, they will have probably passed away. My mum is only in her mid-fifties, and she looks like a witch in her seventies or eighties. I suppose the death of my co-worker is still a bit of a shock to me.”
Severus ignored the salad for a moment, realizing Hermione was finally ready to deal with the topic of death. “Go on,” he prompted her, knowing she needed to give voice to her thoughts.

“It's just that during the war I knew that people all around me were at risk of dying at any moment. At that time of my life, it felt like I was living in a season of death.” She paused for a moment. “Does that make any sense?”

“What do you mean, ‘a season of death?’” Severus knew what she had meant, but encouraged her to go on.

“It seems like my life has been lived in seasons: a season for learning – being in school; a season of death – during the war, where it was no surprise that people died; a season of marriage – where all around me people were getting married, including myself; a season of babies, with people I knew having children left and right. And now it seems like with Marge's death, a winter frost has come unexpectedly out of season.” There was another long pause while Hermione tried to blink back the tears that almost came beneath her blindfold. “I know it must sound silly, but I can think of no other way to describe the shock of it. It's foolish of me to think that death cannot come at any time to those around us. It's just that I didn't expect it to be a violent death, as if the war had returned.”

“The war has never really left any of us. Those experiences will stay with us forever. We just tend to push those memories aside, and try to move forward with our lives,” Severus explained. He had comforted enough war widows to know what should be said in response to such sentiments.

Sensing she was done with her thoughts, Severus directed the topic back to dinner. “Are you ready for the next course?”

“Yes!” Hermione's voice had a false brightness to it. Her hand began searching for the flatware. “Where is my fork?”

Severus let a low and throaty laugh seep up. “There is no cutlery. Tonight, we eat with our hands. Care to take another guess as to which cuisine I prepared?”

“Ethiopian?”

“No.”
“Any hints?” the brunette witch asked, her question ending on an up note of hope.

“Would you care to make another wager,” Severus countered silkily.

“Another wager? Are you going to trick me again, like that other night?”

“Trick you? I did no such thing!” Severus asserted. “It was not my fault you failed to inquire about dessert beforehand.”

“Ha!” That sounds like Slytherin tactics.’

“I do not see what you are complaining about. Despite losing, you still had your chocolate.” Severus sat there smugly, daring her to refute it.

“I... I... All right. I agree. However, I will not be fooled so easily this time. If we bet, it shall be for the same thing,” Hermione insisted.

“Do you have something in mind?” The smile was evident in his tone. Severus actually did have something in mind. “How about the loser of the bet shall give the winner a massage?” Hermione's mouth opened, but before she could speak, the raven-haired wizard added, “A massage after dinner, to whichever body parts the winner demands that the loser does not deem too... inappropriate.”

Hermione licked her lips nervously as she contemplated whether she should agree to the wager. Though she was very good in detecting different herbs, identifying foreign cuisines was not her forte. Still, what would be the loss in agreeing to give Calleo a massage if she lost? Hermione would still be able to touch him without the misunderstanding that she was ready to take things further.

“If I don't agree, do you still on plan on giving me a shoulder massage?” she asked, testing to see if this was another trick.

“No, I wasn't planning on giving you one tonight.”
“Oh. Very well, I agree.”

Smiling broadly, he placed the salad platter between them. He was really looking forward to a nice back rub.

“Since you seem to be so mistrusting of me, I will allow you to sample all three items from this platter before demanding your answer,” the Potter master announced.

Plucking a chunk of carrot from the tray, he asked Hermione to open her mouth. He watched her surprised reaction as she bit down.

“Do I taste rose with the carrot?” Hermione asked, sounding perplexed.

“You do. Do you like it?”

“Yes, it's very good. I just never thought of cooking with roses.”

“Actually, it's rose water.” Picking up a couple of chickpeas, he asked, “Are you ready for item number two?”

Nodding, Hermione opened her mouth while wondering what new and wonderful flavors she would experience. The tangy flavor of the preserved lemon made her mouth water as she chewed the soft beans. She hummed in appreciation of the flavor. Despite the exotic and aromatic flavors, she could not place the cuisine. After taking a sip of wine and a bite of bread to cleanse her palate, she was ready for the third salad.

Dipping his finger into the soft and warm aubergine salad that would more likely be eaten with a spoon than a fork, he brought his finger to Hermione's expectant mouth.

Not expecting Calleo's finger, she closed her mouth around the dollop of salad and his digit.

Both paused, unable to move.
Hermione tentatively moved her tongue to lick the soft textured salad off his finger while releasing his digit from her mouth. It was too great a temptation to go back down that avenue once more, for if she did not stop herself, there would be no dinner or dance lessons tonight.

The sensation of the tip of her tongue on Severus’ finger made him want to feed her himself for the rest of the meal, letting her warm and soft tongue stroke his fingers.

“Have you figured out the cuisine yet?” Severus asked, prompting Hermione to respond.

Too distracted from the rather intimate act of Calleo feeding her, the witch didn't bother to analyze the spices or flavors. To regain her mental balance, she went back to the previous topic of conversation.

“I want to thank you for waiting. Most everybody else has been trying to get me to talk about Marge's death, but I wasn't ready until after I saw my parents. It was nice not to be pressured by someone to 'express my feelings' on the matter when I wasn't ready. Thank you.” Her hand stretched out and carefully found her wine glass once more, and she took a sip.

“So this is my last guess,” Hermione stated, ready to move on to another subject. “Egyptian?”

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Severus escorted Hermione to the settee. Once the room was cleared of the table and dishes, Severus set about preparing the room by folding the rest of the room's unused furniture against the wall like the previous week. He then set up the massage table, with a loopy swirl of his wand. Though he might have made dismissive remarks about “foolish wand waving” in his classes, Severus was quite talented when it came to Charms and Transfiguration.

“Are you ready?” Severus asked.

Hermione smiled and nodded.

Knowing he should ask again to be “gentlemanly,” he asked, “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” the witch insisted. “I lost, and it’s only fair that I fulfill my share of the bargain. I agreed to the wager; I shall honor my bets.”
Severus supposed there were upsides to dealing with a Gryffindor at times. After casting an *Accio* and retrieving the massage oil, he began unbuttoning his shirt. Casually tossing his shirt onto the settee, he noticed Hermione startle a little when it landed next to her.

Guiding her up from her seat, he escorted her over to the padded table and charmed the bottle of oil to hover next to Hermione for easy access, since she could not see. Severus toed off his shoes and socks and climbed up onto the table, rather pleased he was the one to receive a massage for once.

“Is there any place in particular that is bothering you, Calleo, or do you just want an overall back rub?” Hermione asked.

“How,” the wizard hummed as he thought of a response, pleased that Hermione was being so considerate. “Shoulders and lower back, mostly.”

Turning his head to the side, he saw Hermione blindly reach out for the oil and pour a generous amount into the palm of her hand. Severus put his head back down and closed his eyes, awaiting the chance for someone to please him for once.

Hermione could not think of what to say. She didn't want to seem too eager to fulfill her end of the bargain. One thing she knew to avoid sounding too nervously guilty was to say as little as possible. It was gallant that Calleo had offered her a chance to get out of giving him a massage. Still, she had guessed incorrectly. Hermione couldn't berate herself, as she had never had Moroccan food before.

As she rubbed her palms together to warm the oil in her hands, she caught the scent of almonds and realized what type of oil Calleo had provided her. Stretching out her hands, she made contact with his warm skin and stroked her hands up and down along his back by feel alone. Hermione made a point of not touching him sensuously, but with purpose – therapeutic purpose, of course.

Severus let a low groan of appreciation rumble through his chest.

The sound emanating from Calleo only fed her fantasies of what he sounded like during sex. In an effort to keep her mind on the task of giving him a back rub, Hermione focused her thoughts on the muscles beneath her fingers and the mental diagram of muscles she had memorized from her mother's old *Gray's Anatomy* book earlier in the week.

Running the heel of her hand from the middle of Calleo's spine out towards his shoulder, Hermione murmured, “Trapezius.”
“Hmmm?” Severus heard what she had said, but he pretended not to catch it.

“Nothing, just trying to identify the different muscles,” she explained.

“Yes, that is my Trapezius,” he replied with a slight groan, appreciating the tingling sensation of the muscle being kneaded.

A silence settled between them until Hermione moved onto a different set of muscles. “And these are the... erectors?” she said with uncertainty as she ran her thumbs along the length of muscle that stretched across his ribs near his sides.

“Hmmmm. Yes, you can refer to the group as such,” Severus mumbled back, a pleasant thrill of electric tingling racing along his spine and up onto his scalp, making the hairs stand on end.

Reaching down his back until she reached the waistband of his trousers, Hermione began massaging her thumbs in small circles along his spine. “Let's see. Multifious... Longissimus dorsi...” Higher up the back, she asked, “And this is where the Spinalis dorsi begins?”

“Correct,” the prone wizard replied lazily.

It suddenly struck him that this might be a prime opportunity to ask Hermione a few questions. “Why the sudden interest in muscular structure?”

“While I was at my parents' on Sunday, my mother let me have her old anatomy book from her days at university.”

“Any reason why you borrowed the book?” Severus asked nonchalantly.

“No. No reason,” she said a little too innocently, moving her hands out to his Latissimus dorsi.

“Planning on becoming a Potions mistress someday?” he teased lightly, his voice more of a gravelly growl than playful.
“It’s not likely to ever happen, considering I’ve been turned down by everyone,” Hermione remarked, her voice tinged with bitterness.

“But if an opportunity ever came up where an apprenticeship was offered to you, would you accept it?”

“Of course I would!” Digging her thumbs into Calleo's Rhomboideus major, she felt his back twitch. “Too deep?”

“No,” he assured Hermione. “It's just been a long time since I've had a massage, and my muscles are used to existing in a constant state of tension.”

“I know what you mean. It wasn't until you started giving me neck rubs that I've had a massage more than once a year,” Hermione added. “But as I was saying,” she came back to the previous conversation thread while mapping Calleo's back by touch alone, “who would give an apprenticeship to someone who has been out of school as long as I have? Usually, a master likes to take an apprentice right out of school. I've been out of school for five years. I'm a bit long in the tooth. Besides, apprenticeships don't pay. And until my husband renegotiates his Quidditch contract in November, we need every single Knut we can scrimp together.” Her finger traced along a mole she found near his left shoulder blade, and what felt like an old scar a few inches below that.

“But if an apprenticeship was offered with pay, would you take it?” He groaned once more as Hermione began working on his neck.

“I doubt the pay would be equal to what I earn right now at the Ministry. So, as much as it sounds like a lovely fantasy – if I were ever offered such a position with pay – I must be realistic, as it's never going to happen. One can dream, but that's an unreachable dream. I'll have to take what dreams I can get in real life.” Hermione paused, her hands lying flat on Calleo's back as she realized the implication of her own statement.

Calleo could give her fulfillment of all her wildest hopes of passion that she had given up on long ago. He was the first man to ever stir feelings that she had thought were only trite ramblings written in trashy romance novels.

'It's not like I'm ever going to leave Ron,' Hermione began thinking to herself. Her hands began stroking Calleo's skin lightly, dragging the pads of her fingertips along the tops of his shoulders to his arms, then down his sides, and completing the circuit by bringing her fingers up along his back.
to the base of his neck. 'If I don't seize this opportunity, am I going to regret this for the rest of my life? If I do this, will I hate myself? And can I do this without the thought constantly screaming in the back of my mind that I'm betraying Ron? Could I live with myself if I do this? Or should I say 'sod it all' and do as I want for once, consequences be damned? What if Ron finds out? Ha! Like he would ever care at this point.' Her heart and her mind resumed their old battle of desire and needs versus honor and fidelity.

Severus noted the change in the pressure and purpose of Hermione's touch, from kneading to gentle stroking. She seemed quiet and distracted; Hermione had affected that same quality about her when contemplating if she wanted to take things further with him on Monday night. Still, the sensation of her fingers gliding across his back was soft and tender, lulling him into a state of relaxation. He could have laid there all night and have her continue touching him that way until he drifted off to sleep, if it wasn't for the sensation of his skin feeling electrified where she touched it.

Not wanting her to dwell upon her thoughts for too long, Severus hummed and said, “That was nice. Thank you. I truly appreciate the massage.” Lifting himself up off the table, he escorted Hermione back to the settee while he put back on his shirt and charmed the massage table to put itself away.

Noting her continued silence as he sat next to her, Severus prompted Hermione with an observation. “You seem preoccupied.”

“Sorry.” Hermione rubbed her hands together and up her arm, spreading the remnants of the almond oil over her skin. “I was thinking about what you said during our last meeting.”

“Yes, go on.”

“The married women you've slept with; have they ever regretted it afterwards?” When Calleo did not answer immediately, she added, “Do they feel guilty afterwards that they had done it?”

“A few,” Severus replied honestly. “But most have carefully thought it through before taking that final step.” Reaching out, he picked up her hand. “Do not rush this. You do not have to make a decision tonight or this week.” He remembered how he had begged earlier that evening, but pushed the memory of it from the front of his mind.

Calleo's patience was not making it any easier. Hermione wanted nothing more than to reach over and straddle Calleo, and feel his hands on her hips as she rubbed her breasts against his chest and ground herself against his crotch. She wanted to run her fingers through his hair and explore the planes of his face with her lips. More than anything, she wondered what her name would sound
like as he murmured it in her ear. The way his voice sounded back in the kitchen, as he pleaded with need and desire, had almost been her undoing. To hear him beg for her once more would surely break her resolve. Instead of giving voice to the conflict in her head or the needs of her body, she mutely nodded.

Hoping to lighten the mood as they passed time while dinner settled prior to their dance lesson, Severus said, “So let's say for the purpose of discussion that you were offered a Potions apprenticeship. What languages would you study?”

“Languages?” Hermione asked. “You have to study languages?”

“Yes, of course. Many of the ancient Potions texts you would have to study as an apprentice are charmed with anti-translation spells,” the Potions master informed her.

“Really? All the Potions texts I've come across are translated,” Hermione replied.

“That's because you've never had access to a Potions master's private library.”

“Oh.” She paused for a moment. “You said languages? How many languages does an apprentice have to learn to become a master or mistress?”

“Five is the minimum.”

“Five?!? If I were to pursue a Potions apprenticeship, which of course I never will as it will never happen,” Hermione added dismissively, “which ones should I pick? There are so many.”

“Well, I recommend learning one romantic language, as once you've learned one the rest are fairly easy to comprehend. One of the Germanic languages would be good. Greek is also highly recommended, as a lot of Russian words – once you learn the Cyrillic alphabet – are rooted in Greek. Chinese wizards have thirty-five centuries of Potions history going back to the Shang Dynasty, so being versed in Classical Chinese – which most of the books prior to the Zhou Dynasty have been translated into – would also be highly recommended. And I would suggest one of the Indian languages, either Hindi or Sanskrit. If you want to read the more philosophical Potions texts that involve theory, then I suggest Sanskrit.”

“And this is what your friend or acquaintance, a Potions master, once told you?” Hermione asked,
expecting Calleo to throw out the habitual sentence.

“Not exactly,” Severus said somberly, his voice dropping in tone and pitch. He was walking along the thin edge of blatantly coming out and giving undeniable hints to his identity, or leaving just enough for Hermione to come to her own conclusions.

Puzzled by Calleo's sudden change in his voice, Hermione wondered what he meant by his statement and then realized he might have been talking about himself. But Calleo had never said he was a Potions master; he had said it was merely a hobby. Then she recalled their conversation earlier in the evening; she stomach tightened with the memory of it.

‘I may have downplayed how much I know in order to conceal my identity, but I have always been as honest as I can with you.’

It suddenly struck her that she might know who Calleo was, at least his non-gigolo persona. Tamping down her curiosity to just come right out and ask if he was indeed a Potions master, she sought an oblique answer.

“How many languages do you know, Calleo?”

“It has been a while since I counted them.”

“Well then, list them and I'll count,” Hermione offered.

“All right. Spanish, French, German, Latin – of course, Greek, Russian, Hungarian, Arabic, Sanskrit, Classical and Vernacular Chinese, and a smattering of Korean, Dutch, and Swahili.” He watched Hermione sit there in silence, her mouth slightly agape. “How many was that?”

“Eleven if you count Chinese twice, fourteen if you include the last three at the end.” Hermione didn't know what to say. She had no idea that Calleo was so learned. Why someone as well-educated and well-rounded as Calleo was working as a gigolo was beyond her comprehension.

More memories of previous conversations with Ginny about the Death Eater decree came back to Hermione. ‘There are some jobs the Ministry turns a blind eye to: Trash picking. Begging. Prostitution.’
Questions flew to the forefront of Hermione's mind. *Who is Calleo, really? Is he a Death Eater? Do I know him already? Has he charmed his hair and voice so I don't recognize him? What does he look like without his mask? Is he really a Potions master?*

Though Severus could not see her eyes, he knew her mind was working furiously to put the pieces together. His stomach roiled with anticipation that perhaps this was the end of their friendship as they had both grown to know it. He would miss these evenings of long hours spent talking together with Hermione. It was nice to having a dining companion for a short while, instead of dining alone. How ironic that during his years at Hogwarts, there had been times he wished he could be left alone in peace to eat, and he had done so for most nights for the past four years. Now, Hermione had joined him weekly for supper, and he hoped she would continue to do so once she learned who he was. The ex-Death Eater waited for the slew of questions to begin.

Severus was surprised when Hermione asked, “I think dinner has settled. Shall we begin our lesson?”

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The tall raven-haired wizard had verbally guided Hermione through several basic tango steps, practicing them without music.

Setting the music box to play, Severus drew Hermione close as they moved together while strolling, rocking, and doing the eight-count basic. He gave her commands of which steps to use. She got used to the movements and the way he guided her.

Hermione let herself be pulled close to Calleo. Earlier, she had been on the verge of demanding to have her blindfold removed so that she would know who he truly was, but stopped herself. The only thing that would be satisfied by this course of action would be her curiosity. But by confronting her companion, the illusion that had sustained her starving soul for weeks would shatter, and she would no longer be able to continue what could only be called a glorious lie.

She had helped feed this lie herself and was just as much to blame. It was a mutually agreed upon lie that had turned into honest mutual attraction.

Remembering that Calleo had confessed earlier that he had been as honest with her as he possibly could had eased some of her concerns. Knowledge that Lavender Brown would never put her in immediate danger with a Death Eater also allayed her fear that Calleo might be a dangerous man. Granted, Draco Malfoy was one of Lavender's gigolos and a Death Eater, but he was an *ex*-Death Eater and was a member of the Order.
Hermione had briefly entertained the idea that Calleo was actually Severus Snape, but had immediately dismissed it as ludicrous. Sure, Calleo and Snape may have both had black hair, but other people she knew had black hair as well. Professor Snape would never be attracted to her. The old Head of Slytherin loathed Gryffindors, despised Harry Potter and all those who were close friends of his – especially her – and was known to not have a warm or compassionate bone in his body.

Calleo must be someone she was merely acquainted with, or perhaps met once briefly, but would recognize upon regarding his face. Besides, she was attracted to Calleo, and Hermione had never been attracted to her foul-tempered, arrogant, cruel, disdainful Potions professor who seemed to take perverse satisfaction in instilling fear and dread in his students. Even when dealing with him as a member of the Order, Snape had always been brusque, and treated each comment and suggestion of hers during the meetings with contemptuous skepticism. Besides, Severus Snape would never lower himself to become a gigolo, or at least he never seemed the sort who would. Draco Malfoy was a rather arrogant and proud individual himself, and he had done just that. Still, Hermione could not be falling in love with Snape. Not ever.

Cocooning herself in denial and willing to let the pretense of anonymity prevail, Hermione pushed all speculation of Calleo's identity aside and just lived in the moment. The feel of Calleo's chest pressed against hers, his strong hand grasping hers, the brushing of his legs against hers made reality seem like some obligation to deal with at another time. The scent of his cologne, the heat radiating from his body, and the disorientation of direction as he spun her about the room pushed aside those plaguing thoughts. Hermione focused solely on the world of music, emotion and sensation, and did not drift back into the plane of cerebral thought.

Severus pushed apart their bodies, and instructed her to turn and step, then to turn her hips the other way and step once more before drawing her back into his embrace. As the song ended, he instructed her to gently lift her leg and hook it around the back of his leg. They ended the dance in a simple pose of entwined figures. They continued dancing to other songs. Severus gave her instructions with less frequency, so that an hour later no words were needed. A small trickle of sweat ran down the middle of Severus' back.

Perspiration dotted Hermione's brow and chest. Hermione could feel her blouse sticking to her back, and she could tell Calleo's shirt was sticking to him where their bodies met, pressed against one another. The heat coming off Calleo's body made his cologne more pronounced, and the scent of sweat reminded her of sessions of sex on hot summer nights with Ron – but the scent of Calleo drove her to maddening distraction. It didn't help that the tango was a dance that exemplified restrained passion, mirroring her own battle to keep her desire contained.

Severus observed a single drop of perspiration run down from under Hermione's blindfold, along her hairline to her jaw. As it traveled down her neck, he licked his lips, tempted to use his mouth to remove the vagrant drop. It settled along her collarbone to rest before making a hasty retreat between her breasts.
Unable to stand watching the sweat caress Hermione's skin in ways he could not, Severus suggested they stop for some refreshment before continuing.

Once seated, a tray with two tall glasses and a large pitcher of some fruity cool drink appeared, chilled with ice.

“Lemonade?” Severus offered.

“Yes, please,” Hermione sighed.

“You look a bit overheated. Shall I cast another cooling charm?”

“Yes, that would be lovely,” she replied, thankful for a chance to cool down. It was good to get a little physical distance between her and Calleo, as just being in his arms made her head swim and spin in a deliciously overwhelming way. It reminded Hermione of the first time she got drunk and how the world seemed to float out from under her feet.

“Here,” Severus said as he carefully placed the glass in her hand. He proceeded to cast a cooling charm that swept across the room like a sudden waft of chilly air.

The sudden drop in temperature felt wonderful, in addition to the large gulp of sweetly tart lemonade. The sudden change in temperature chilled her skin, making her nipples pucker, and Hermione hoped Calleo wouldn't notice.

“Delicious,” Hermione said in order to keep her mind from the fact that her nipples were protesting against the fabric of her brassiere. “It's been a little while since I've had lemonade. It seems the wizarding world is forever stuck using pumpkin juice for everything that's non-alcoholic.”

It was at that moment that Hermione remembered the last time she had consumed lemonade. It was near St. James in the park with Ginny. The coincidence seemed too strange to ignore.

“I've only recently discovered the drink myself. I find it quite a bit more palatable than pumpkin juice, as well,” Severus said after swallowing a long sip of the pale yellow beverage.
“Oh, really?” Hermione said, unable to hide the suspicion in her voice. “Where did you learn the recipe from?” She tried to keep an easy smile upon her lips, but found it hard.

“From a friend,” Severus casually answered her while waiting for the confrontation to begin, suspecting Hermione finally realized who he was.

‘Well, that eliminates Ginny,’ Hermione thought, as she could not imagine Snape and Ginny being friends. It was too preposterous. A genuine smile returned to her lips as she leaned back, her posture becoming relaxed once more.

Severus wondered if she was playing a game, or if she was she genuinely skirting upon the realization and then quickly extinguishing the idea in her head to avoid reality. He had dealt with his own bout of denial of obvious facts, but had needed to face them squarely upon the death of his wife. Knowing it was best not to press the point and to let Hermione come to her own conclusion in time, the wizard let Hermione hold tight to her delusions.

“I have a Potions journal that I thought you would like to borrow,” Severus stated.

“Really, which one? I might have read it.” Hermione felt more at ease now that they were back in the familiar territory of intellectual discussion.

“Obscure Oozes & Fabulous Fluids. It’s a relatively new publication. I have their first issue.”

“Oh! I just got that by Owl Post this week at work, but I haven’t had a chance to read it Is it any good? What am I saying? I don’t think you would have offered it to me if it wasn’t,” Hermione said, laughing at herself.

“Yes, it is rather good in that it takes articles from abroad. Normally one would have to subscribe by albatross to read articles by wizards from other continents,” he said with an air of distraction. Severus watched as Hermione took another sip of lemonade before placing the cold glass along her pulse point.

Severus recommended which articles Hermione should spend her time reading, since her free time was so sparse. By the time they had both finished their drinks, they were ready to resume the lesson.
As he guided her up from her seat, Hermione noted how Calleo’s palm had alternating patches of hot and cold from holding his drink.

“I thought we should review the foxtrot a bit before resuming the tango,” the tall wizard informed her.

“Yes, that would be a good idea.” Hermione extended her right hand out in wait for Calleo to grasp it.

Severus instructed the music box to play. He stepped up to Hermione and pulled her close as they began to move.

Listening to the music, Hermione suddenly stopped. “I know this song.” Turning to cock her head slightly, she listened and suddenly felt a little giddy. “This is the song in my music box.” Severus was somewhat puzzled by her statement until she clarified by adding, “My parents went to America during the war. One of the things they brought me back was a Muggle snow globe with a music box in the base. I just wish this song had the lyrics so I could know the words to the song.”

“I can rectify that,” Severus told her. “Repeat song from the beginning with lyrics. Play,” he commanded the enchanted music box.

They began dancing once more as the voice drifted over the room amid the soft tinkling of the piano, and the gentle rhythm of the drums, guitar and bass.

“I left my heart... in San Francisco,
High on a hill... it calls to me.
To be where little cable cars
Climb halfway to the stars.
The morning fog may chill the air
But I don't care...”

Hermione tried to memorize the lyrics despite the distraction of being in Calleo’s arms. She recalled a picture of her snow globe in her head: the little cable cars climbing the hills; the Golden Gate bridge in the background.

As the song ended, Severus twirled Hermione away and then back into his arms. Another
instrumental version of some unknown song began to play.

“Thank you. I always wondered what the words to that song were,” Hermione said quietly.

“You’re welcome. So did your parents go to San Francisco while in America?” Severus asked with great interest.

“Yes, there and many other places, too.”

“Really. What was San Francisco like?”

“Well,” Hermione began, trying to recall what her parents told her and using the memory of the local landmarks in her snow globe to guide her. “They have cable cars that function like buses that go up and down the hills there. My parents rode one and said it was rather quaint.” Severus hummed, encouraging her to continue. “They were there during the summer and said it was unbelievably cold. They were shocked to be in sunny California only to be freezing in the middle of summer in San Francisco. They said the fog rolls in and makes the place unbearably chilly.”

“Go on.”

“Let’s see. They also went to this prison called Alcatraz that is on this little island in the middle of the bay. It’s not a prison anymore; it is a tourist attraction now. But just having them tell me about the cold weather and a prison on a rock in the middle of the frigid water just made me think they were describing Azkaban,” Hermione casually commented, trying to discern if Calleo had any reaction to her mention of Azkaban prison. Since there seemed to be no physical reaction to her comment, she figured Calleo was definitely not a Death Eater.

Severus studied Hermione, trying to determine if she was indeed toying with him at the mention of Azkaban, or was only relaying facts he requested. To keep his own mind as preoccupied as hers, he asked, “So where else did your parents travel to while in America?”

Without her sight, Hermione could not check the time to make sure she was not staying too late. It made no difference as she had told Ron that she might be back late. Still, the time flew. It wasn't until they stopped dancing and had another glass of lemonade and some chilled fresh fruit that Hermione asked about the time.
“Eleven-thirty?” Hermione said, repeating what Calleo had just informed her, sitting up straighter with worry about how late she had stayed.

“Correction, eleven-thirty-one,” Severus amended his previous statement.

Collapsing back onto the settee, Hermione sighed. Popping the last slice of tree-ripened peach into her mouth, she shrugged as she said, “I shouldn't worry. I told my husband I'd be home late anyway.” It still didn't stop the little knot of guilt in her stomach from making itself felt.

Severus just finished an exceptionally juicy plum before commenting, “Afraid your carriage will turn into a pumpkin if you don't leave in time?”

Hermione ignored the rather blatant reference to Muggle fairy tales, as the witch that inspired that particular fairy tale had seen her wand snapped in half for breaking International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy laws. It was her fault, due to her flamboyant antics of turning mice into coachmen, and rags into haute couture and glass footwear.

A melancholy smile graced her lips. “I have to admit, this has probably been one of the most romantic nights of my life.” It saddened her that a night like this had to happen with a man she wanted so badly, but could not allow herself to have. ‘Why did I marry someone like Ron instead of Calleo?’

“Come now,” he challenged her. “The most romantic night of your life?”

“Yes.” Of course she meant it. Not the first time she made love with Ron, nor her wedding night filled her with even a fraction of the passion she had experienced this night. From his caresses to the way he fed her during dinner, or the way he ground himself against her in the kitchen; none of these could ever be eclipsed by any memory of her time with Ron.

“Truly?” Severus understood the gravity of her statement.

“Truly.”

They sat in tense silence as they sipped their drinks. Severus contemplated removing her blindfold, but then stopped himself. He would let Hermione have this one perfect night. It would not be ruined with revelations of his identity that she would no doubt find disturbing. Monday was but
only four days away. There was much they had talked about tonight, and he had given her many hints along the way to lead her on the path to answers. Four days was plenty of time to let her think on their conversation.

Picking up Hermione's hand that rested next to his, Severus brought it to his lips for a simple kiss on her palm. “Then I am glad to have given you something to remember so fondly.”

Hermione felt his breath upon her palm and the brush of his lips. When he didn't remove his lips from her hand, she began tentatively exploring his face. Her fingertips brushed along Calleo's cheekbones and slowly down to his jaw. She felt Calleo's own hand move from her wrist to the crook of her arm, his own fingers making lazy circles on the inside of her arm. It seemed strange to touch another man who was not her husband so intimately, but thoughts of Ron did not surface during her exploration. Reaching Calleo's chin, her fingers brushed against his lips; his breath was warm, and his lips soft. Moving up his face, she traced the profile of his nose, marking the slope of it until her fingers reached his brow.

Severus reached out with his other hand and wrapped it around Hermione's waist, pulling her closer.

Hermione let out a small gasp of surprise as she felt Calleo's possessive hand about her waist. She continued discovering his face by touch alone. Stroking his brow, she was pleased by a gentle relaxed sigh coming from Calleo.

He never knew that the simple stroking of one's brow could make one so drowsy. Closing his eyes, he let Hermione continue touching him tenderly. When he leaned into her touch, he was pleased when she repeated the simple action of rubbing his forehead.

She decided that being held so close to Calleo in this manner was quite different from dancing. There was no music to give reason as to why she was in his arms. Hermione reached Calleo's hairline and decided to satisfy her curiosity on one point. She wanted to feel what it would be like to run her fingers through his hair. The action of her fingers sliding though his locks was met with a sigh of approval. Emboldened, Hermione raked her fingers through his hair, her nails scraping the scalp lightly, and she was rewarded with a pleasure-induced growl from Calleo.

Pulling Hermione closer still, Severus moved the hand that wasn't around her waist up her back to the nape of her neck, stroking the skin with the pads of his fingers.

Hermione couldn't breathe. The sensation of Calleo's touch on her neck made her head spin faster. She pulled Calleo to her even more and buried her face into his shoulder. Both of her hands were
busy running her fingers through his hair.

Sitting back, Severus pulled Hermione on top of him so that she was straddling him.

Hermione was intensely aware that she was in the exact position she had fantasized herself in earlier that evening, straddling Calleo on the settee. Throwing caution to the wind and wanting another fantasy fulfilled, she began grinding herself against Calleo as she kept her face buried against his shoulder, her fingers still running through his hair.

Severus' hands ran down her back to her waist as he started to guide her movements. Planting his feet on the floor, he began grinding back up against Hermione.

Burying his face against Hermione's shoulder, he began nuzzling her neck, grazing his nose along her throat. Moaning, he said with desperation, “Do you have any idea how badly I want you?”

Hermione immediately stopped and removed herself from atop Calleo, short of leaping off his lap. She loved the feel of Calleo's hot breath on her neck, but once again, she had found herself on the precipice of temptation. Resolving to be firm with herself, Hermione said, “This can't go on. We can't keep winding up in these situations. I'll give you my answer next Monday. If I decide that I can't do this, I still want to come visit you and have dinner and wonderfully long conversations. But we can't keep falling into these...” Hermione panted trying to regain her own breath. “I'll give you my answer next Monday. I promise.”

Severus adjusted himself discreetly before sitting up. “Very well. And if you decide you cannot take things further, I will refrain from tempting you and myself into these compromising positions. As must you,” he warned her politely. This time it may have been instigated by him, but he still felt the incident in the kitchen was Hermione's fault.

Nodding, Hermione agreed. “I think it's time for me to go home.”

Severus guided her to the door to bid her good night. Before he reached to open the door, Hermione turned and embraced him in a hug. He returned the hug with the same intensity, feeling her trembling arms wrapped around his chest, her small hands pressed into his back. She smelled of sweat and something indefinably sweet.

Once the door was closed and Hermione was on her way, the raven-haired wizard sank down on the settee and sighed. Leaning over with his elbows on his knees, and holding fistfuls of hair in his
hands with frustration, he muttered to himself, “This has got to stop.” It mortified him that he had wound up begging her for more, *twice.*

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The door clicked shut and Hermione was finally able to remove the blindfold. Blinking to remove the fuzziness of her eyesight, she found the three-candle chandelier hanging in the center staircase well of the building rather bright, though normally it would seem quite dim to her.

After rubbing her eyes, her vision finally became focused. She looked at the length of black silk in her hand, and decided to take it home with her as a souvenir. She would put it in her escape box with her letter from Calleo and the other secrets she kept from Ron.

As she descended the stairs from the fourth floor, her gaze was fixed on the third floor door in front of her. Walking by, she remembered that Draco lived there. Hermione stopped and glanced up to the fourth floor. It was another strong coincidence. Snape and Malfoy were both spies together for the Order. It would be only natural that they would somehow stick together. Hermione violently shook her head, certain that Snape was not the man occupying the fourth floor flat, and that it was some other black-haired wizard with a prominent nose – by what she could feel, anyway – and with a knack for Potions.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 37 A/N: Charmeuse is a type of weave of silk. Very soft, matte on one side and satiny on the other. Often used for making blouses.

Sanskrit has often been described as the language of scholars in India. And to learn more about the variety of Chinese language, I highly recommend visiting this web site: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_language

“I Left My Heart In San Francisco”: Written by by George Cory and Douglass Cross.

In regards to the comment about being able to understand other romantic languages once you have mastered one, if you have a problem with that you can take it up with my college linguistics professor, as he made that statement. (This is true, as they are all related under the common root of Latin, I believe. ~ Horserider)

I've always had a theory that long distance mail via overseas was sent by albatross, as owls just could not make the journey over the ocean. (Works for me! ~Horserider)
Hermione Apparated home from work. She was already running late. Ron was probably already dressed for Harry's birthday party. Once in the living room, she saw Ron stretched out on the couch, wearing cowboy boots, cowboy hat, plaid shirt and blue jeans, and reading the latest issue of *Which Broom*.

“Bout time you got home,” Ron quipped snidely, not looking up from his periodical.

“Thanks,” Hermione muttered darkly in response to her husband's less than enthusiastic greeting.

Bolting off to the bedroom, Mrs. Weasley stripped quickly and rushed through her shower. Washing her mop, which reeked of rancid troll belly button lint, she was thankful that she had picked an easy costume, and that a simple chignon at the base of the neck was all she had to do with her hair. Dressed as a rancher's wife, Hermione laced up her boots and rushed back into the living room to find Ron still reading his magazine.

“Right here,” Ron said, lifting a box from the floor to show his wife that he had not forgotten to get it gift-wrapped. “Come on. We're running late,” Ron grumbled.

“I'm sorry, Ron! It's not my fault that Trevor, the dipshit, set the lab on fire!” Hermione yelled. “I couldn’t exactly plan for it so that I could come home on time!”

“Never mind,” her husband sighed. “Let's just go over.”

Stepping through the Floo together, they emerged into the living room of the Potters’ home.

Ginny greeting them immediately. “Perfect timing! The party is just getting started!” she said, giving both of them a kiss and a hug.

Hermione shot Ron a dirty look for his earlier complaining before she walked away to find something alcoholic to drink.

Standing at the bar – made up of some rough-hewn planks placed over some sawhorses, to add to that makeshift “Wild West” look – the weary witch saw Dobby playing bartender, and sporting a ten-gallon hat, checkered vest and barman's apron

“What have you got that's strong?” Hermione asked Dobby, as the house-elf served up another shot of bourbon to Kingsley Shacklebolt.

“Whiskey, Kentucky bourbon, rye, Cactus Wine, and ice cold beer,” the house-elf cheerfully informed her.

Remembering what had happened the last time she had drunk beer first rather than liquor, Hermione said, “Whiskey, please.” Glancing about the living room, she commented to no one in particular, but loud enough for Kingsley to hear, “Ginny really outdid herself this time.” Hermione was amazed at all the little details, from the wagon wheel chandelier and dynamite keg chairs, to the red velvet Victorian fainting couch and sawdust on the floor. Fred and George were in the corner, both sporting Mohawks, leggings and breech cloths, and having some argument over who was the last of the Mohicans.
“Yes, Ginny certainly did,” the black Auror responded. He was eyeing a saloon painting featuring a zaftig woman in a very snug red corset with black lace trim. The portrait winked at Kingsley before flirting with the other guests in the living room.

“It's good to see you, Kingsley. Where's Amphigoria?” Hermione asked, looking about for his wife.

“We're temporarily separated,” the large wizard said with little emotion, his eyes looking a little far away.

“I'm sorry to hear that.” Knowing how hard it was to have a sympathetic ear, Hermione sidled up to the Auror. “If you ever need a sympathetic ear, you know where to find me.”

Shacklebolt mutely nodded, pursing his lips appearing to be lost in his thoughts.

“Hermione!”

Spinning on her heel, the brunette witch saw Harry burst into the room. As the summer night of his party was balmy, the birthday boy was bare-chested, dressed in soft-sole moccasins and a pair of suede britches with fringe along the side, a bone choker necklace, and a couple of artfully placed eagle feathers dangling from the back of his head. Before she knew it, she was pulled into a rather rough hug.

“Hermione, so glad you and Ron could make it,” Harry said once more loudly with a slight slur.

Looking down at the beer bottle clutched in his hand, Hermione asked, “Harry, how many of those have you had?”

“Jus'za couple.” Before Hermione could comment that maybe he should eat something before drinking any more, Harry let go of her and advanced on the wizard next to her. “Kingsley!”

 Unsure if she should shake her head or be glad that Harry was letting loose and having a good time, Hermione got herself another round of whiskey for sipping and took off towards the garden.
Stepping out into the garden, Hermione smiled. The place had truly been transformed. In front of a trompe l'oeil painting of snow-capped mesas and Saguaro cactus, Vladimir's Cowboy Jazz Band played Dixieland Jazz with a distinct Western Swing influence. The band members were wizards dressed in traditional American Union soldier garb. How Ginny had found a band of wizarding cowboy jazzmen in England, Hermione couldn't even imagine. A tumbleweed rolled past, followed by a gaggle of Weasleys who then ran off in the opposite direction.

The center of the garden featured a fire pit with a side of buffalo, slowly turning on a spit over red-hot coals. Winky, on temporary loan from Hogwarts, was slicing up huge chunks of roasted meat onto a floating platter. Surrounding the fire pit was a ring of tipis. Along the back of the garden was a buffet table set up, with a long line of guests helping themselves to the bountiful feast set before them.

Hermione spied Ron cutting in line to stand next to Charlie, obviously hoping that he would not need to go to the back of the line to wait for food. Shaking her head in disgust over her husband's lack of good manners where his stomach was concerned, Hermione moved down into the garden. She moved among the guests who were finding a nice spot on the ground – or spare powder keg, or box marked “dynamite” – on which to sit and eat their dinner. Eventually she ran into Ginny, as the redhead bustled about making sure the party was running smoothly.

“Ginny, is there anything I can do to help?” Hermione offered.

Mrs. Potter, dressed in an ornately beaded Plains Indian dress, stopped and placed her mouth close to Hermione's ear. “We need to talk later, in private.” Hermione nodded, understanding that her friend was busy, but once things settled down they needed to have a chat. “Please, help yourself to the buffet. I see you have a drink already.”

“Yes, thank you...” Hermione looked up. She saw that Ginny had disappeared into the house to take care of some other details that needed addressing at the moment.

Once Hermione had a plate heaped with fried chicken, corn on the cob, American-style biscuits, chili beans, and some Indian fry bread, she ambled off among the tipis in order to find a patch of ground to sit upon and eat. Seeing Bill, Fleur and their gaggle of urchins sitting down on a large picnic blanket eating their dinner, Hermione decided to join them.

Hermione noticed Fleur was not eating. “Did you already eat, Fleur?”
“No, I do not think eet would be wise,” her sister-in-law informed her.

“Why not?”

Leaning over, as much as her rather large and pregnant belly would allow, the half-Veela whispered, “I think I am in labor.”

“What? What are you doing here then?” Hermione asked, looking a little panic-stricken.

“I thought eet might be false labor, juz like what happened with Philippe,” Fleur said, casting a glance at her second oldest child whose face was partially obscured by a thick layer of barbecue sauce. “But since we've arrived, the contractions zeem to be getting longer, stronger, and closer together.”

“Why don't you leave then?”

“Because,” Bill informed her, “they are only fifteen minutes apart, and we have plenty of time. We can stick around until they are five minutes apart, and then leave the kids here to camp out overnight with everyone else in a tipi. Besides, we want to stick around for part of the party, since we did bother to dress up.”

“Oh.” Hermione looked at their costumes, and quietly admitted to herself that they did look rather nice. Bill was dressed as a gentleman gambler, and Fleur had donned a saloon girl costume altered to cover her swollen belly. The children were all dressed in cowboy outfits, including little toy guns with holsters.

“Then I guess you don't mind if I take the kids with me to Ron's game tomorrow, since Ginny and I sort of discussed the arrangements for watching the children,” Hermione asked.

“Not at all,” Bill said brightly. “Just don't count on being able to watch the game. You should probably have Ginny and Harry come along to help you watch them, since you'll probably be running one or more of the kids to the loo during the game.”

“That's a good idea. I'll talk with Ginny later after she's had a chance to sit, once the party has settled down,” Hermione replied.
“Ginny has really outdone herself,” the pregnant witch noted with admiration. “This ees zee most fabulous party. So original!”

Before Hermione could add her own remarks, Michael, who was Bill and Fleur's oldest child, came up to Hermione and asked plainly, “When are you and Uncle Ron going to have a baby?”

Hermione blanched before regaining her composure. “Uh, erm. Well, someday. We just haven't gotten around to it.”

Michael nodded, his expression one of deep thought, before he piped up and added, “Auntie Penelope says that maybe if you loved Uncle Ron more than your career, you'd have a baby by now.”

Hermione was gobsmacked.

“Michael!” Bill and Fleur simultaneously scolded their child. Both of them turned to look at Hermione in deep embarrassment for their child's behavior. Poor Michael had no idea what he did wrong, but he got the distinct impression that he should not have said what he had.

“I am so sorry, Hermione,” Bill began apologizing profusely. “I had no idea... Michael! You will apologize to your Aunt Hermione right now. That wasn't very polite.”

Michael look very distraught. Before he could open his mouth, the tears began rolling down his round cheeks.

Hermione put aside her plate of food and pulled the child into her lap, hugging him tightly. “Shhhhh, it's alright, Michael. You didn't know. You were only repeating what someone else said about me,” she said, casting an eye about to see if Percy's wife was about, in order to give her a rather nasty look. “I suggest in the future that you don't repeat what other people say about someone else. It's called gossip, and it's not very nice.” She tipped up her nephew's chin to have Michael look her in the eye. “All right?”

Michael nodded before hopping off his aunt's lap to go finish his fry bread.
“I am so sorry, Hermione,” Bill apologized once more.

Putting up a hand to stop her brother-in-law, the youngest Mrs. Weasley said, “Bill, it's not his fault. He didn't know it was a hurtful thing to say. He's just repeating what he overheard. Penelope is the one who should apologize, if anyone should. Unfortunately, I haven't seen her yet, and I don't want to make a scene at Harry's party. Needless to say, at some point in the future I intend to ___”

Hermione was cut off in mid-sentence when Fleur took a rather sharp intake of breath and braced her hands along her back.

“Breathe,” instructed Bill, scooting over to his wife to rub her back as she sat there with her eyes shut, her breath sounding like a hiss through clenched teeth. Once the contraction was over, Bill looked at his watch. ‘Eleven minutes. It looks like we are going to St. Mungo's tonight.” Bill grasped Fleur's hand and gave it a squeeze, before giving her a quick kiss on her brow.

Hermione smiled at the sight of husband and wife in a tender moment, enjoying the knowledge that their child was going to be born soon. A pang of envy ran through the brunette witch in the knowledge that she would probably never feel this sort of deep visceral connection with Ron, if she ever had his children.

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Hermione kept on ignoring Ron during the party. Periodically, she would swing by to see if Fleur was all right, but it was not necessary, as Bill never left her side, except to help change the nappies of their youngest child, Colette. Making the rounds, Hermione chatted with Tonks for a bit before talking with George. The slightly younger of the Weasley twins was giving Hermione an up-to-date account of their thriving business.

“Yeah, the market is only so big when you have mostly kids with a weekly allowance for clients,” George commented as he nursed his beer. “So Fred and I decided a few weeks ago to expand into the adult market.”

“But I thought you already did sell to adults with those things you make,” Hermione replied, trying not to blush as she lowered her voice in embarrassment.

George cast an eye about for young children to make sure none were near. “If you can't say vibrator or dildo, you can always say 'adult novelties' instead,” George said with a chuckle. “Besides, it's all Owl-Order right now for those items, as we can't necessarily sell a ten-inch pulsating willy next to our fake wands. People might get them confused, and neither Fred or I want to go before the Wizengamot under charges of corrupting underage wizards. No, we're going to be
opening an adult-oriented shop that specializes in accoutrements for the bedroom later this year.”

“Really? And what made you decide to do that?” Hermione asked, curious to understand their reasoning behind expanding into a business that bordered on sordid.

“We have a friend who dabbles in how Muggles spend their money, and on what. She said that Muggles in England spend over five million pounds a year on all sorts of things – lube, toys,” George stopped and looked about once more to make sure none of the children could hear before adding, “kinky costumes, and erotic lingerie.”

“You can't exactly sell stuff like that in a shop that caters to children,” Hermione agreed.

“No, which is why we are looking for new digs in which to open up a new shop.”

“So you will sell your – erm – adult novelties in this new place? What else can you sell there?” Hermione asked.

“Madam Malkin has given us connections to someone who can provide the lingerie and costumes. We have a silent partner that will be providing us with sex potions and other things of a Potions-based nature. Since we have the most experience operating a retail business, we're in charge of opening the new store and running it.” George suddenly stepped back and looked Hermione up and down. “We will need someone with a good head on their shoulders to run the store, since Fred and I still need to continue experimenting with new items for the Treble W,” he said, using the family nickname for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. “Care to leave that stodgy job of yours at the Ministry and work someplace fun, that pays a hell of a lot more than your current job, and that gives you a bit more respect than slaving away in the basement?”

Hermione blinked, unable to respond. Her brother-in-law was offering her a job that offered her much more potential than her current position. As tempting as it seemed, Hermione didn't know if she could manage a business that sold the promise of interesting and better sex. It would be ironic if she did land the position and still wound up having the most pathetic sex life of anyone she knew.

“I don't know, George,” she began to politely decline. “It's a generous offer, but I really... I... I... it's not that I don't appreciate the offer, it's just...” she stuttered and shrugged her shoulders, unable to verbalize how the situation flattered her – for his faith in her ability to help run a business – and embarrassed her at the same time.
She could just imagine it now. Hermione would run into an old acquaintance from the Ministry who would ask her what she was doing lately. 'Oh, yes, I now manage a store that sells sex toys, strawberry-flavored fucking gel, and sleazy lingerie. And you?'

"We're still looking for a location in which to set up shop. Don't make your decision now," George told her. "I assure you that it would be very tasteful, and would not be the sort of store to attract dirty old wizards who are stooped over from playing pocket pool all day. This store would cater to the housewitch who is in search of something to spice up the bedroom. Our unnamed partner says there is a huge market of unsatisfied housewives out there who need our novelties."

Thinking it would be prudent to sit and meditate on the matter for a while, and unwilling to close out the option, Hermione said, "Very well, I'll think on it." Leaning close to George, she asked in a whisper, "In order to help me make my decision, I think it would be best if get a small sample of the goods you currently sell. After all, I would have to become familiar with your product line if I were to sell it." Hermione hoped her blush was not visible by the dim firelight. It was a rather roundabout way for her to ask her brother-in-law to send her a couple of dildos and vibrators without outright asking for them.

George stood back and gave her a cheeky smile. "And you are not going to hex me this time if I send you some items?" he asked, remembering the hex Hermione had given him and Fred the last time they owled her a prehensile vibrator to sample.

"No. Just don't tell Ron. Please?" She hoped George would honor her request.

"What? You think he might be threatened by some silly little toys?"

Hermione closed her eyes and grimaced, debating how much to let slip that things were not so rosy between her and her husband.

Sensing the struggle that Hermione was having and how mortified she looked, George relented and said, "Take it easy. Fred and I won't say a thing about it to our little brother. Thank you for considering it anyway. We would prefer to keep this in the family, as we would be hesitant to trust a stranger to run a new venture we are heavily investing in."

Feeling honored that they would trust her in a new business venture, she thanked George once more for his faith in her before wandering off to see if Ginny was ready to talk. Everyone seemed to be fed and was currently socializing, and it wasn't time for cake and presents yet, so Hermione figured that this would be a good time to see what Ginny wanted.
After grabbing an ice-cold beer for herself, Hermione found the young redheaded witch in a circle of old friends from Hogwarts. Luna, Seamus, Dean, Neville, Kevin Entwhistle, Hannah Abbott, and Ginny were sitting around a campfire, set out in front of one of the many tipis, regaling each other with old tales of their days at Hogwarts.

Hermione greeted everyone as she sat herself down next to Ginny. She listened to a few stories before leaning over, to quietly ask if Ginny wanted to find someplace more private in which to chat.

Ginny rose and excused herself, proclaiming that she needed to check on the party while asking Hermione to assist her on a few things. Making a circuit of the grounds and inquiring of a few people to see if they were having a good time, Ginny then steered Hermione into a tipi in the back corner of the garden, away from the light and bustle of revelers.

Sitting down on the soft furry pile of sheepskins, Hermione asked grimly, “What is up?”

Plopping down on another pile of plush hides, Ginny looked like she was torn between crying and laughing hysterically. “Ha, ha, ha! Where to begin.” She cast a Silencing Charm to make sure no one would overhear through the thin tent-like structure. “I suppose I'll start out with the good news: I'm not pregnant.” Before Hermione could ask any questions, Ginny plodded on. “I was late. I took a test earlier today to confirm that I'm not pregnant, and then right after I got my result, the old crone decided to come visit me then. She would have to wait and give me a scare like that. I think it was stress. Thank God I'm not, though.” Mrs. Potter flopped onto her back and let out a huge sigh of relief, while staring blankly up at the top of the tipi.

“What would happen if you were pregnant?” the older witch asked.

“Then I'd be sweating bullets wondering if it was Harry's or Draco's.”

“What if it was Harry's? Would that be so bad?” Hermione knew she could have phrased it differently, but the alcohol in her system short-circuited the portion of her brain associated with tact and word selection.

“Would it be bad? That would mean I could never divorce Harry!” Ginny exclaimed, sitting up and looking agitated.

“And what would happen if you did try to divorce him after you had a child?” Now Hermione
wished she had gone back to Flourish & Blotts to finish reading that book on marriage and family she had briefly browsed.

“You mean you don't know?” Ginny asked, looking astounded at the prospect of Hermione being ignorant on the matter. The brunette just shook her head. “Haven't you ever wondered why Tom Riddle's mother died in childbirth?”

Hermione had to admit the thought had never crossed her mind. She shook her head dumbly.

“Tom Riddle's father found out his wife was a witch while she was pregnant and dissolved the marriage,” Ginny explained. “Because Tom Riddle's father was a Muggle, the divorce did not affect him, but it did affect Tom Riddle's mother. It killed her.”

Unaware her mouth was hanging open in shock, Hermione found it hard to blink. After a moment, she snapped her mouth shut and asked, “But she stayed alive long enough to bear Tom Riddle.”

“That was the only thing keeping her alive. The life force of Tom Riddle overrode the breaking of the marriage, letting her live just long enough to give birth. I mean, when was the last time you ever heard of a witch dying in childbirth? It's practically unheard of!”

Hermione shook her head back and forth, shocked at this revelation. “WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME THIS BEFORE!”

“I would have thought that when you learned about the inability to divorce once you had children, it would have made you pick up a book and read the rest!” Ginny yelled back at her friend. “Besides, I thought you would have understood the implications of being unable to break marriage vows and magical bonds once children are born! This is why I am so pissed at my mother for not informing you of everything involved with a wizard's marriage!”

“I haven't had time to read, much less contemplate the repercussions of leaving Ron if I were to have his children!” the older witch screeched frantically.

“Well, now you know! I can't believe my mother at times,” Ginny seethed. “My mum assured me that she had briefed you on everything before the wedding, but I don't consider the topic of death upon divorce after childbearing a topic that should have been skipped. It's just like her. I should have known,” the redheaded witch continued to fume. “She doesn't open her mouth when it suits her, and THEN she assumes things that aren't true and opens her mouth when it ISN'T
“You can calm down, Ginny. At least YOU told me, even if your mum hasn't,” Hermione bit out, trying to regain a sense of calm.

“That's just it! I just found out what else she's been doing to royally fuck up my life!” Ginny stopped speaking and continued to shake with uncontrollable rage. As her face started to change from red to purple, Mrs. Potter opened her mouth and let out a scream of bitter frustration and anguish. Heaving a huge gulping breath as she started to sob, Ginny wailed, “I just found out from Harry what my mother told him when we were still dating. I can't believe the lies she has told!”

Hermione inched over to Ginny and pulled her crying friend into her arms, rocking her gently. “Tell me what happened,” Hermione coaxed her.

Once Ginny stopped crying long enough to form coherent words, she sat back up and began to describe the course of events. “When Harry and I first started dating, my mum took Harry aside and told him, besides keeping me a virgin until we were married, to 'be gentle with me.' Basically, she fed Harry a sack of lies that Tom Riddle did sexual things to me against my will while under his influence. 'Deviant things,' as she called them.”

“No!” Hermione interjected in a scandalized whisper. She knew that Tom Riddle's diary had manipulated Ginny's mind and emotions, but nothing of a physical nature had transpired according to what the redheaded witch told Hermione over the years – besides trying to drain her of her life force in the Chamber of Secrets.

“Oh, yes,” Ginny refuted. “She made Harry think that I was sexually molested, and told him not to do anything to me that might seem traumatic or bring back 'horrific memories while under the dark influence of that inhuman creature.' She never even asked me if anything like that happened, she merely assumed it. No wonder Harry thought I was sick when I wanted to be a little creative in the bedroom.”

“When did you find this out?” Hermione asked, still stunned by this additional revelation.

“Last night. Harry and I had quite a bit to drink in celebration of his birthday, and he finally confessed what my mother told him. My mum instructed him not to say anything out of fear of dragging up old memories that she hoped I would keep repressed. SHE NEVER EVEN ASKED ME WHAT HAPPENED!” The younger witch shook her head. “It still wouldn't have changed the fact that I think of Harry more like a friend and brother than a husband and lover, but at least we would not have had the abysmal sex life we've had for the past three years. I'm so furious with my mum, I
couldn’t even look her in the eye when she arrived tonight for fear of making a scene. I've been avoiding her all night.”

“Oh, Ginny,” Hermione sighed sympathetically. “I had no idea. I'm so sorry.” Pulling her friend back into a hug to share their commiseration over Molly Weasley's actions and inactions, Hermione observed, “At least you know now.”

“Yeah, always too late. And this isn't the only time she has drastically interfered in my life,” Ginny growled with restrained rancor.

“You mean she's done this before?” Hermione was aghast; it seemed that Molly had purposefully done something appalling that was of equal or greater magnitude.

Ginny rolled her eyes to look up at the pinnacle of the tent and replied, “If I go into it now, it will be like reliving it all over again. I will feel compelled to go poison that woman's drink and hope there is no antidote at St. Mungo's.” Dropping her gaze to meet Hermione’s, she ground out, “Let's just say that if she hadn't interfered like she did, things might have turned out quite different.”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked warily, wondering what else happened.

Mrs. Potter sighed and dropped her head in defeat. In an anguished voice, she answered, “I'll tell you at some point in the future, but not now. It's too painful to go into at this moment.”

“Malfoy?”

Keeping her head down, Ginny nodded, looking like a woman whose spirit was on the verge of breaking.

Hermione let the matter rest, knowing what it was like, not wanting to talk about painful memories at times. She did figure this was a good time to bring up a question she had wanted to ask Ginny without sounding too suspicious. “Ginny?” Her friend raised her head to regard her curiously grave tone. “When did you know you were in love with Malfoy? How was it that you knew it was more than love, that you were in love with him? Was it some great revelation that came out of the blue, or was it something slow?”

Ginny scrutinized Hermione with a penetrating eye, and Hermione felt once more that she was
being laid bare with the knowledge that her heart belonged to someone other than Ron.

“When? I guess you could say I never stopped loving him from the time we were first separated.” The younger witch's gaze softened. “I didn't realize I was already in love with him at the time the Death Eater Decree came out, but when I saw him again that first time a year and a half ago, I just knew then that I loved him just as much.”

“Yes, but how did you know?” Hermione asked, desperate for some answer to help solve her own questions regarding the state of her heart.

Ginny had a distracted look about her, as if she was recalling some dearly fond memory from childhood. “You just do. It can't be measured by quantity or by any value. It's something you know in your bones. When you are deeply in love with someone, you can't wait to be with them; and when you are together, time flies. Time can't go fast enough when you're apart. And when it is time to leave each other's company, you don't want to go. Each time you part, it seems like you'll be cast into a gray world until you can be together again. It's like a part of your soul remains with him when you leave, and you'll only feel whole when you're with him again. When you're with the one you love, it feels like you've never been happier in your life, and you wondered how you went through life before not knowing this sort of joy.”

Hermione sat there absorbing Ginny's summary of love. If this was what being in love was like, then Hermione could suppose she was in love with Calleo. It was true she felt things she never had before when in his presence, but she questioned if this was love or just an infatuation taken to the extreme, fueled by her sexual frustration and loneliness.

Sensing Hermione lost in thought, Ginny rose and announced, “I need to take care of a few things before the cake is served.” Placing a hand on Hermione's shoulder, Mrs. Potter said, “Thanks for listening. I really needed to get that off my chest. I think I can survive the rest of the party without hexing my mother now... possibly.”

Hermione chuckled lightly with Ginny.

“I think I'll stay here for a bit before going back to the party, if you don't mind,” Hermione stated, although it came out more like a request.

“Take as long as you want. Cake will be served in about thirty minutes. You want me to come get you when it's time, so you don't miss it?”
“No, I’ll be there. I just need a few minutes to collect my thoughts.”

“All right, then.” Ginny ended the Silencing Charm, and the noise of the party flooded back into the tent. Just before she pulled back the flap and exited, she said once more, “Thanks.”

Hermione nodded, and was quickly lost in thought once more.

’Could I really be in love?’ She giggled nervously, though part of it was the fact that Hermione did tend to feel dreamily blithe when thinking about Calleo. If being truly in love is as Ginny described it, then I guess I am in love with him. A physical sensation bordering on euphoria suddenly filled her senses with this realization. For so long she had silently envied those that had found love and experienced the excitement of romance. I'm in love.’

A smile that spoke of rapturous elation was plastered on Hermione's face as she fell on her back amid the plush fur pelts that padded the tipi floor. Closing her eyes, she imagined Calleo there with her in the tipi alone. Remembering the night of her first dance lesson, she conjured the mental image of Calleo lying next to her, propped up on one elbow while hovering over her. I'm in love with a man I've never kissed.’ Hermione imagined Calleo kissing her deeply while recalling her dream from earlier that week. Rubbing her thighs together, she remembered what it felt like to have Calleo's legs rub against hers as they danced. Thinking about the way he felt when he ground himself against her, Hermione brought her hand up under her skirt and started rubbing herself through her knickers.

As the rhythm of her hand picked up, and she found herself having to bite down on her lip in order to keep quiet, Hermione's self-pleasuring fantasy was cut short when a couple of voices approached the tipi in which she still lay.

“I don't think it would be appropriate to talk about such matters here at Harry's party,” a deep voice said, as the two approaching shadows became more distinct against the side of the tipi.

“Come now,” said a gruff voice that Hermione recognized as Alastor Moody's. “No one can overhear us.”

“You forget who invented Extendable Ears, and how many pairs could be floating about at this party,” commented the other voice, that Hermione finally recognized as Kingsley Shacklebolt’s.

“Fine, if you're going to be that way,” Moody growled.
Hermione heard the elder Auror cast the Silencing Charm, and was surprised when she heard the figures continue speaking. *'I must be inside the spell's bubble,'* she surmised, figuring by the fact that the two figures were right next to the tipi, and she was included in the charm by accident. *'Moody and Kingsley don't know I'm here.'* Sitting quietly, Hermione listened through the canvas that divided her from the two wizards.

“This can wait until Monday when we're both at work, Alastor,” Kingsley said with some impatience. “This is a party; it's time to relax a little.”

Moody's skeptical snort was unmistakable. “You never know when some dark wizard will come along, and then I won't be around to tell you what was on my mind at the time. You know just as well as I do how you can be here one day and gone the next.”

“Fine,” Kingsley replied with resignation. “We'll talk shop, but I'm here to enjoy myself, not spend all night talking about work.”

“I wanted to talk to you about Malfoy and Snape.”

At the mention of the two ex-Death Eaters' names, Hermione perked up, hoping to learn something that she might find useful in the future, when she got around to working on clearing their names.

“What about them?” Shacklebolt sounded a bit aloof, yet he couldn't seem to help but sound a bit defensive in his quick reply.

“It not only concerns them, but all the parolees you oversee. I want you, and the other Aurors who oversee Death Eaters, to start making surprise visits to their places of work. I think we've been too lax, and that's why Dolohov went off like he did,” Alastor explained.

“Dolohov went off because of the restrictive nature of the Death Eater Decree, just as Snape said someone would,” the junior Auror countered. “He was right in that we should have shipped them off to Azkaban, and for those that we could not convict, placed an informant in their midst in order to keep tabs on them.”

“And Snape would be so willing to go to Azkaban?” the grizzled wizard scoffed. “I find that hard to believe considering how cowardly he went, going to beg for Albus' forgiveness in order to keep his manipulative arse out of there years ago. He just saw the writing on the wall and could sense
that Voldemort's first downfall was inevitable.

“No one could have guessed that Harry would have been Voldemort's downfall, not even Snape. You know as well as I do that Snape was true to the Order, as well as young Malfoy,” Kingsley insisted.

“You don't know if those two let the rest of the Death Eaters into the castle or not. I do find it convenient that they were both on a so-called mission when the Death Eaters slipped into Hogwarts.” Hermione heard Alastor cough and spit some phlegm onto the ground.

“Albus kept the dissemination of information down to a minimum, justly concerned that someone, if caught, could be brought before Voldemort and have their mind invaded. If Albus did tell anyone else about their mission, it was most probably Minerva, but she died in the attack. And by the time the attack was over and the dust settled, Albus was so far gone, he never properly regained consciousness again,” Shacklebolt summarized. “That doesn't definitively prove that they let the Death Eaters into the castle, or that Snape poisoned Albus.”

“Yes, but it doesn't prove that they didn't either,” Moody retorted. “Still, come Monday, I want you to look at your schedule and check into some unplanned visits to your parolees’ places of work; possibly their homes, And,” Moody added with emphasis, “no warning Malfoy and Snape beforehand. These are to be surprise visits. Understood?”

“Yes,” answered the black Auror reluctantly.

“Perhaps a surprise visit by Miss Brown's office would not be out of order either,” Alastor commented.

“Why would that be necessary?”

“Because anyone who would want to employ Malfoy and Snape is not above my suspicions,” Moody tartly replied.

Hermione's mind reeled at Moody's last comment. She was so busy processing this startling information that Snape worked for Lavender too that she missed the rest of what the two Aurors said. Still, she did not miss much, as the men ended the conversation quickly and rejoined the rest of the guests.
'Snape works for Lavender? If that's so, then he probably works as a...’ She couldn't breathe. 'No...no...no, no, no, No, No, No, NO, NO, NO!' Hermione's mind screamed as she placed her hands on either side of her head, hoping to squeeze the terrible realization from taking root in her mind. Desperately wishing it wasn't true, she began hyperventilating as she realized that Calleo was most probably Snape.

“It can't be,” she whispered to herself. “Oh, God, no.” She felt awash with nausea and numbness. “It can't be true,” the witch whimpered, clutching her arms to her stomach. Unable to feel her limbs due to emotional shock, Hermione squeezed her arms about her midsection tighter and began rocking back and forth, her eyes darting about, scanning the interior of the tipi without noticing a single detail of her surroundings.

No matter how hard she tried to deny it, facts and bits of information came floating to the top of her mind, piecing the whole unsavory puzzle together into a whole. Hermione began remembering snippets of conversation she had with Calleo: how he experimented with Potions until about four years ago, which would be about the same time as when the Death Eater Decree came out; Calleo's now obviously blatant hints about his Potions knowledge, knowledge that only a Potions master would have. 'All those comments about how a Potions master told him once, my arse!' Now she knew why Calleo, or should she think of him as Snape, had asked her that if she knew his identity, would she still remain friends with him.

Had she her senses, she would have cried. A physical feeling like a gaping hole burned in her chest, making her clutch her hand to her sternum. 'He lied to me,' Hermione thought. Before her mind could wander down that thought, she remembered how Calleo-Snape had said he had never outright lied to her, but downplayed his knowledge to hide his identity. Knowing he said that still didn't take away the numb tingling in her body, or the sensation that she was detached from reality.

Memories of the previous night flashed before her eyes. Hermione buried her face in her hands in mortified shame and guilt. “Oh, God,” she moaned pitifully. She had told him about her erotic dream of him, and then wound up dry humping him twice. She choked on the bile as it began to creep up her throat at the recollection of it, and she wished she could burn the image from her mind.

'I cannot be attracted to Snape! It's just not humanly possible!' But the more she analyzed it, the more it made sense that Calleo was actually Snape. The lengthy talk about Potions, his questions about logistics concerning brewing large quantities of Potion while freeing up other cauldrons, the body paint potion, and loaning her Potions journals. Then there was the time he commented on her use of the phrase, “Close only counts in Divination and Dementor's Kisses.” It was a phrase Snape used to use when a student claimed their Potions work was close to perfect.

Her emotions were trying to override the logical part of her mind. 'This can't be. I cannot be in love with... with... SNAPE! He put a love potion in my tea. That's the only answer!' But she knew that it
wasn't true, as she knew the effects of a love potion and she exhibited none of the symptoms. Besides, he drank from the same teapot as she did, so he couldn't have slipped it in that way. And most of the dishes during dinner were served from a communal serving dish, so Snape would have had the love potion too, if that's what it was. Hermione doubted that Snape would willingly imbibe a love potion under any circumstances. Still, no amount of logic could explain how she had fallen for a man such as Snape.

“How could I have been so stupid as not to have seen it right in front of my face all this time?” the harried witch berated herself in a whisper.

‘Malfoy lives on the third floor, Snape on the fourth.’ “I’m an idiot.” It was plain as day that Snape would be the one living right upstairs from Malfoy. Then it struck her that if Snape had told Malfoy of her visits, then that would mean that Ginny would know of her visits to see Calleo-Snape as well. Remembering how Ginny would look at her at times made a shiver run up Hermione's spine, certain that Ginny knew of her Thursday night trips to the Red Ginseng.

“Oh, God,” she cried softly once more, falling over and burying her face into the soft pelts. 'How can I face Ginny now, knowing that she knows. This can't get any worse,' the distraught Mrs. Weasley concluded. It made Hermione cringe to think about it.

Hermione continued to deny that Snape could fuel all the masturbation fantasies she had spun within her mind for the past several weeks. Though all the evidence weighed in favor of that fact, Hermione could not reconcile the two images in her mind. One image was a well-built man with a voice like warm silk who had a spirit of compassion, wit, intelligence, courtesy and patience; and smelled of all things sensual and seductive. The other image was a bitter, cruel, impatient, scrawny man who used every chance to make disparaging remarks to her and about her, whose mere voice instilled fear or wariness in most. Snape did not have a kind bone in his body, whereas Calleo had been kind to her in a time of need.

She was confused by images of the man who lived on the fourth floor of the Red Ginseng – whoever he might be – sitting across from her and sharing long dinners, dancing for hours with her, the way his body felt so good pressed up against hers, and how his presence drove her to near madness with desire. The physical remembrance of a rather impressive erection pressed against her bottom not twenty-four hours prior didn't help the matter either.

'It can't be him. Snape hates me, and Calleo definitely likes me and wants to pursue a more intimate relationship.'

Then Hermione recalled one snippet of conversation from a few weeks back where she had mentioned to “Calleo” how much her old Potions professor hated her, and would probably not let her apprentice under him. ’Maybe if he got to know you as something other than a student, perhaps
Hermione's mind went back to their conversation the night before and Calleo-Snape's mention of an apprenticeship. Was Snape offering her an apprenticeship? 'You're just imagining things,' she told herself. Maybe this crazy idea that Snape has been working as a gigolo and cooking her dinner on Thursday nights was nothing but an elaborate delusion in itself. Still, she could not ignore all those evenings filled with interesting conversations on a variety of subjects, and her arousal from his simple act of kissing her hand. Whoever the man was that she had fallen in love with, her body hummed with desire for him.

Denial once again reared itself in Hermione's conscience and seated itself firmly in her mind. The way Calleo kissed her palm, and pulled her on top of him in order to caress her breasts, and begged her so sweetly; no, he could not be Snape. Snape could not make her body feel tingly, aroused, and enthralled all at the same time. Snape could not make her fantasize about being lost amid soft bed sheets and tangled limbs panting, grunting and rutting away until she was deliciously raw in all the right places. Snape had not made her consider having an affair, essentially cheating on her husband.

Wondering what time it was, in order to get her mind off the fact that she was earlier considering becoming Snape's lover, or Calleo's, or whomever it was who she was attracted to, Hermione left the sanctuary of the tipi. She wandered off into the house just in time to sing happy birthday to Harry, watch him blow out the candles, and observe the little icing cowboys and Indians scatter when Ginny started cutting the cake.

Hermione felt a tug on her calico skirt. Looking down, she saw Michael (Bill and Fleur's oldest) standing next to her with a coy smile.

"Can I have your cowboy?" the small child asked.

"What?" Hermione looked at him in confusion, unable to understand what he was asking about.

"Your cowboy," Michael said, pointing to her square of cake, where the little icing cowboy had set up a tiny rampart of frosting from which to defend himself with his miniature icing rifle from intruders. "Can I have him? I have an Indian on my piece of cake, and I want to see what happens when they fight," her nephew explained.

Hermione didn't even know how the piece of cake wound up in her hand to begin with. She figured she must have been so lost in thought, she didn't notice when the plate with the piece of cake had been placed into her hand.
Once she nodded, Michael plucked off the little icing figure and happily ran off to plop the tiny sugar-charmed cowboy into his own piece of cake next to an Indian.

Forcing herself for politeness sake to eat her cake, still deep in thought and wishing she could stop thinking of additional parallels between Snape and Calleo, Hermione did not notice Ginny sit down next to her with her own piece of cake, now that all the guests had been served.

“You all right, Hermione?” Mrs. Potter asked, looking at her friend with a concerned expression.

“Yeah,” Hermione replied absentmindedly. Her mind still whirring, another question came to the forefront. ‘If Ginny doesn't know where Severus is, then does Malfoy?’

This was neither the time or place to ask such a dangerous question, especially when half of the Ministry's Auror division was standing in the living room shoveling bite after bite of chocolate cake down their throats.

“I was just thinking,” Hermione added at the last minute.

“I thought I smelled wood burning,” Ron quipped, as he sidled up to his wife and baby sister.

Hermione looked up at her husband and glowered at him. Normally, Hermione would have laughed at such a witty retort, but considering Ron's recent history of being verbally cruel to her, she was in no mood for his deprecating jibes tonight. If she wasn't a guest at Harry's party, she would have chucked the rest of her cake at her insensitive clod of a husband. But in order to keep the peace and not make a scene, she quickly left and headed straight for the loo.

Once inside the door, she locked the door and cast a Silencing Charm before screaming her lungs out. Hermione was at the end of her mental and emotional ropes. Between dealing with Ron, finally learning about the mortal binding of bearing children with Ron, and suddenly realizing that she had been a blind dolt and had fallen for her old professor – and she was suddenly aware of how much older he was than her – she had a conniption fit in the tiny room. Nothing was safe from her wrath. The vanity cabinet was repeatedly kicked to the point where the door started coming off the hinges, and several deep boot heel marks dented the wood and chipped the varnish. The mirror, which Hermione could not recall being charmed or not, was smashed by a hastily thrown soap dish. If the room had had a bath or shower, she would have run the water and stood fully-clothed underneath its scalding spray in order to shriek some more. Nothing made sense anymore, and neither did Hermione's hysteria.
A forgotten tube of lipstick quickly turned into a pen in order to scrawl angry scribbles and squiggles on the wall; jars of potions were smashed against walls. Hermione ignored the tiny shards of glass that assaulted her upon their impact on a nearby wall. When no object remained untouched by her fury, Hermione sank down to the floor in order to start sobbing pitifully. Realizing after a few moments that if she didn't emerge soon, someone would force the door open to see if she was all right, Hermione told herself to stop crying. When that didn't work, she soundly slapped herself across the face in order to try and regain some control over herself, especially since she felt she had now lost all control over her life.

The stinging burn of her hand making repeated contact with her face brought her around. She assessed the room and was disappointed that she didn’t feel any satisfaction from the destruction she had caused. She began casting Reparo spells to restore the toilet to its former undemolished state. Hermione looked at the assortment of repaired jars of potions and creams. Locating the jar of Lovely Lavender's Puffy Poof Eye Crème, Hermione dabbed it around her eyes while giving the mirror one last look over to make sure it was seamlessly repaired. She cast a quick Glamour Charm to hide the red hand print on her cheek. One last glance about confirmed that she had fully restored the room, before she ended the Silencing Charm and went back to the party pretending that everything was all right.

Hermione was wrapped up in that now familiar blanket of cold numbness. Turning off her emotions for the moment helped her to keep up that false facade that she was all right, while inside she felt as if she had been irreparably shredded into a thousand pieces.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 38 A/N: I want to thank Siren for all her help with my story up to this point. Her beta input has been invaluable to this story. Thank you for all the help, Siren! A round of applause to her, ladies and gents.

At this point, I would like to welcome GinnyW to my team of betas, Horserider and JuneW. Let's give a huge round of applause to my betas for all their hard work in beating my chapters into shape.

If you have a problem with the usage of “dipshit” being British enough, my official Brit-picker, Piggie, has told me it is indeed a phrase that is used in England. Kindest thanks to Piggie for being my emergency Brit-picker these many chapters with my many emails.

For some interesting history on saloons of the Old West, I recommend going to: http://www.legendsofamerica.com/WE-Saloons.html Cactus Wine is made from peyote tea and tequila. Whiskey is spelled the American way for this chapter.

Amphegoria is a variation on the word amphigorey, which means a nonsense verse or
composition. It's also my tip of the hat to Edward Gorey.

My inspiration behind Vladimir's Cowboy Jazz Band is based on Igor's Cowboy Jazz Band, which I have seen on many occasions at the Sacramento Dixieland Jazz Jubilee over the years: http://www.igorsjazzcowboys.com/

Here is a video of them playing I have on my Tumblr page from a jazz festival: http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/post/131333282995/and-they-didnt-live-happily-ever-after-chapter

Thanks to okonchristy (cocoachristy) for a little help with this chapter when I got stuck in a couple places.

I have no idea if George is the younger Weasley twin, despite scouring all of hp-lexicon for a clue, but it seems only logical considering “G” comes after “F”, and George is usually the second one to speak when both the twins are talking.

Since HBP has come out, it is now known exactly when Tom Riddle's mother died. I laughed (not in amusement over the tragedy, but for the coincidence of it) when I read that part of HBP, because it was exactly as I planned it for my story. Now if I was willing to incorporate any part of HBP canon, it would be making marriage vows the same as an Unbreakable Vow, the contract sealed when the wife has children. But since it is far easier for me to ignore HBP and all the new canon that came with it, I won't use it. But it is nice to know that Rowling and I had the same idea in mind.

Great chapter! I can’t wait for more…concerned about our girl here, and wondering what will happen when next she and Snape meet! –Horserider
Chapter Summary

Hermione contemplates her past and present with Snape, and how it will affect her future dealings with him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-Nine
“Forced Exuberance and Pointless Sentimentality”

Disclaimer:
Rowling owns Potter, it’s true.
I've stated this ‘til I’ve turned blue.
This disclaimer is lame,
I'm solely to blame,
But this, you already knew.

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Hermione spent the rest of the weekend in a dazed fog. Harry had wanted a sleepover as part of his birthday celebration, so she had slept Friday night in the heated tipi. As Hermione fell asleep on the ground, curled up in a bedroll next to Ron, she still tried to convince herself that Snape could not be Calleo. By the time she awoke the next morning, to the smell of blueberry pancakes, ham steak, scrambled eggs, and coffee as a finish to Harry's Western-style camp-out party, Hermione realized that she could not refute the facts any longer. Snape had been posing as Calleo, while working as a gigolo for Lavender Brown.

Once her denial had evaporated, it was quickly replaced by anger. With her stomach twisted into knots due to the seething fury she held in check while everyone else enjoyed a hearty breakfast, Hermione drank cup after cup of hot coffee. The acid from the coffee did not help her stomach. She feigned a hangover in order to explain her grim mood and lack of appetite.

When breakfast was nearly over and all the non-Weasley guests had Flooed home, news arrived via owl of Fleur's easy delivery of a beautiful baby boy weighing eight pounds, four ounces. All the other Weasley wives started chattering amongst themselves, reliving stories of each of their own children's births, the complications they endured during delivery, hours they spent in labor, and other such nauseating details which Hermione filed under the category ‘too much information.’
Hermione, not wishing to listen to the horrors of childbirth again for the umpteenth time, ushered Bill and Fleur's children inside and upstairs to change out of their pyjamas and into the day clothes they would be wearing to their Uncle Ron's Quidditch match. Hermione Flooed to her flat in order to change into regular clothes before wrangling the children to the stadium with Harry and Ginny's assistance. By the time she returned to the Potters', Ron had already left for prepare for the game.

During the match, Hermione was unable to concentrate on the game at all. There was no time to meditate on her anger either, as the young children required constant attention. Thankful that Ginny and Harry were there to help, the adults went in rotation when taking each child to the stadium's toilets. When they weren't busy taking children to the loo, Harry was answering the children's questions about the game, or the two witches were busy saying no to their repeated requests for candy floss, chocolate frogs, bags of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, team souvenirs, game programmes, and Lacerating Lollies.

Hermione had to stop the Lacerating Lolly vendor from giving Michael one out of kindness, as Hermione did not feel like taking her nephew to St. Mungo's for a bleeding tongue, nor did she feel like repeatedly healing his tongue and spelling away the blood stains.

It didn't help that Harry, remembering the denial of sweets and mementos during outings as a child with the Dursleys, tried to countermand her orders by sneaking off and buying them sweets anyway. At least he didn't bother buying the souvenirs, as Ron had promised his niece and nephews as many Chudley Cannons hats, shirts, jackets, scarves, pennants, posters, programmes, brollies, and quills as Harry, Ginny, and Hermione could carry.

Once the Snitch was caught, Hermione and the Potters began ushering the children down to the VIP area adjacent to the locker room area. Just outside the locker room, Hermione caught sight of her husband being mobbed by fans asking for his autograph, holding out copies of *Quidditch Weekly* featuring him on the cover. Ron seemed to glow from the attention of his admirers, and gladly began scrawling his name with a squiggly flourish for each fan who beamed an adoring star-struck smile at him.

Hermione spent the rest of Saturday at the Potters' helping them mind the children, thus keeping her mind preoccupied so that she could not think about Snape. Ron had a last-minute engagement, as his temporary agent had lined up a long string of meetings for the rest of the day with wizards who wanted the Chudley Cannons' star Keeper to be their new company spokesperson.

Finally, on Saturday night, Hermione found privacy in the solitude of her flat. Ron was being wined and dined by some broom manufacturer, and would not be back until late.
In the dark quiet of the night, she sat on the couch with her knees drawn up as her mind raced. Hermione was becoming increasingly agitated. She felt betrayed. How exactly Snape had betrayed her, she could not pinpoint, but she felt it regardless. For each instance she would try to drag up some point in which to be outraged, only to have her mind bring up some other fact that countered it.

"He lied to me."

"What was he supposed to do? Say 'Hey, I'm your old Potions professor, remember me?' Not likely. He said he never really lied to you, but merely downplayed his knowledge and what he knew in order to hide his identity."

"And you're going to believe a man who was a successful spy and fooled Voldemort all those years?"

"Now you're beginning to sound like Moody."

"He made me fall for him."

"He did no such thing. You did that all by yourself. You were the one who approached him about taking things further."

"It didn't help that he kept kissing my hand every time I'd leave. And Snape tried to seduce me last Thursday."

"Yes, after you nuzzled him and teased him. And don't forget the time you made the first move and sucked his fingers. Then you let him hump you in the kitchen, and then you just had to hump him on the settee, exactly like you had fantasized."

"Yeah, but he didn't stop me."

"But would you have wanted him to stop? Or would you have felt rejected that he rebuffed your crude advances?"

Hermione cringed at that thought. She wasn't particularly suave or subtle in the way she let her
feelings be known, but she had certainly enjoyed how things had unfolded at the time.

'What game is he up to? Snape is definitely not attracted to me. He's toying with me in order to humiliate me.'

'Yes, and he's humiliating himself with that erection he ground into your arse. If he's planning on turning you into a fool, then he's making one of himself, as well.'

'There must be some angle that he's playing in order for him to continue this charade.'

'But he's not really playing it anymore, as he gave a rather large hint that he was a Potions master. Then there was that question about whether you would still be his friend if you found out who he was.'

'That was just so he could throw that back in my face when I did learn who he really was.'

'And what a two-faced hypocrite you will be if you do rescind your friendship with the knowledge of who he really is.'

Hermione buried her hands in her face. No matter how incensed she became, she could find no justifiable reason behind her resentment. She wanted to be angry because it felt good – though the intensity of the emotion made her physically sick.

'And Lavender! She set you up with him! How could she?'

Now having a valid target on which to focus her vexation, Hermione began to rail against her old dorm mate from school.

'She must be having a good laugh. She probably thinks it's funny that I could be shagging Snape.'

“Urgh!” Hermione groaned in disgust at herself.

She could not deny the fact that Snape's gigolo persona had aroused her in a way that bordered on a
mentally-induced orgasm of the soul. Hermione could not comprehend how Snape could stir her into such a state of frenzy. She had two mental images in her head that seemed completely diametrical. One image was an attractive man with a sense of mystery and sensuality, the other was a grotesque vision of asexuality and everything non-alluring about men. How they could be one and the same was beyond her understanding.

Hermione's mind kept running through the same cyclical argument all night long. She would be infuriated with thoughts of betrayal and of being a victim of Snape's cruel sense of humor, only to be rebuffed with memories of how he had been a patient friend to her during the past several weeks. Her mind would then wander into a mental fit of curses wished upon Lavender for her part in this, before wondering what the whole point was of Lavender's recommendation that Hermione spill her soul out to Snape.

It all came down to one issue. It was only when she learned of Calleo's identity that Hermione regretted any of it. Before she realized that it was Snape all along, Hermione had been thankful for the pleasure of that man's company. Between their long conversations and the way he had made her feel stimulated mentally, emotionally, and physically, Mrs. Weasley had felt she had finally awakened from some long and unpleasant slumber involving dreams of languishing in mediocrity. Now it seemed she had entered some nightmare where the man she had fallen for was openly mocking her.

The last and clearest memory Hermione had of Snape was from the night before her wedding to Ron. She had been sitting in the kitchen at the Burrow, while going over some of the last-minute details of the reception.

Professor Snape had arrived earlier in the day to talk over some business regarding the Order and the last of the rogue Death Eaters, spending most of the day in the study with Arthur.

Just as Hermione rose to make a cup of tea, Professor Snape swept into the kitchen on his way out to the Apparition point in the Burrow's back garden.

“Congratulations on your upcoming recognition for all the hard work you did for the Order, Professor,” Hermione said.

The black-clad wizard stopped and turned to regard the young witch standing by the cooker. “I'll believe it when it actually happens,” he grumbled with ominous derision.
To counter the awkwardness Hermione felt in his presence, she had said brightly, "I'm so sorry you won't be able to make it to the wedding, Professor."

Snape gave a derisive snort before replying in a cool and contemptuous voice, “I can make it to the wedding. I just choose not to go and suffer under the unbearable barrage of forced exuberance and pointless sentimentality."

Not surprised by her old professor’s cynical statement, and by the fact that he had never shown up to any of the other Weasley weddings, Hermione replied, "Then I guess the next time you'll see me, I'll be a married woman."

His eyes had narrowed like a hawk's before the Potions master snarled acidly, “If you expect me to give you my congratulations, you are mistaken. However, I will offer you my deepest condolences for the fact that you will be chained by matrimony to a petty, vapid, and foolish boy of Mr. Weasley's caliber. My deepest regrets that you have chosen a poor candidate for a husband, but then, as they say, 'love is blind.' May you awaken to the great impending mistake you are about to undertake and leave tonight before it's too late. Good night, Miss Granger."

Before Hermione could close her mouth that had been hanging open in shock, Professor Snape had exited the kitchen in great haste. Hermione was left to contemplate the full implication of her old professor's statement as her tears began to fall. It was bad enough that she had been having second thoughts about marrying Ron; she didn't need a verbal beating like that to add to her sense of cold feet.

Now that the long-suppressed memory had resurfaced like some old forgotten night terror, Hermione began to cry. She wondered if Snape had sat in his flat many a night, laughing over the fact that he was so right in his analysis over the way her marriage had turned sour, and in his frighteningly concise appraisal of Ron. All those times she had cried to "Calleo" about how miserable she was, and Snape had known ages ago it would turn out like this. Four years ago, the only one who did not congratulate her and wish her happiness was the same man now providing her escape from the dysfunctional marriage she was currently stuck in.

The anger over Snape's cruel but accurate assessment of her marriage would not come. Hermione was too drained to hate Snape, and the fact was that he had been right. Instead, a weighty resignation settled in her chest once more that her life was shit, and there was nothing she could do about it for now. Anger was exhausting business, and she had spent the better part of the day keeping it bottled up. Once she was alone at home, it further sapped her strength to fixate upon the cause of her outrage. There was nothing left to fuel the fire of her fury.
Hermione took a scalding shower, the hot water making her feel even more fatigued. After getting into bed, she fell asleep quickly, but still found no respite. Snape was there haunting her in her dream world. If her old Potions professor was not making her scrub cauldrons for detention while rubbing his erection along her backside, he was taunting her with more cruel remarks about her marriage as he sucked her toes, making disparaging comments about her dancing ability as they tangoed, or sneering at her while dining together. Every dream seemed to consist of some combination of humiliating her while bringing her a form of physical pleasure at the same time.

When she had woken up for the fourth time that night after another disturbing dream, Hermione noticed Ron had finally come home and was in bed next to her. She scrunched up her nose at the disgusting smell wafting from her husband.

Unable to go back to sleep next to a man who was snoring soundly and stinking of cigar smoke and alcohol, Hermione got up and went to the kitchen. Even her habitual cup of tea in a time of crisis could provide her no comfort. Hermione felt as if she was cast adrift in a sea of confusion.

'Why? Why do I have to be attracted to Snape?'

She couldn't deny it any longer. Hermione wasn't even sure if Snape was pulling some sick and twisted joke, or if his attraction to her was sincere. Tired. She was so tired, and confused, and depressed.

Hermione opened up the large window. Crawling up onto the wide window ledge, she sat on the ledge with her back braced against the window frame as she gazed out over the London sky. Tilting her head back, she began banging it lightly against the sill repeatedly until she felt like her brains had been jostled quite enough for one night. She felt numb all over. With her arms wrapped around her knees, Hermione continued to stare at the night sky that glowed a sickly orange. She tried to view the stars dimmed by the city lights, but could only spot a few.

Spying the summer triangle, Hermione found it difficult to remember which stars were Deneb, Vega, and Altair. Her mind refused to function under such stress. Instead, it persistently wandered back to the ever present topic at hand.

'How is it that I could have ever been attracted to Snape at all?'

'He is just a man. Not some ghoul, vampire, or bat. Ron has called you a sexless bookworm, and he was wrong about you.'
'Ron has been wrong about a lot of things.'

'So have you.'

In the past six short weeks, Hermione's life had been turned upside down. Her life, which had been organized very neatly like a drawer, now seemed to have been overturned and dumped haphazardly onto the floor. Not only had she discovered that Ginny was cheating on Harry with Draco Malfoy but, somehow in that process, she had fallen for Severus Snape. Of all the people that Ginny and Hermione could be romantically linked with, they were the two people in the world Harry and Ron hated the most. It seemed like some bad plot out of a cheesy romance novel Molly might have read while hanging laundry at the Burrow, charming the book to hover near her as she put up row after row of clothing and sheets.

“Oh, God!” she whimpered piteously in the dead quiet of the night.

At three in the morning, the only things stirring were other tormented souls like Hermione, the odd ambulance far off in the distance now and then, and the wind. There was no breeze to fill the ringing silence in her ears tonight. Left with only the sound of her own breathing, the thoughts in her head sounded louder than usual, as if shouting out each point and counterpoint.

'Are you going to see him Monday night?'

'I don't think I could face him.'

'Why not? It's not as if he knows that you know. Why can't you continue on as before?'

'Because I couldn't face him knowing it's him.'

The memory of Snape's hard, sweaty body pressed firmly up against her as they had danced the tango invaded her mind without invitation. No matter how hard she tried to evict the thought, her senses revolted. Hermione could recall with perfect clarity the rumble of his voice vibrating against her cheek, the scent of his body and cologne, the lingering touch of his lips against her palm, and the feel of his face beneath her touch when she had mapped his face with her hands. When she forced out those memories, her mind was taken over by the remembrance of her straddling across his lap, grinding against him as he thrust his hips up to meet her. She had loved running her fingers through his hair, and had found thrill in his pleasurable growl when she raked her nails across his scalp – more thrill than anything Ron had ever done to her in bed.
Hermione winced as the images kept coming back into her mind: snippets of long conversations that seemed so earnest and sincere; stolen touches from him that seemed to arouse her with their apparent innocence; surging feelings and emotions that left her feeling heady by the end of the night; her mind taxed to pleasurable exhaustion from intellectual debates; her body roused with tension. All these things added to her confusion, making her wonder at Snape's sincerity of it all, not to mention her own when Hermione had vowed that she would still be his friend if she learned his identity.

The unbearable part of depression was that it made one so utterly fatigued, that all a person wanted to do was sleep, but Hermione could not sleep. Beyond Morpheus' veil, Snape was waiting for her, further confusing, angering, arousing, and taunting her. But Hermione desperately needed sleep.

Rummaging through the cabinet above the bathroom sink, Hermione found the last bottle of Nightmare-No-More. The potion was commonly sold at apothecaries, who did a brisk business in selling the potion during and shortly after the war. Hermione had taken it herself for a few weeks immediately after the end of the war, but quickly stopped using it. She had kept a bottle in reserve for emergencies, and now seemed the time that she would need it.

Once on the couch, as Hermione refused to sleep next to her husband, she drained the vial of the wretched tasting elixir. Leaning back, Hermione slipped into unconsciousness just as her head touched the pillow.

Cracking one eye open, Hermione noticed the living room window was open. She remembered opening the kitchen window, but not the one in the living room.

The tea kettle whistling in the kitchen told her that her husband was already up.

Hermione sat up and remembered why she hated taking Nightmare-No-More. Though her body felt rested, her mind felt as if she had stayed awake the rest of the night after being denied a chance to dream. She pondered if it was better to let her subconscious deal with the confusion of her contradictory repulsion-attraction to Snape, and let the dreams come, than to walk around in a state of mental limbo.

She ambled into the kitchen scrubbing her face, and spied Ron looking quite elated as he made tea. Standing next to him to make a cup for herself, Hermione noticed that he still stank like an old ashtray in a bar.
“You're in a pleasant mood. Have a good time last night?” Instead of sounding conversational, she sounded grumpy.

“You're looking at the new spokesperson for the Mercury Broom Company!” Ron crowed gleefully.

“Really?” Hermione stood there and tried to think of something a little more supportive and joyous. Finally, her mind came up with, “I'm thrilled for you, Ron.” She paused a bit before adding, “It's about time that you got some recognition.” It came across as stilted and forced.

Ron pursed his lips. Realizing that any further remarks by her were likely to be misconstrued, Hermione sank down into a chair and gave a weary sigh. “I'm sorry, Ron. I really am excited for you. I'm just very tired this morning, that's all.”

“Yeah, enough so that you slept the rest of the night on the couch,” Ron bit out.

Lifting her head to regard her husband, she slowly and calmly retorted, “Maybe if you didn't smell of old cigars and Firewhisky, the stench wouldn't have chased me out of our bed.”

Ron lifted his arm to his face and gave a deep whiff. He scrunched his nose up in disgust. “I guess I smell a bit ripe.” In response to Hermione's raised eyebrows, he conceded, “Okay. Really ripe. I'll take a shower, then let's go out to breakfast this morning to celebrate.”

The idea of not cooking that morning sounded too good to pass up.

Breakfast was easy enough to suffer through. Hermione kept nodding her head while Ron went on and on about his new contract as the Mercury Broom Company's spokesperson for 2004. As she prodded her Eggs Benedict listlessly, Ron rambled on, not noticing her lack of appetite. He was too busy going on about the endorsement deal that included him as the Quidditch pin-up boy for the company's calendars they handed out as a promotional item, the press tour pumping him up as the newest Quidditch star on the circuit, the image makeover he was going to be getting, international conventions he'd be attending to promote Mercury Brooms, and so on. When he finally came to the part about money, Hermione finally perked up.
Money was tangible. It paid for rent, food, and clothing.

“My agent thinks with this deal, we can negotiate a higher salary than originally estimated when my contract with the Cannons is renewed this November,” Ron said, puffing out his chest a little bit.

“What sort of numbers are we talking about?” Hermione said, speaking for the first time in more than half an hour.

“Twenty-eight thousand for my contract with the Cannons, and another fourteen thousand for the endorsement,” Ron announced with a bit of self-satisfied smugness.

Hermione quickly did the conversion from Galleons to English pounds in her head, and realized Ron's salary would be close to what her parents usually earned. Though Mrs. Weasley was not stunned by the amount of money, she was stunned by the fact that Ron was able to earn that much based on a career that required little academic excellence.

Knowing that most Quidditch stars had an average run of ten good years before sustaining a severe injury or being replaced by someone younger, faster, and cockier, Hermione began calculating for their financial future. Most Quidditch stars retired to become self-made businessmen, drones in the Department of Magical Games and Sports, or coaches of a Quidditch team. Hermione hoped Ron could earn a decent wage in one of those occupations when he finally got too long in the tooth to play professionally.

Hermione was roused out of her mental math calculations when Ron said, “Maybe now we can get that nice house we've always dreamed about, you can quit that job, and we can start thinking about children.”

Before she could stop her mouth, Hermione yelled, “Wait a minute!” Ron looked at her, puzzled by her sudden outburst. *Think fast!* Hermione did not want to go into why the thought of spending the rest of her life with him terrified and depressed her at the same time; she felt that would be more appropriate for their next counseling session. To prevent another impending argument, she said, “Let's not count our chickens before they hatch. Let's wait until you get the contract signed, we get some money saved in the vault, and then we can start thinking about such things. For now, let's just not jump ahead and start making plans. There's plenty of time to talk about these things later.”

Ron shrugged and spouted, “I guess you're right. Why plan for a little house when maybe my agent can get me more money. Then we can get the nice big house with the proper garden and all.
Maybe even get a house-elf.”

Hermione wanted to bury her face in her hands and shake her head, but refrained.

Ron did tend to get a little carried away when things were on the upswing, be it with money, his ego, or with his newfound celebrity. Having a conservative nature meant that Hermione tended to be a bit more cautious when it came to spending money or planning for the big things in life. She certainly was hedging her bets that she didn't want to stay married to Ron, especially since she knew of the mortal nature of a true wizarding divorce when children were involved. Her Muggle upbringing always gave her the idea that a marriage was a contract that could be legally broken if both parties were unhappy, not a binding lifetime agreement. Maybe if she was actually in love with her husband, being stuck with him for the rest of her life would not seem such a grim prospect.

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Even when lunch rolled around, Hermione still had no appetite. She spent her time doing housework, every so often asking her husband to help out. Ron would respond that he would get around to it after he was finished answering his fan mail that had been delivered to their flat while they were away at breakfast. It was a small pile of letters, but Ron seemed to be making a big deal about the fact that he had a responsibility to his fans, asking Hermione if she had any of her good parchment lying about, along with her good writing quill and her good ink, in order to send a proper response to each and every one of his fans.

Hermione found it quite humorous, in an irritating sort of way, that this was the same wizard who would fob off sending thank-you notes to his uncles and aunts for birthday and Christmas presents until under threat from his mother. She didn't even want to remember how he used to delay doing his homework until the last minute; sometimes he wouldn't do his homework at all.

By the time Ron did get around to finishing his fan mail responses, he suggested that they might swing by St. Mungo's to see the newest addition to the burgeoning Weasley clan. Then they would make a stopover to Harry and Ginny's before the kids were shepherded over to their grandparents that night to spend the rest of the week.

Instead of fighting it, and insisting that they stick around until the housework was done and that Ron actually help for once, Hermione gave in. She had no energy to fight or try to make her point that the housework was not going to take care of itself, despite Ron repeatedly talking about getting a house-elf in the near future. Hermione went with the flow today, and she felt as if she had been beaten into submission.

When they arrived at St. Mungo's, Hermione and Ron had just missed most of the other Weasleys who had been there to visit and ogle over little Eric. Hermione held the newborn for a while before passing him back to his father, who beamed with pride at the little bundle in his arms. Suffocated by the overwhelming love and affection in the small hospital room, Hermione stepped out to get a
It wasn't until Hermione sat down on an empty bench in the hallway that she realized she was having a panic attack. The weekend was becoming too much for Hermione to take. Seeing Fleur and Bill together, she knew they would be together for the rest of their lives. It seemed like a happy and joyous prospect, but when Hermione had a flash of herself sitting in that same hospital bed nursing Ron's child, she felt sick to her stomach with terror. She knew right there and then that children with Ron would never be a possibility, not unless there were some drastic changes between her and her husband.

' Maybe I should just run off with Snape.' For some strange reason, that unbidden thought provided Hermione with a much more pleasant outlook than becoming another one of the amazing breeding Weasleys.

“I've gone mad,” she muttered to herself, just as a witch and her child passed by. They quickly began walking away from her, the mother casting a nervous look at Hermione after overhearing her ramblings.

After a few more minutes, Ron came out of Fleur's room. “You all right?”

“Yes, just needed some air,” Hermione assured him, unable to look Ron in the eye. Averting her gaze, she watched him shift from one foot to another in front of her.

Ron said, “Well, Fleur and the baby are going to get some rest now, but Bill said we could swing by tomorrow evening if you are up for it.”

“I have dance lessons tomorrow night,” Hermione automatically responded, then felt her heart stop when she realized what she had said. Hermione didn't think she could ever set foot in Snape's flat again, but the prospect of seeing all those shining, beaming Weasley faces, and then being assaulted with more images of herself saddled with Ron's children, frightened her more than an evening with Snape.

“Oh. We can always swing by on Wednesday night, then,” Ron stated matter-of-factly.

Hermione wanted to run down the hallway as far and as fast as possible, just to get away from the scene. Instead, she didn't fight it and went with the flow of it once more. She nodded mutely in some vague gesture of agreement.
“How about we go over to Ginny and Harry's now? Go spend some time with them and the kids?” Ron reminded her.

Hermione didn't know how Ginny did it – all the pretending and believable false smiles when all she wanted to do was be with Malfoy. Even the idea of going over to her friends' house and continuing to pretend that everything was all peaches and perfect was too much for Hermione to handle. She was just too damn tired.

“I really need to get back to the flat and finish the housework, Ron.” Hermione purposefully left out the inclusion of Ron, knowing that it would be easier to get Alastor Moody to drink an unknown substance than to get her husband to help around the house today. “You go on. Give my best to Harry and Ginny.”

Ron left Hermione sitting in the hallway by herself.

A few minutes later, Bill came out of Fleur's room. “Hermione? You looked a bit peaked when you left the room. You okay?”

Hermione looked into the tired but elated face of Bill Weasley, and found that she could not speak. How in the world could she ever tell Bill that when she married his youngest brother, she didn't think it literally meant, “til death do you part.”

“Just a bit tired,” was her reply.

Bill sat down next to Hermione and sighed. “Don't worry. I'm not about to start bugging you about when you're about to start having kids,” Bill said, as a non sequitur.

“Huh?” Hermione could not understand what she had done to make Bill say that.

“I saw the way you and Ron avoided each other at Harry's party. I can tell things aren't so great between you two, especially now. You two have never acted like two people deeply in love.” Bill bit down on his lip, looking like a man weighing the option of saying more, before adding, “Don't let our mum push you into doing anything you don't want to do. She doesn't have to live with the consequences; you do. She tries to do what she thinks is best for her children, but she forgets that what she thinks is best is not exactly what we think is best.”
Bill went back into Fleur's room, leaving Hermione to ponder over his rather candid remarks.

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The flat was spotless. Hermione came home to find the place had been cleaned while she and Ron were gone. A little note from Ginny explained that she had sent Dobby over to help; it was the only sign that the house-elf had been there, besides the cleanliness of the place.

Left with nothing to do, Hermione sat on the couch and let her mind wander once more. She thought about Snape's considerate gestures of loaning her Potions journals to read and then discussing them with her at great length; and his admittance that he had never been friends with any of his clients, except with her.

'Could it be that he is lonely like me and needs some companionship?' He had mentioned that he enjoyed her company, and that if she decided to not become more intimate with him, he was willing to accept the fact.

Realizing that she was on a couch once more brought back memories of her straddling him. Her body shivered, though the revulsion was not so apparent at this recollection versus previous times. Her mind was slowly beginning to accept the concept that Snape aroused her.

Hermione went to the kitchen and found some juice to quench her parched throat. Sipping her drink, she remembered how Snape had mentioned that he had learned the recipe for lemonade from "a friend."

'Ginny. Does Ginny know Snape? Did she lie to me? Of course she did. She's very good at lying. Why? Why did she lie?'

'Oh yes, and admit to you from the beginning that she knows exactly where Snape is? And what sort of questions would you have been asking then? He's obviously been hiding his identity from you for a while. He probably told Ginny not to tell you if you ever asked. But why is he giving you hints to his identity now?'

'Because you want to fuck him.'

'Wanted. It's past tense now.'
'You think so? Snape knows it's you, and he obviously has made it known that he wants you. Why can't you want him too? He's a man, a sexual creature with needs and desires.'

'But I can't.'

'Why not?'

'Because I'm not going back there. I can't.'

'Why not? Has he come right out and said who he is? Unmasked himself? As long as he's willing to continue with this game, why not enjoy this? Do you really want to give up your Monday and Thursday nights out? What will you do? Sit at home with Ron and wish you were anywhere but stuck at home with a husband who doesn't talk with you, except to brag about how much money he's going to make, how famous he's going to be because of Quidditch? Wouldn't you rather be over there having a nice meal that you didn't have to cook for once, enjoying decent conversation, and maybe a nice massage if you can win the next bet?'

Hermione wondered if she truly had gone around the bend. How her subconscious could come up with such arguments for her to continue seeing Snape was beyond her comprehension. They were very persuasive and logical arguments, but she still fought against the idea of still going to Snape's flat now that she knew who he was.

'If you don't go, Snape will have been right to question the steadfastness of your friendship if you discovered who he really was.'

That thought made her stop dead in her mental tracks.

'I have to go back.'

She had never really gotten to know Remus, Albus, and Minerva while they were still her professors. It was only in that year after school, before they died, that she got to know them as people beyond a student-teacher relationship. Only after her N.E.W.T.s did she learn what a wickedly sharp wit Minerva had, or that Albus had a rather annoying habit of offering sweets when trying to misdirect a person or change the topic.

Hermione realized that she had never known Snape as a person, only as a professor and a spy for
the Order. The person she had gotten to know as Calleo was a completely different man than the professor she remembered from years ago. There was a patience there that she didn't know Snape was capable of. Where Snape would bark orders at the students, his persona of Calleo would discuss things with her.

Suddenly, more pieces of the puzzle began fitting together. Hermione remembered the discussion they once had regarding erotic body paint, and George's mention of a silent partner providing potions for the twins' new business venture. If Snape couldn't brew potions due to the Death Eater Decree – and she doubted the twins would ever take Snape on as a partner, even a silent one – who would be the silent partner?

It came to her. 'Lavender.'

'But if Snape isn't brewing potions, then why was he asking me all those questions?'

Her gut clenched when she remembered that Moody had asked Kingsley to start making surprise visits to Death Eaters' places of work. Hermione's mind began working furiously once more, trying to figure out if Snape was doing more than being a gigolo. Was he secretly brewing potions for Lavender? If so, how was he getting around the decree? If there was a surprise visit, would Kingsley catch Snape in the act and have to send him to Azkaban?

Hermione wanted to leave her flat that minute and go warn Snape that he was in danger of being discovered, if he was indeed brewing potions on the sly. But if Hermione warned him, that would mean this charade would end and she could no longer see “Calleo.”

Remembering the rest of the Aurors’ conversation that she’d overheard just on the other side of the tipi wall, Hermione knew who she should talk to instead.

Dashing off to the kitchen, she found that Ron had thankfully left her one good piece of parchment. After penning her letter, she sent it off with Pigwidgeon, telling the little bird it was imperative to deliver the message as soon as possible.

Once the owl took wing, Hermione went to the bedroom and fetched her good blue cloak. She Flooed directly to the Three Broomsticks and got a private room in order to wait for her guest.
Chapter 39 A/N: A huge round of applause to my fabulous team of betas: Horserider, JuneW, and GinnyW. And a special round of thanks to JuneW for coming up with a chapter title.
Arriving at work Monday morning, Severus was surprised to see a note hovering in mid-air. The scrap of parchment was desperately vying for his attention as he stepped into his office. It was a note from Lavender, requesting him to see her immediately when he arrived.

As Severus went to Miss Brown’s office, he felt particularly agitated, due in no small part to the fact that he was anticipating Hermione confronting him tonight, demanding he take off his mask. He was certain she had most probably figured out his identity by now. There were three things he expected Hermione would do upon confirmation of his identity: yell at him, cry, or run away. None of those possibilities held any great allure.

Severus entered Miss Brown's office and discovered his employer frantically pacing the length of the room. Draco was already seated in a chair.

“Good!” Draco addressed him with exasperated relief. “Now that you're here, Lavender can tell us why she's in such a strop.”

The agitated witch stopped her pacing and turned to face her only non-elf employees. “Gentlemen, we may have a problem.”
Severus never cared for conversation that started on such an upbeat note. “A problem?” he asked slowly, his voice low and threatening.

“I have it on good authority that Alastor Moody wants all the Aurors who oversee Death Eater parolees to start making unannounced visits to their places of work, maybe their homes, as well.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to shout, “WHAT?”, however the statement did not need repeating. He wondered how his employer had come upon this information. Instead, Severus asked with restrained calm, “Who is your source?”

“Someone I can trust.”

“Someone you can trust?” Draco queried, skeptical of any anonymous source.

Both Severus and Draco were extremely cautious, but wondered what the purpose would be to feed Miss Brown false information of such a nature. If the information was true, then it was still something to not take lightly at all.

“Yes!” she snapped with great irritation. “And you two are not the only ones. It seems that my employing ex-Death Eaters has caused Moody to become suspicious of me. It was mentioned in the same conversation that I am not above his mistrust as well!”

As Draco and Severus looked at each other, each gauging the other’s reaction to the news, Lavender started pacing once more. “You know what this means!” she began railing. “I can count on Moody coming in here and trying to slip me some Veritaserum! I can't know anything you two are up to anymore. I shouldn't know anything at all! I should be Obliviated, or take a Memory Erasing Draught, or – or SOMETHING!”

Lavender was bordering on hysterical when Severus grabbed her by the upper arms and forced her to sit down. “Calm down, Miss Brown!” he ordered her, using his authoritative voice. “Hysteria will solve nothing,” Severus hissed, trying to keep his own panic from rising in his chest.

“Severus is right,” Draco stated calmly. “We can't panic. What we can do is take measures to make sure we aren't caught doing anything even bordering on what the Ministry considers unauthorized.”
“And how do you propose that? You're not allowed a Floo connection in your homes, and your Apparition licenses are revoked. And if you think I'm going to be involved with making illegal Portkeys, you must be mad!” Lavender yelled with ever increasing loudness until she was close to shrieking.

“You forget that you have close to sixty-five house-elves in your employ,” the younger wizard reminded her. Severus' eyes lit up with the realization of Draco's line of thinking. “Use Marf and Dheef as lookouts or spies. If an Auror comes snooping around, one of the elves can come here and warn us, and we can casually come back to our flat, claiming that we were out for a walk when the Auror came to call.”

“Or,” Severus amended, “perhaps we can be told ahead of time by certain parties.” The raven-haired wizard gave Miss Brown a knowing look.

“Told ahead of time by whom?” Lavender asked, wondering who Severus was referring to.

“By the person who gave you this news, that's who,” Severus snapped back, expecting his employer to make the obvious connection to who he was obscurely referring to.

“And who do you think told me?”

“Who else would know about these random checks except someone who was supposed to know? Say, Kingsley Shacklebolt?” Severus asked rhetorically, raising one brow to add to his sarcastic tone. “Who else would know about such things?”

“It's not Kingsley. He didn't tell me,” Lavender confessed.

“If not Kingsley, then who? This is not the sort of thing one just happens to randomly overhear at a social function. Who told you?” Severus demanded.

Both Draco and Severus had thought Lavender had gone mad, for she started laughing heartily before schooling her features.

Lavender merely said, “Someone who has your interests at heart,” while staring directly at Severus. “But we still need to figure out how to get around these surprise inspections. They might figure out that you're never home during the day.”
“Well,” Draco mentioned casually, while inspecting his nails, “since Macnair no longer occupies the flat below mine, it is no longer a Death Eater's residence; therefore you can have the Floo reconnected. That way we don't have a Floo in our flat, yet we have a nearby Floo access point in which to beat the Aurors before they get to our block of flats.”

After a few more of the logistical details were sorted out, Draco excused himself. There was a great deal of work that needed to be done on several projects.

Once Severus and Lavender were alone, she stood up to leave but he held out an arm across the doorway, to bar her exit. “Just where did you get that information, Miss Brown, if not from my very own parole officer?”

“I can't say. I gave my word not to say. Not just yet.” Lavender ducked out from underneath Severus’ arm and called for Wonkle to bring some tea. “I need a cup for my nerves. Care to stay and have a cup too?”

“No,” he bit out, irritated he could not be given the information he wanted. Severus began pacing Lavender's study, impatiently trying to figure out who may have given his employer such warning of upcoming inspections.

“And how are your evenings with Hermione progressing?” Miss Brown asked while pouring milk into her tea. “Does she know yet it's truly Severus Snape and not some other tall, dark stranger?”

Severus hesitated mid-stride before continuing his trek across the length of the room. “I have alluded to my identity, but nothing declarative or obvious. Perhaps by tonight she will know, or shortly there afterwards.”

“Tonight?”

‘Damn!’ In a moment of preoccupied thought, wondering if Hermione had figured out who he was yet, he let slip his Monday night meetings with Hermione. Severus had not informed Miss Brown of the additional meetings he had arranged with the brunette witch. He had figured that since it was his own free time and Hermione was not a paying client, he could plan to see her anytime he wanted.

After clearing his throat, Severus announced, “Yes. Tonight. She will be coming over for a few
Monday nights in order to get extra dance practice in before her anniversary dinner.” He made a point of omitting the fact that Hermione had come over the previous Monday night.

There was an odd glint in the witch's eye. “And why didn't you tell me about this meeting before? Were you planning on telling me eventually?” There was an accusatory tone in her voice that set Severus' teeth on edge.

“What I do in my free time is none of your damned business!” he snarled irritably at Miss Brown. “Since you decided to do away with the exchange of coin, she is not a paying client – in the strictest sense. I think I have more than earned that forty percent royalty for the sex potions I have been working so fastidiously on, by meeting with Mrs. Weasley several times, as per our agreement.” His face began to contort with ever increasing fury as his lecture turned into full-blown fulmination. “I have more than made an effort to be a patient ear for her to bend. And if I arrange to meet with her on additional evenings, especially since you were the one to encourage dance lessons, then it's my own business why and when I meet with her. Though my job as a gigolo may be a front in order to fool the Ministry, you do not own me, Miss Brown. I have had enough masters in my lifetime, and I never will be owned by anyone ever again!”

Severus stormed from Lavender's office in a rage. Miss Brown's house-elf, Wonkle, who also acted as her personal secretary, ducked under his desk in order to escape the wrath of the livid Potions master.

In all the time Severus had worked for Miss Brown, he had never been made to feel like he was owned or controlled by anyone. It was by mutual agreement that he would be a gigolo at night so that he might claim to have some source of income; it provided a good cover so that he could consult on Potions in secret. Miss Brown's question about not being informed of Hermione's additional visits had made him feel like he was a piece of property to be bought, sold, and controlled. Severus had always lived by his own terms to see whomever he pleased and fuck whomever he wanted as a gigolo, and now his employer was questioning who he was choosing to see in his free time.

Alone in his office, Severus felt caged. Instead of opening a book in order to begin more research, he felt the sensation of being tethered down to his office weighing upon him; he felt unsettled and anxious. Part of the reason was that he hadn't had a good shag in over a week. The last time he had experienced sex was with Miss Anne during the initial testing of the male enhancement potion. Last weekend, Miss Anne was away due to a visit by the Old Crone, and his Sunday night client bowed out at the last minute – not that she ever requested a shag very often. It wouldn't have helped if his Sunday night client had showed up and spread her legs anyway. He would have refused her. Severus was only interested in bedding one witch, and Hermione had yet to decide if she wanted him. Not to mention that her decision would likely be very different once she did figure out his true identity.
Severus has spent most of the weekend canning two bushels of peaches, while worrying if Hermione had figured out who he was yet. If she did, would she come Monday night, or would she not show up at all? He pondered the many possible scenarios that would happen later that night – that was, if Hermione bothered to come. None of the likely outcomes seemed pleasant. The best and mostly unlikely of all outcomes was that Hermione would accept him – flaws, crooked teeth, seedy night job, past history between them and all – and agree to become his lover; the worst possible outcome was that he would never see her again.

Sitting down at his desk, Severus forced himself to work on the latest pile of notes he had compiled, mentally slapping himself whenever his thoughts strayed to Hermione and the question of whether he would ever feel her welcoming touch again. It was then that he finally realized that he might have made his heart too vulnerable for the second time in his life.

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The repair crew was still working on fixing some of the fire damage to the lab, thus giving Hermione a much needed chance to sit in her office and catch up on paperwork. Since Marge's death, the low-level working witch had no time to do the interdepartmental paperwork required to make her section run smoothly. This was work Madam Dushka could have done so that Hermione could have more time to do more important work, like making sure she was all caught up on testing inventory, but that was not meant to be.

Hermione could have pawned the paperwork off onto the incredibly obtuse idiot down the hall, but since she spotted all those spelling errors on Mr. Spawn's C.V., she did not trust him not to botch it up. She had already caught a faulty entry of his, labeling a box of tested “Night Blooming Jessamine” as “Night Blooming Jasmine.” The results of such an error could have been disastrous if overlooked by some myopically half-blind apothecary. *Cestrum nocturnum* (Jessamine) was a plant that was available to both the Muggle and magical world; its atropine-like toxin affected the nervous system. In contrast, *Jasminum nocturnum* was a rare plant that was only grown by the wizarding community, its blooms picked on hot summer India nights by the light of the full moon; it was used in some love potions. She was thankful that at least he didn't label it as “Night-flowering Jasmine”, because *Nyctanthes arbor-tristis* was frequently used in fever-reducing potions. Either way, any faulty entry could have possibly resulted in deaths.

Hermione's attention was not on her work. No matter how hard she tried, she could not focus her attention on the papers she shuffled and reshuffled in her hands, filing them and then unfiling them once more, half-remembering she was supposed to do something with them first before putting them away.

Her mind constantly drifted over the meetings she’d had with Snape during the past several weeks. What struck her most was the fact that he knew exactly who she was and still admitted his attraction to her, cooked for her, and gave her neck rubs. Remembering Madam Rosmerta's assessment of several couples in the bar that night right after the play, Hermione thought about how Snape acted around her like the one couple where the barmaid guessed the man has not slept with the woman yet. The way Snape leaned towards her during their meetings, and touched her at every opportunity, Madam Rosmerta would probably wisely guess that Snape had not slept with
Hermione yet, though he wanted to.

Hermione had already admitted she had wanted to sleep with him while she didn't know his true identity, but she could not admit that now. There was too much bad history between her and her old professor for her to casually cast it all aside. Just because Snape had gotten past any ill feelings he might have had towards her in the past, did not mean that Hermione had suddenly cast her reservations aside too. There were too many questions, and too many bad memories to overcome, for her to want to be Snape's lover.

Hermione shuddered at the memory of practically throwing herself at Snape time and time again. How she must have seemed like some silly female to do the things she did: wantonly sucking his fingers, shyly admitting her desire for him, rubbing herself against him like some virgin schoolgirl. There were flashes where Hermione wondered if Snape secretly laughed at her behind her back for all her clumsy attempts at seduction. The prospect of that mortified her.

Suddenly all the sexual confidence she had felt growing within her over the past few weeks had withered inside of her. Hermione felt bereft of hope and optimism.

Knowing there was no point in continuing to pretend to do paperwork when it was not going to get done no matter how many times she moved the papers about, Hermione grabbed her cloak and left her office.

Sticking her head into Madam Dushka's office, Hermione asked, “Have the repairmen given you an estimate on when the lab will be finished?”

The senior witch shrugged and replied, “Probably late today by the latest estimate. If you are done with your paperwork, you might as well call it a day.” It seemed her boss had finally taken some pity on Hermione being saddled with such an incompetent co-worker, to give her the rest of the day off.

Surprised that her boss hadn't assigned her some menial job, Hermione did not have to be told twice. She left quickly and Flooed directly from the Ministry to the Three Broomsticks.

Looking towards the stairs at the Three Broomsticks, she recalled the confidential conversation she had shared with Lavender the previous day in a private room upstairs. Hermione had phrased her words carefully so that she did not tip her hand that she knew Calleo was Snape; she only made reference of Malfoy's employment when relaying the pertinent information. Lavender had seemed quite upset that she would come under the Ministry's scrutiny, but so would Hermione if Alastor Moody was involved. He had convicted two innocent wizards based on pure speculation. Who
knew who else Moody might falsely convict if he set his mind to something?

Hermione turned and walked out the door into warm Scottish summer air.

The previous day, after her meeting with Lavender, Hermione had entertained the idea of going to the Hogsmeade Memorial Cemetery where many of the war dead lay buried, but did not have the emotional strength to walk amongst the headstones of her old friends and mentors. Now she needed to talk to the bones of those who had guided her during her formative years.

The Hogsmeade Memorial Cemetery stood on a patch of mostly flat earth, a short distance from the gates to Hogwarts. It was decided by those who had fought and survived that the cemetery for the war dead would be placed near the school. The verdant earth was dotted with highly polished slabs of granite that stood out from the ground like comically jagged teeth. A fence that was neither forbidding nor welcoming demarcated the land of the living from the realm of the dead. Above the gate to the hallowed ground was a sign that read, “Memoria prodamur proiecerint.”

"Those who sacrificed will be remembered," Hermione said to herself, translating the Latin phrase that struck at her heart.

Hermione did not amble or stroll. She walked with careful steps, making sure not to step on top of the graves. Her gait was partly out of respect, but also partly out of fear that the earth would open up and she would be sucked down into the earth, trapped by some coffin that caved in, the ground swallowing her whole. As she walked by each headstone, she would stop momentarily and remember the person she once knew as a living breathing being. Now the only things occupying the spaces six feet underground were decaying corpses devoid of thought or soul.

She paused before Remus' grave and wondered if he would have ever gotten around to proposing to Tonks. The sight of Hagrid's headstone brought a weary smile to Hermione's face, recalling all those days in Hagrid's hut: the sipping of hot tea from gargantuan mugs that the half-giant held easily in one hand, as she politely tried to choke down one of his cauldron cakes, praying she wouldn't chip a tooth in the process.

It was when Hermione finally stood before Minerva and Albus' headstones, placed side-by-side, that she sat herself down on the bench placed at the foot of their graves. She always wondered if the two were romantically linked, or if their association was merely one of close camaraderie due to similar backgrounds – both being Gryffindors and Transfiguration teachers – and a long-standing work relationship.

“I know,” Hermione said to the two pillars of rock inscribed with Minerva and Albus' names, and
birth and death dates. “I should swing by more often and tell you what's been going on as of late.”

She heaved a huge sigh to prepare herself. “Where to begin?” Hermione looked up to the sky in search of an answer that could only be found within herself.

After a quick glance about to make sure no one else was around the cemetery to overhear, and casting a quick Charm to alert her if anyone was near enough to catch any of her confession, she plainly said, “Well, Ginny has been cheating on Harry with Draco Malfoy. Yes, I know. It was quite a shock to me, too. You'll be even more shocked to learn that Malfoy has been working as a gigolo for Lavender Brown for the past few years. Well, technically, I don't know how long he's been a gigolo, but it's been at least as long as Ginny has been seeing him, so a year and a half at least. So I was in a bind wondering if I should say anything to Harry or not, and then I found myself seeing a gigolo to talk over this problem of whether to tell or not to tell. Yes, I know, it's mind-boggling that I would see a gigolo. It was for talk only, I swear. And you'll never guess who he is.”

Hermione paused to catch her breath, since she found herself rambling, chattering non-stop in order to get it all out. Her mouth kept moving as her stream of conscious thoughts struggled to get out unhindered.

“He’s Professor Snape! Oh, Minerva. Don’t look so shocked. You and Albus should have seen this coming, what with the Death Eater Decree. And I've been so lonely and miserable with Ron, since he seems to ignore me. That's why I started seeing Snape weekly, just to have someone to talk to. Only I didn't know it was Snape. Oh, do stop twinkling at me, Albus. It's not funny!” As Hermione prattled on, she could envision Albus and Minerva’s different reactions to her recounting of events that had led her up to that moment.

Hermione sighed with exhaustion once more. She had unloaded her heart to the two slabs of carved granite before her, even admitting that she thought she was falling in love with the man she knew as Calleo, but uncertain of her love now with the knowledge that it was Snape.

“Don't look at me like that, Minerva. I know. I feel like a hypocrite. I finally decide to sleep with him, breaking my marriage vows, and then to discover it's actually Snape? Do you have any idea how confused I am? I remember what that man said to me the night before my wedding. He treated me abysmally for years. And now I meet him years later, and he's suddenly nice to me? I know, I know, I never knew him other than in the context of a professor-student relationship, but still. How do I know it’s not all an act?” Hermione felt perplexed. How was she supposed to feel about a man she was falling in love with, while hating the man she remembered? “I don't know. Maybe his surly attitude all those years was an act. Maybe both versions of him are an act, and he's not really like either one at all.”

Holding her hands out toward the graves in a pleading manner, she begged, “Help me out here.
You both knew the man for years. What was he really like? Is he truly like this? Has he changed? I've heard others mention what a foul temper Snape has always had, and he's so different around me now. What's changed?” Hermione laughed. “That's silly! Everything has changed! He no longer teaches—though maybe if I had to teach three or four hundred students a week, especially if they were anything like Trevor Spawn, then I might be a grumpy bitch too.” Laughing at the realization that if one co-worker could make her this upset and terse, imagine what three hundred mediocre students would do to her temperament. “Maybe I'd be worse than Snape if I was a Potions mistress at Hogwarts! Can you just imagine it now? All the students in the corridors whispering behind my back that I'm worse than the old greasy git?”

Hermione cringed as the old nickname for the former professor slipped past her lips. It was a cruel name, and she knew he was aware of those malicious monikers that children assign to those they dislike or who are different. She had had her share as a young child. “Buck-tooth beaver” and “swotty toffy” were two of many names she remembered. Recalling her own hurt feelings from being taunted as a child brought a few tears to her eyes, which she wiped away hastily. Even Ron had been cruel to her over the years, calling her “mental,” “a nightmare,” and “a star-struck tart” when he had first discovered she was dating Krum, and many other names that she had forced herself to stop recalling.

A sudden wave of compassion for Snape washed through her. Hermione had heard from Remus that Harry’s father and Sirius were cruel to Snape at times, and Hermione could only imagine how she would have felt if she had been the victim of such vicious teasing for years. It was bad enough that Malfoy had publicly called her a Mudblood repeatedly. And for such name-calling as Snape had endured to continue into adulthood only made her wonder if she would have been equally as cold and disdainful herself. She remembered how even at the Order meetings, during the last year of the war, Ron and Harry would still use the term “greasy git” and “dungeon bat” when referring to Snape openly. It didn't help that Sirius used to publicly call him “Snivellus” in front of others, no doubt a nickname that was born during their days at school.

Ron still called her names even to this day, and she had forgiven him for them, but it seemed that Hermione was finding it harder and harder to forgive him when he seemed to do little these days to make amends for his periodic cruelty.

Still, the worst names Snape had ever called her personally were "a silly girl” and “an insufferable know-it-all” – and that was only once, many, many years ago. Though still mean-spirited, those names stung far less than being called “a frigid cunt” by your own husband the previous week.

“What am I going to do?” Hermione pleaded for some answer from the inanimate stone before her. “I don't know if I can ever go back and face Snape, knowing who he is and what I've done. Yes, I know I'm being a hypocrite to throw away the friendship we've developed, all due to the fact that I now know it's him. Don't berate me, Minerva. I feel bad enough as it is. I've been over this a million times in my head already before I came here. I just need to say it out loud.”
Hermione did feel better as she vocalized all the random and muddled thoughts that had been trapped in her head. It was one thing to think it; it was another to utter it from your own mouth, forced to hear one's own thoughts aloud.

Rehashing over the old argument that had been running around in her head, Hermione said, “If I don't go back to see Snape, what do I have to look forward to? Being stuck at home with Ron?” It was clear from her own statement that Hermione knew she would be going back to Snape's flat that night. “I just hope that once he finally does reveal himself, that he'll be the same person I've gotten to know and not change into the old acerbic, mean-spirited man I remember from years ago. Perhaps if I pretend I don't know it's Snape, we can continue having nice evenings together, talking and dining.” Shaking her head, she noted mournfully, “I can't believe I'm actually looking forward to an evening with Snape over one with Ron. What has the world come to?”

Gazing at Albus' tombstone, she read aloud the inscription, “The answer to all your questions can be found in a Lemon Drop.” An ironic smile twisted Hermione's mouth into an odd tight-lipped half-grimace. “Very funny, Albus,” she remarked dryly, looking at the lemon tree behind the wizard's headstone.

After spending a few more moments in quiet introspection, Hermione's wand began humming and vibrating. Remembering that she had set a Charm to notify her if anyone approached the cemetery, Hermione rose from her seat and gazed beyond the perimeter fence.

A short, squat witch, that looked to be the color of dirt from head to toe, was slowly strolling along the path to the cemetery. As she got closer, Hermione recognized the older witch as Professor Sprout, Headmistress of Hogwarts.

Pomona waved her arm enthusiastically in greeting when they were close enough to easily recognize each other.

“I thought I saw someone down here!” the older witch remarked cheerfully.

“Yes, I just came to visit and keep them up-to-date on the latest goings-on,” Hermione explained with a nod of her head towards the tombstones of Albus and Minerva.

“Then you should swing by my office sometime and talk with their portraits directly,” Pomona offered jovially. “We'll have some tea, and then I could leave you alone to catch up in private with them sometime.”
“That's very kind, Professor Sprout, but I wouldn't want to impose,” Hermione politely declined. There was something less nerve-wracking about confessing certain things to a piece of stone versus winding up in an argument with a piece of enchanted canvas. Besides, headstones just sat there silently and listened to you without passing judgment.

“Oh, it certainly would not be an imposition!” the headmistress countered. “And besides, just between you and me, though you were never a Hufflepuff and you never considered apprenticing in Herbology, you were one of my favorite students.” She shortly corrected herself by adding, “Well, right after Neville. He was my favorite, but you were a close second.”

“Thank you,” Hermione answered, feeling a little awkward since it had been a while since she had received such enthusiastic praise, and she discovered that she missed it.

Glancing at the lemon tree, Hermione asked, “When did you plant that?” She wondered if maybe the former Herbology professor planted it herself.

“The lemon tree?”

Hermione nodded.

“My, it has been a while since you've been here!” Pomona commented boldly. “It popped up as a seedling the day the war ended; and within a week, it was bearing fruit! Most amazing thing. It survives the Scottish winter with nary a sign of frost damage. I think Albus was behind it. He was a master at Transfiguration. My only critique is that the lemons are quite awful,” she said sotto voce, as if she didn't want Albus' bones to overhear her remark.

“Really? What's wrong with them?” Hermione tried not to feel guilty as she suddenly realized she had not been back to the cemetery since a few days after the last stand, when the last of the war dead had been buried.

“Here,” the headmistress said, as she fetched a lemon that had recently fallen on the ground. “Look.” Pulling out a small gardening knife from inside her dirt-smudged robes, Professor Sprout cut open the lemon and showed it to Hermione.

Examining the lemon, Hermione noticed the waterless and pulpy texture.
“See, the fruit is dry and is practically devoid of any juice,” noted the older witch, poking at the
flesh with her knife. “That would be indicative of Imperial mandarins, but this is not a mandarin
tree nor grafted onto rootstock that would make the problem worse. Nor is there excessive nitrogen
in the soil to cause the fruit to be desiccated.” Chucking the fruit back under the tree, she admitted,
“I’ve tried everything to make the fruit more palatable, but nothing I have tried has worked. What’s
more, the fruit does not rot, but dries out naturally. So I come out here and collect them, and the
eльves use them to decorate the wreaths around the castle at Christmas time. I usually keep a bowl
on my desk for decorative purposes. I’ve asked the portrait of Albus about his Transfiguration spell
regarding the tree, but it seems that his portrait knows nothing about the tree. Personally, I don’t
think he wants to admit he failed in that one aspect. But that’s neither here nor there.”

Professor Sprout and Hermione chatted a while longer before Hermione excused herself, noting it
was getting late in the day and she needed to head home.

Before they parted company, Hermione asked, “Could I take a few lemons back with me for further
study?” having told the headmistress about her ingredient-testing position.

“Not at all, take as many as you like. They seem to be of no use for eating, so you might as well
take as many as you can carry,” the headmistress urged the younger witch.

“Thank you.” Hermione gathered enough to examine and experiment, and a few for drying and
analyzing later on. Some fruits were more useful in their dried state than fresh.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Back at home, Hermione found a decorative bowl she rarely found a use for, that she had received
as a wedding present, and artfully placed a tower of lemons in it. Setting it on the kitchen table, she
smiled to herself at the quaintly homey tableau presented by the sight of the fruit and very worn-
looking furniture.

Once dinner was in the oven, Hermione went to the bedroom to collapse.

“I have to go tonight,” she mumbled into her pillow while staring out the window.

It felt hotter that day than the day before, and the Daily Prophet had predicted that there was a heat
wave on the way. It was supposed to be close to 34 degrees Celsius the next day. Hermione
vaguely wondered whether wizards made wild guesses to the weather, used complex Arithmancy
charts to predict the climate patterns and fluctuations, or just took whatever the Muggle
weathermen said at face value – what with all the computer modeling and technology they used,
which made weather-casting a rather reliable art for Muggles.
With nothing to do but kill time until dinner was ready in another hour, Hermione continued to vegetate on the bed, exhausted from all the mental and emotional gymnastics she had put herself through over the weekend and that day.

Hermione wasn't even sure how she would react to Snape, once he opened the door for her tonight. There was no point in her preparing for anything, since she had no idea what would happen. Would Snape know she knew his identity and just come out and admit who he was, or would he continue to play this game of theirs? She wasn't even sure she could continue, but if Snape was willing to play along and ignore the truth, then so was she. It was easier this way, and she needed things to be easy for once in her life.

There was a thump in the kitchen, and Hermione went to investigate the noise. A Treble W owl was perched on the windowsill with a medium-sized box. After relieving the owl of its burden, she gave it a treat from Pig's snack tray before the bird took off.

Curious as to what the Weasley twins could be sending her, Hermione opened the box only to quickly shut it closed. She had forgotten that she had delicately asked George to send her a selection of their adult Owl Order wares, since he had offered her a job running the retail store.

Unable to be even remotely inclined to consider when she might sample anything from the box, as her libido had taken a sharp dive since Friday night and the news of Snape working for Lavender, Hermione hid the box under a collection of cleaning supplies. She was certain Ron would never stumble across the adult novelties there.

Thankful that she was home and Ron wasn't yet, as she could only imagine her husband accidentally opening the box, thinking it was for him – or worse, prying into her post – Hermione got the box hidden just before Ron came through the front door.

Dinner was another strained moment between the two. Desperate to see if there was any reason to stay home instead of going to see Snape, Hermione valiantly tried to talk with her husband, only to confirm her suspicions that they indeed had nothing in common any longer. Ron was bored quickly by anything of an even remotely intellectual nature. He preferred to spend time rehashing family gossip or cooing over how cute their newest nephew, Eric, was.

Talking about certain subjects with Ginny and Harry did not irritate her in the least, but somehow the same words coming out of Ron's mouth infuriated Hermione beyond reason. Resentment was a funny emotion that could alter one's perceptions to the point of absurdity.
Instead of killing time at their flat before she had to leave for “dance lessons,” Hermione excused herself and swung by Flourish and Blotts to fritter away some time before heading to Snape's flat. Time alone in a bookstore was much more preferable to the company of Ron at the moment.

Walking to the back of the bookshop, Hermione headed straight for the Family/Home section. She quickly found the two books she had browsed on that hot summer night when she and Ron had fought.

_Marriage and Divorce in the Modern Wizarding Age_ and _The Magical Contracts of Marriage and Children_ were still in stock on the shelves, and Hermione quickly pulled them down. She found herself a place sit, and began thumbing through the table of contents on the contracts book.

After reading pertinent parts that she was keenly interested in, Hermione noticed the time. Hermione bought the books, relieved she wasn't worried about money for once and that she could actually buy a couple books on impulse, instead of calculating down to the last Knut to see if she could afford them. It was a relief to be able to have the funds for something as simple as books, and not worry about being short where finances were concerned.

Hermione arranged to have them owled home, instead of taking them with her to Snape's flat.

Strolling along the cobbles that lined the street, Hermione noted her reluctance to reach her final destination, nervous that it would all come to a halt tonight.

Severus had checked his hair twice and brushed his teeth three times, even using the tooth whitening potion to brighten his smile, though he doubted there would be much to smile about tonight.

He had a lesson plan for swing dancing prepared, but he doubted it would be of any use tonight. Marf had been briefed on the situation, and every possible outcome had been planned for. Most importantly, lots of tea and alcohol would be ready. He doubted Hermione would be drinking, but he might be if things dissolved quickly into unpleasantness. Handkerchiefs were pressed and ready, and Severus' nerves were braced for the worst.

Severus figured that tonight was the night. Either she stayed and agreed to help him and Draco escape; or she would run off into the night, and he might have to resort to begging and possibly groveling for her help. Groveling seemed to evoke an inordinate amount of pity in Gryffindors, especially when it was sincere. The Slytherin loathed being an object of pity, but he was willing to bare the sting of it if it suited his end purpose of escape.
Though he had stayed late at work to minimize the time he would spend pacing his flat, he still found too much time on his hands to spend waiting. Temptation to begin drinking before his guest arrived was strong, but the ex-Death Eater held his resolve to wait until he absolutely needed a drink before indulging. For if he started now, he doubted he would stop until he was close to suffering from alcohol poisoning.

He heard Hermione's knock on his door.

Checking the color of the bed curtains, Severus saw they were gray with an overlay of swirling red. 'She's in despair,' he noted before Charming the bed curtains to black.

Grabbing his half-mask, Severus adjusted it, checking himself in a mirror before opening the door to welcome Hermione into his flat.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 40 A/N: *Cestrum nocturnum* is frequently referred to as “Night Blooming Jasmine”, even though it is not a member of the jasmine family. The more pedantic plant enthusiast, such as myself, will refer to it as “Night Blooming *Jessamine*” and not “Jasmine.” Only a rabid plant nut like myself would understand that there is no *Jasmine nocturnum*, having spent years hoarding rare tropical plant catalogs and studying gardening books. Anyone who has labeled a plant *J. nocturnum* has most probably mislabeled it such, but *Nyctanthes arbor-tristis* is frequently referred to as “Night Jasmine” or “Night-flowering Jasmine” and is frequently used in homeopathic medicine (for fever and rheumatism). The flowers of *N. arbor-tristis* are commonly used in Buddhist temples for worship.

A huge round of thanks to LP for her Latin translation services. “Memoria prodamur proiecerint” translates roughly into these variations: In memory of those who have sacrificed; Those who sacrificed will be remembered; May we never forget those who sacrificed; So that those who sacrificed are not forgotten; So that we never forget those who gave their all.

According to weather records, on Tuesday, August 5th 2003, it was 34 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit) around London on that day. All other exact temperatures in this fic quoting degrees are based on actual recorded temperatures for the respective day in or around the London area.

Thanks to okonchristy (A.K.A. cocoachristy) for being my sounding board on the past several chapters when I needed some feedback to see if I was on track.
The door swung open.

Hermione tried to stifle her barely audible gasp of surprise, but failed. Snape was standing before her with a half-mask on. Now able to see the lower half of his face, it was clearly unmistakable to Hermione that he was her former professor. All of the remaining doubts or wishing that it wasn’t true flushed themselves right out of her head. If she didn’t know beforehand who he was, she surely would have recognized him by now.

Severus observed Hermione’s reaction; he had expected nothing less. She stood in the corridor outside his flat, unable to move. Since she had not immediately fled, but appeared to be considering it, Severus took this as a sign that there was hope for the situation after all. Indecision was merely a chance disguised as uncertainty.
Bowing low in his formal manner with an out-swept arm, he said in his warmest and sincerest voice, “Hermione, I'm so glad you came. Welcome.”

She blinked. It suddenly struck her that she was still standing outside Snape's flat, and she had the choice to enter or walk away. Snape’s welcome pushed her into action. Grasping on to the tiny thread that remained of her vaulted Gryffindor courage, she did the polite thing and accepted his invitation into his home.

As Hermione walked past him, she began stammering out an apology. “I... I'm sorry. I'm just surprised to see you in a more revealing mask,” she explained, thankful that at least it sounded like an honest reply. Hermione was surprised to see the ex-Death Eater in a half-mask, so it was a truthful statement.

Severus could have asked if what she saw met with her approval, but that was pushing the boundaries for the moment. Instead, he reverted to the usual itinerary of letting her rest first. “Please, have a seat,” he offered. Reaching for her elbow to escort her, as he always did, he noticed her flinch from his touch.

Her simple and instinctual reflex was like cold steel piercing his chest and wounded him to the core.

Hermione whipped her head to look at him with shameful remorse. “I'm sorry,” she said hastily, then looked away. “I'm not myself tonight.”

Severus felt the familiar walls of emotional detachment going up in defense of the rejection he had expected from her tonight. He was momentarily stunned when Hermione came back to his side and settled her hand around the crook of his elbow, accepting his original offer to escort her to the settee. Her hand trembled, though she kept her touch feather light upon his arm. Hermione's nervousness was apparent from her uneasy gait to the way her breathing was erratic and strained.

She thought her knees were going to give way from underneath her. Hermione should have leaned on Severus' arm for fear of collapsing to the ground, but barely gathered the courage to accept his arm.

Once her cloak was removed and she was seated, Hermione still could not relax. Her legs trembled in expectation of Snape to give up the game and confess his true persona. Looking up into his face, she saw him give her an unreadable smile.
‘She knows.’ After he analyzed the way Hermione had flinched from his touch and did not greet him with her usual warmth, Severus surmised that she had figured out his identity. The trepidation in her eyes told him all he needed to know.

Hermione watched his face as the realization of her reactions sunk into him. ‘He knows, I know.’

As soon as the dawning crossed her face, Severus came to the undeniable realization. The urge to bark, ‘I know you know, I know!’ forged within him, but he refrained, deciding that it would be best if he waited for her to make the first step. He would not be the one to force an end to this enchantment that had spun between them, though it seemed the short fairy tale they had lived had ended.

Sitting himself down on the other end of the settee, though not as close as he normally would have, Severus asked, “How was your weekend?”

The wizard was aware of Potter’s birthday party, and was sure this would provide a neutral ground on which to converse.

“It was…” ‘Stressful, shocking, confusing, hellish, humiliating, depressing, draining.’ ‘…interesting.” Hermione did not have the energy to lie convincingly, so she took the vague and diplomatic path.

In Ginny’s last letter to Severus, which he received earlier that morning, the redhead witch made mention of Hermione looking rather distracted, and she attributed it to being informed of the mortal nature of a wizarding divorce.

“Care to elaborate?” Severus prompted her.

Mentally scrambling for anything but her immediate thoughts to fill the conversation, Hermione blurted out, “Trevor almost completely burnt down the lab Friday afternoon.”

In a moment of complete empathy, Severus slapped his hand over his forehead and groaned. His eyes still hidden behind his hand, he queried, “And just how did the imbecile manage to pull that one off?” There was exasperation and disgust in his voice.

‘There’s the old Snape I remember,’ Hermione noted, though she quickly realized it was not
directed at her, but in sympathy of her plight. “Trevor set a box of Ashwinder eggs on top of a shipment of phoenix feathers.” She noticed him visibly wince as he realized the result of the situation. “Without,” she added with dramatic tension in her voice, “checking to see if the Freezing Charm on the Ashwinder eggs was about to expire.” Hermione watched Snape pinch the bridge of his nose through his mask, and his mouth grimace. “I had stepped out of the lab to get some paperwork in my office when he did that. By the time I got back, smoke was billowing out of the lab and Trevor had gone to get a cup of tea, essentially leaving the place to burn down.”

“Would you care for a cup of Turkish coffee, or better yet, a stiff drink?” Severus really felt a strong pang of empathy for Hermione.

Hermione was secretly thankful that she had recalled the accident in the lab, for it gave her something impersonal to concentrate on other than the fact Snape was sitting right next to her, and he had been working as a gigolo for God knew how long. Her eyes quickly passed over the bed on the other side of the room, forcing her mind to not even contemplate the sight of Snape naked on the bed shagging some random witch, much less herself.

“I think a cup of tea for my nerves would be in order,” Hermione replied. Continuing on with her tale, she elaborated, “And today the work crew was still cleaning up all the fire damage, so at least I didn't have to work in the lab today.” She omitted the fact that she was allowed part of the day off, and had gone to the cemetery to visit Albus and Minerva's graves.

A tray with tea service appeared on the table in front of them.

Severus poured Hermione a cup of tea. “Milk?” He knew how she took her tea, but asked anyway.

“This is regular tea?” Hermione asked, noting there were no obvious floral or herbal scents. Severus gave a gentle nod of his head. “Yes, please.”

As she accepted her cup of tea, making a point of grabbing the saucer so as not to make contact with Severus, Hermione noticed the cup and saucer had the same geometric pattern as the first night she came to his flat. That first night, she had confessed her moral conundrum after discovering Ginny's infidelity. With hindsight illuminating the truth, Hermione surmised Snape probably helped guide her to the decision to not tell Harry anything, but to lie. She could not blame Snape. If she were in the same situation, Hermione would have manipulated Snape to keep herself and her friends safe from an Auror's wrath. She did it as a teenage girl to Dolores Umbridge, so it all depended on how much one felt the need to lie to save one's own arse.

“Did anything else of interest happen?” Severus asked, wondering when Hermione was going to
drop the facade of politeness and confront him about his true identity.

Hermione wondered if Snape was being polite or was fishing for a specific answer. Perhaps he was wondering when and how she had figured out who he truly was, and if she was going to back away from her promise of friendship no matter what the truth revealed.

Pausing to take a sip of her tea and contemplate on just how aloof she wanted to sound, Hermione finally mentioned in passing, “A friend of mine had a birthday party, and one of my sisters-in-law had her baby.”

“How was the party?” Severus inquired, continuing the casual conversation. He wondered how long this banter of small talk would continue before Hermione would demand an end to this pageant of pretense.

“It was enjoyable,” Hermione lied easily, though unable to stop a faraway look from coming into her eye as certain events flooded back into her mind.

“And how is your sister-in-law and her baby?” Severus asked, not really concerned at all.

“She and the baby are fine,” Hermione reported. At the last moment, she added, “Though with all the nieces and nephews I have, when it comes time for them to start going to Hogwarts, they could practically start their own house. There will be so many of them.” Her tone was not exceptionally kind; it sounded rather derogatory, and she meant for it to, bearing in mind the number of children her brothers-in-law had sired recently.

“How many are there now?” Severus could not recall any specific number, though Hermione has noted the total number of relatives in the past who had been packed into the Burrow for family occasions.

With one hand holding her teacup, her other hand began ticking them off. Severus watched her fingers tally the names that she mumbled silently, each child marked by a tap of her fingers against her thumb.

“Sixteen and one on the way,” Hermione answered.

Severus was momentarily thankful that he was no longer teaching at Hogwarts, for he did not have
to dread the day when the next generation of Weasleys was going to darken the doorstep of his Potions classroom. “And somehow your mother-in-law feels that having enough grandchildren to fill nearly three Quidditch teams is not nearly enough?” he remarked, remembering Hermione’s complaints about Molly’s nagging her to have children of her own soon.

“After what I learned this weekend, I don't think I'll ever have children with my husband,” Hermione remarked sharply.

“And what was that?”

“Remember when I mentioned that I had recently learned about the inability to divorce once children were born?”

Severus nodded so that she could continue.

“Well, I haven't had much time to contemplate the full repercussions as to why a divorce was unattainable once children were born. A friend of mine informed me of the consequences of such an action.”

Hermione shivered, feeling her mortal soul asserting itself that it was still alive, despite the fact she had briefly entertained the idea of divorcing Ron. Of course if she ever did divorce Ron, it would have to be before she found herself corporeally bound forever to her husband if her monthly potion accidentally failed.

“Really?”

“I know, I should have understood what the implication of ‘magically bound’ implied, but I haven't had much time to contemplate such a matter, especially since I feel particularly adverse to the idea of motherhood. At least if my husband was the father.”

Hermione suddenly realized how that last statement could be misconstrued by Snape, considering that she had promised him that she would give him a reply regarding becoming lovers or remaining platonic friends. She prayed Snape would not remind her of her promised answer.

“Anyway,” Hermione soldiered on, hoping to bury her previous remarks with more conversation, “I've purchased a few books in order to understand what my mother-in-law purposefully omitted
when she supposedly told me everything involved with a wizarding marriage.” She could feel the rage building inside of her as she mulled over how she had been misled by so-called family.

The memory of Snape's cutting words the night before her wedding came back. Setting down her teacup, she closed her eyes and valiantly held back the tears. Now would be the time to confront Snape about how she felt he had been mocking her behind her back; however, now that she was in his presence, she sensed none of the petty righteousness she’d thought he might be harboring. Hermione opened her eyes and looked at him with unshed tears. Instead of finding the gloating brute she expected, she found a patient man sitting next to her, offering her tea and sympathy for a while.

Hermione wanted to pound her fists against his chest and ask him why. *Why did you have to be so right? Why didn't I listen to you and run far and fast away from my impending doom? Why didn't I leave the kitchen with you, each going our separate ways, never setting our eyes on the Burrow or each other ever again?’*

Her shoulders slumped, and the tears began to fall quietly.

On cue, Severus produced a neatly pressed linen handkerchief for Hermione to blot away the tears and blow her runny nose.

“Thank you,” Hermione choked out in a thick whisper.

Severus sat there quietly waiting for Hermione. What exactly he waited for her to do, he could not foresee. A distraught woman was an unpredictable creature. She could go from weak and simpering to vengeful and spiteful in a heartbeat.

“I suppose you’re getting rather tired of me coming over here and constantly crying,” Hermione said hesitantly.

It was the first hint that Hermione expected Snape to revert back to the person she remembered him to be, and the meaning of her comment was not lost on him. Severus had understood that Hermione would question if he would become his familiar acrimonious self. He had spent every night since Thursday wondering that same question.

With his mask and anonymity, Severus could pretend to be anyone the client wanted, and for the past three years, it had been a game to him. Each client was a test of his acting ability, though he
always drew the line when he started getting bored, a client's tastes got too bizarre, or a witch became too emotionally attached to him. Now it was reversed. The gigolo had become too attached to the client, and Hermione was the one weighing if things had gone too far between them. With his mask removed, would any part of him that she had associated with “Calleo” remain? When Hermione would eventually regard him, sans mask, would his psychological mask take the place of his physical mask and thus shut his heart off from the world, as he had done for years before? Even Severus wasn't sure if any of the tenderness he felt for Hermione could come easily without the use of a mask or blindfold. Or was it all an act, one that fooled even himself?

Severus, for all his brittle and glacial exterior, still had a heart like anyone else. For a brief while it had begun to feel once more under the warmth and sincerity of Hermione's attentions. Would some part of his “Calleo” personality survive the transition to a man with a known face and notorious past? He hoped it would. A part of his mind berated the fact that he had become too attached and that rejection was part and parcel of the deal, yet the part of him that craved for Hermione insisted that he not give up until she flat out refused him.

They sat there for a moment in silence as Severus contemplated how to answer Hermione's question.

“The only thing I am tired of is how you allow your husband to insult you,” Severus replied, providing an answer that would deflect from the persona Hermione expected. Knowing that if he didn't watch his tone, it would rise in anger, Severus made a concerted effort to keep his voice soft and consoling. “Abuse is abuse, whether it is by the end of his wand, the end of his fist, or the end of his tongue. You have made it quite clear he ignores you, and of the times you do speak with each other, he is quick to put you down. Emotional abuse is a rather powerful weapon if wielded correctly. Your husband seems to know your Achilles heel. He attacks your intellect, your looks and your... femininity.”

Hermione listened intently to what Snape said, hating the fact that he was right. Four years ago he had said similar things that night at the Burrow, but tonight he delivered his sentiments with the tender sympathy of an old friend. It hurt to know that she had allowed herself to reach this point, that she had allowed Ron to hurt her so much over the years. It scared her more than anything else that it took an outsider to point out the obvious. Hermione had denied that Ron's derisive remarks and put-downs were abuse, but Snape had pointed out that abuse was abuse, even if the scars were not physically visible.

'Where has the strong person gone – the one that stood up for the oppressed?' she wondered about herself. When had she finally become the one who needed someone to fight for her, since she seemed unable to defend herself?

“Excuse me,” Hermione barely choked out, and bolted for the bathroom.
After quickly shutting the door, she braced her back against it in some pointless attempt to keep Snape out. Hermione slid down the door, breaking into hysterical sobs, until she was seated on the floor with her knees pressed uncomfortably against her chest, making it harder for her to draw breath and wail her heart's lament.

It wasn't difficult for Snape to note that Hermione had run to the bathroom instead of to him for comfort. Hermione's mournful cries were easily heard through the thin interior door.

Hermione could not bring herself to throw herself into Snape's arms. She had expected him, in his long-awaited moment of triumph, to relish in her anguish and point out with sadistic glee that he was right all along, and that she had made a grave mistake; that she should lie in the bed of her own making. Instead, he had continued to sit there and pretend to be the friend she had come to rely upon in her many hours of need.

How was it that sweet and lovable Ron, her own husband, had turned into the monster; and the snide and sarcastic ex-Death Eater had become the man who helped her to discover love and true companionship?

She slid sideways, her back still against the door, until her face was pressed against the cool tile. Sprawled along the bathroom floor, she pretended she didn't notice that Snape had opened the door after performing a Reverse Hinge spell, so the door would open outward instead of into the bathroom.

Severus saw her lying on the bathroom floor and crying her heart out. A familiar burning settled in his chest; the seeds of hate began to grow. Severus had always disliked Ronald Weasley, but now he began to hate Hermione's husband with the white-hot intensity of a thousand suns. It was that thick-headed boy that had brought Hermione to his doorstep seeking comfort and companionship, who had caused her such grief when he disappeared for a week while making Hermione worry about his safety – though Severus thought she should have spared no grief for such an insensitive half-wit. The boy frequently insulted her and treated her with thinly veiled disdain, according to Hermione's descriptions.

Severus wondered if he was any better. He knew that part of the reason why she was there on his bathroom floor, sobbing her heart out, was due in no small part to himself. They had grown attached to one another when he was only Calleo, and now she knew who he really was. He could imagine how confused Hermione must be, unsure if he was still the same angry and distant man, or was he truly the person she had come to know recently.

Gazing at her prone form, still shaking with racking sobs, he could see her bony spine above the
neckline of her blouse, and the thinness of her person; Severus wondered if she had forgone eating once more. He hated himself for bringing her pain, after he had grown used to the idea that he was her source of comfort. Now that she knew who he was, Severus knew her frank confessions would not be forthcoming. Hermione was now isolated in her pain, alone and unable to unburden herself to anyone else, and would have to suffer this agony alone.

Severus stepped into the bathroom and around Hermione. Sitting down on the floor next to her, he waited until she looked up to regard him. He said nothing. Severus merely held his arms out to welcome her, offering comfort. He would wait for her to come to him, unable to bear the thought of Hermione flinching from his touch again.

Red-rimmed eyes – teary, swollen and weary – gazed at him. Hermione reluctantly crawled along the floor like some lame beggar, and collapsed into Severus’ arms. A fresh wave of tears and wailing came forth, as she curled into his embrace.

“Shhhh,” Severus cooed soothingly, stroking Hermione's back. This only seemed to make her cry with more intensity, her wails telling of her anguish. Severus stopped stroking her back and held her tighter; hating himself for the pain he continued to cause her to suffer.
Hermione laid there in Snape's arms, trying to comprehend how she came to be lying on his bathroom floor being comforted by him, of all people. When he opened the bathroom door, she was expecting his whole facade to be wiped away with the sight of her lying on the floor, howling and keening like some wounded creature. Anticipating him to bark at her to get up off the floor and do something other than blubber like an old woman, she was stunned when he sat himself next to her and said nothing, instead willing to embrace her and give her comfort once again.

Unwilling to analyze Snape's motives at the moment or whether his intentions were sincere, Hermione allowed herself to be held, knowing that if she began to dwell on how she was being offered solace by Snape, she would not find any emotional respite. She found sanctuary in the same set of arms she had flung herself to many times before, but now she knew who they belonged to. As he stroked her back, it wrenched at her heart even more. Over the weekend, she had convinced herself she could not love Snape, that she had loved an illusion, a fantasy born from dire need. Snape's tenderness, when she felt her life could not be any worse, undid her more than if Snape had yelled at her or reverted back to the man she remembered.

Hermione hated herself. She hated that she was such a hypocrite, just as Snape had predicted with his question about her unwavering friendship; she hated that she had become like those she
As her weeping subsided, Hermione just allowed herself to continue lying in Snape's arms. She made herself stop thinking, as her mind was taxed beyond cohesive thought, after she’d spent all weekend and that day questioning and analyzing Snape's sincerity, and her own emotions. Hermione was a woman who had found that her intelligence had served her well, but now her intellect could not fix her life as it was. Instead, she just let herself feel.

Slowly, her breath stopped hitching and the tears ceased, yet still, Hermione lay enveloped in his arms. With her cheek pressed against his now tear-drenched shirt, she listened to his heart beat, and felt his lungs expand and contract with each breath he drew, his body warming her where it made contact. To be held by Snape was presently more enjoyable than being sprawled out on the chilly tiles feeling alone. At least with another warm body to cling to, she didn't feel quite so desolate. With her head still tucked underneath his chin and her hands clutching to his shirt, she continued to stare past his knees to the counter opposite of them. She let herself be lost in the deep blue color of the tile and the dark browns of the vanity cabinet, her eyes tracing the pattern of the wood grain as an act of meditation.

Severus sat on the cold floor, noticing Hermione's even breaths, and he wondered if she had fallen asleep in his arms once more. That fact was refuted when she sniffed and wiped at her nose with his handkerchief. He did make note, with a slight smirk, that after she wiped her nose, her hand went back to clutching his sodden shirt. It gave Severus hope that Hermione could come to terms with the fact he, Severus Snape and former professor of hers, was still her confidant and friend.

They had spent more than a half-hour sitting on the hard tile floor, and Severus was beginning to feel it. Part of his right leg and his arse had gone to sleep, and his joints were beginning to protest to the rather uncomfortable conditions. The added weight of a witch in his lap compounded the numbness growing in his lower extremities.

Severus shifted, and with a bit of levity said, “As much as I would not mind sitting here the rest of the night on the bathroom floor with you, I think my body will be extremely displeased and would prefer the comfort of a soft cushion underneath me. Perhaps we could take this back to the settee?” He would have suggested the bed for her to lie down upon, but as she had never been near his bed, Severus thought it was prudent to go back to familiar territory.

Hermione shifted and sat up. Sniffing, she said, “Sorry.” Her eyes were downcast.

“Don't be,” Severus replied gently, lifting her chin up to look at him. Their eyes locked and neither could look away for the moment.
She could not remember at the moment what color Snape's eyes were, if they were black or brown. And with his wine-red mask on, it was even harder to tell. Regardless, she could not stop staring, wondering what Snape looked like without his mask on. She had memories of him from years ago, but they all seemed faded and uncertain, mostly a caricature of a hook-nosed man. She could have used a Pensieve to remind her of what Snape had looked like before, but those memories would be from a time she had found him repulsive. Hermione wanted to see him with new eyes from this fresh perspective.

Temptation to reach out and remove his mask rose within her, but she suppressed it. As long as Snape was going to allow this spellbound time between them to continue, she would let it happen without questions or satisfaction of her curiosity.

Severus rose and extended his hand to help Hermione up. Once she was on her feet, he saw her body sway and her eyes go unfocused for a moment. Hermione reached out and clamped both hands onto Severus – one on his arm, one on his shoulder – to steady herself, before she regained her senses.

“When was the last time you ate?” Severus asked with concern.

“I had dinner just before I came here,” Hermione replied.

“How much did you eat?”

Hermione turned her face away to avoid answering him.

“When was the last time you had a real meal?”

“Friday night,” she confessed. “Since then, I haven't had much of an appetite.”

Severus wondered if her lack of appetite was due wholly to Ginny's revelation of Wizard divorces, or if Hermione had realized prior to showing up tonight who he was. It was a matter to think upon at another time. What mattered now was getting Hermione to the settee and putting some food into her system.

Once he escorted her to her seat, Severus called out, “Marf!”
A house-elf with a knobby nose, a wisp of hair coming off the top of his head, and a clean pillowcase for clothing suddenly appeared in front of them.

“Yes, Master!” Marf replied with an extravagant bow, looking very pleased to be of use to his master.

“Miss Hermione is hungry. Please fix us a tray of some sliced-up cold chicken, cheese, fruit, crackers, bread, and a fresh pot of tea,” Severus instructed the creature.

“Yes, sir!” Marf disappeared with a shimmer and a tendril of smoke, along with the tea service.

Hermione was rather pleased Snape said “please” when requesting food and fresh tea.

“I suppose it's another night where we won't get around to dance lessons,” Hermione observed dryly, wiping at her runny nose which was still red from crying.

“Perhaps it was for the best. You looked a bit fatigued when you arrived.” Severus noted the bluish cast that underlined her eyes, despite the redness that still ringed them.

“I haven't been sleeping well, these past few nights. I'm not looking forward to tomorrow night,” Hermione amended with a half-truth, in response to his scrutiny. “My first session with the marriage counselor did not go very well. I dread to think how this one will fare,” she said with dark apprehension.

“Since your wands will be surrendered to that Muggle counselor, as least your husband won't be able to hex you,” Severus noted, feeling his hatred for Ronald Weasley swell upon remembering what Hermione had informed him of last week.

Hermione let out a short laugh. “Well, he did it in self defense, as I was the one to hex him first,” she admitted with a small bit of amusement.

“You got in the first hex? You omitted that little detail,” the raven-haired wizard remarked with a smile, pleased Hermione was the first to strike, though it was prompted by some rather unpleasant name-calling.
Hermione laughed a little more, blushing slightly, and noticed Snape smiling. Her old memories recalled Snape with yellow teeth. She wondered when he had bothered to whiten them, then remembered he worked for Lavender, and was probably encouraged to “clean-up a little” for the clientèle. Her eyes scanned over his features that were not covered by his half-mask. His chin; his hair, which she remembered being longer; and his body.

Though the teeth were still a bit crooked, he looked quite different from what she remembered. Snape was no longer rail-thin; and his hair, though thin and straight, didn't hang about his face like a lank curtain of black anymore. And while he no longer sported that minty-green tan, he was still pale.

Before Hermione could recall how she had wantonly appraised Snape's body while she knew him only as Calleo, a tray laden with food appeared on the table before them.

Severus grabbed a plate for her and began piling it high with a little of everything, convinced if he let her fill her own plate, she would only nibble on a few bites. By presenting Hermione with a plate full of food, he knew she would feel obligated to eat it all, satisfying his concern that the witch was not going to waste away from malnutrition.

She accepted her plate with a timid smile. “Thank you,” Hermione breathed, feeling a bit overwhelmed by Snape's attentiveness. She had gotten used to Calleo being gracious to her, but with knowledge of who was actually sitting across from her, she discovered she had to learn to accept his hospitality, as if they were starting anew.

“Oh, here. Please let me,” Hermione said, referring to the patch of wetness on Snape's dark shirt. She made a gesture seeking permission to spell his shirt dry before going ahead. Snape nodded his head slowly, accepting her offer. With a circular swirl of her wand, the tears on his shirt dried, leaving behind no stain.

“Thank you.”

“You're quite welcome.” Hermione didn't know what else to say. She began eating her plate of food so that she would not feel forced to speak to fill the silence. She knew it was silly, especially since she'd had moments with “Calleo” before where they both sat in comfortable silence. Snape seemed to be treating her the same as before, and it made her feel guilty that she was treating him differently in her mind. The moment she flinched from his touch earlier tonight, when he had offered to escort her, was something she was looking back on with shame now. Snape has always escorted her to and from her seat about the flat, as any genteel gentleman would. He was still being the courteous companion.
Both knew that the game had changed. Hermione knew. Severus knew she knew. Hermione knew Severus knew she knew. But now the game was that neither party would be the first to speak about the truth. Neither would acknowledge the proverbial elephant in the room.

Severus watched Hermione eat with a little more relish than someone who had properly dined before coming over to his flat. He poured her a cup of tea and added milk to it, bringing it to the right color. She accepted the tea with another coy smile and expression of reserved gratitude.

The gears were burning in her mind, calculating how to proceed, and Severus could see it: the way Hermione's eyes appraised his newly exposed features searching for recognition, traversing his body when she thought he would not notice her stares. Her self-conscious mannerisms that he had not seen since her first night there reappeared: the way her hand would periodically clutch at her knee to steady her hand, her knees locked tightly together.

Finally satisfied that she had eaten enough so that when she stood she would not keel over from low blood sugar, Severus cleared his throat to signal that he was going to start a conversation.

“Have you had a chance to read the article from Obscure Oozes & Fabulous Fluids yet?”

Hermione ducked her head down, swallowing a bit of chicken and dabbing her mouth with a napkin before answering, “No, I haven't had much of a chance. I had to catch up on paperwork at the office today, since the lab was still being repaired. I do intend on reading it before Thursday night,” Hermione said, catching herself when she realized that she was automatically promising to come on her usual scheduled night. ’You’ve already decided that a night with Snape is better than being stuck at home with Ron. Don’t ruin this by being awkward around him,’ she chastised herself for sounding uncomfortable as she finished her sentence.

Severus smiled warmly. ’She's coming back for more.’ There was hope for his situation after all. As long as Hermione treated him with the same considerate and courteous manner as she had these previous weeks, he would allow the unspoken truth between them to remain unspoken. He knew it would take more time for Hermione to adjust to the knowledge of his identity, but from her behavior, he could see she was making an effort and was beginning to relax a little around him. The fact she willingly went to him for comfort when he offered it earlier meant that she could accept the fact that it was him after all.

“Then I look forward to a lengthy discussion on Thursday night,” he replied with a slight bow of his head.
Hermione's lowered eyes scanned about the floor and table in front of her, as her fidgety hands gripped the cup and saucer, before answering, “As do I.” Raising her eyes to meet his, her nervous gaze foretold of hope that they could continue to pretend that things could continue as before.

Desperately searching for a new topic to embark upon, Hermione thought about asking if the idea about the giant brewer's kettles was of any use, but then she remembered that “Calleo” had said he hadn't done any Potions work in four years. To bring it up might make Snape suspicious that she was on to him brewing Potions, violating the Death Eater Decree. And she was not about to acknowledge that he might be brewing Potions for Lavender. She had considered asking how his weekend was, but as she had always assumed “Calleo” was a private individual who would not regale her with tales of witches he shagged over the weekend, she refrained. Hermione was afraid that Snape might think she was prying if she suddenly asked for personal details when she never had before.

To make small talk, Hermione said, “One of my brothers-in-law recently mentioned that he'll be opening a new shop soon, and he was interested in having me manage it.”

Severus dropped his teacup. It landed on the floor and shattered, splashing tea on his shoes and trouser leg. “Pardon my clumsiness,” he hastily said while trying to mask his apprehension. He swept his wand in an arc, and the broken cup and the spilled tea were gone. A new teacup appeared on the table to replace the broken one that had disappeared. “That sounds interesting,” Severus feigned delight of the news while mentally berating himself for his loss of control. “When would you start?”

“I don't know. He said that he and my other brother-in-law, who both own the business, are still looking at locations, and that it would not open until later in the year,” Hermione informed the wizard sitting next to her. She wondered if his dropped teacup was merely an accident or a reaction to her news.

“And what sort of store would you be managing?” Severus guessed it would be another joke shop in Hogsmeade or some other wizarding village.

Hermione ducked her head down and mumbled something into her own teacup.

“Sorry, I didn't catch that,” Severus remarked, leaning forward with great curiosity.

Setting her teacup down, she squared her shoulders and turned to face Snape with her head held high. “I said,” Hermione began, over enunciating each word with as much dignity as she could muster while trying not to blush, “that it would be an adult-oriented store specializing in
Thankful that he did not have his hands full with another teacup, as he surely would have dropped that one as well, Severus sat back once more. There were two responses he immediately felt the urge to express: one was to shout “no” and tell her not to accept, the other was to laugh. If she did accept, that would certainly put a Gremlin in the works of getting him ingredients for the Polyjuice Potion. Laughing would not be a tactful response either. Severus put his hand up to his chin thoughtfully and hummed, stalling for a moment to come up with a decent response.

“And does that sort of job interest you? Do you see yourself working in retail for the next ten, twenty, fifty years?” Severus asked concernedly, hoping to make her reconsider.

Hermione's shoulders slumped. “I don't know. I'd much rather have a job that does not involve interacting with the public in general.” Recalling tales her mother had told her about when she had to work a sales job in a department store while going to dental school, Hermione said, “For some reason, having to haggle with some witch over why some kinky Muggle meter-maid outfit does not come in neon pink doesn't sound appealing to me.”

Severus gave a hearty chuckle at the mental image that conjured. “So you would be selling unusual clothing. What else would be sold at this store?”

“Let's see.” Hermione picked up her teacup and took a sip before replying. Feeling a bit braver, she replied casually, “Vibrators, dildos, sexy lingerie, erotic costumes, and sex potions.”

“Sex potions?” Severus repeated. He watched Hermione carefully, as he remembered other discussions they had shared regarding certain potions recently.

“Yes, like erotic body paint,” Hermione mentioned, purposefully reminding Snape of one of their previous conversations. Then the brunette witch added quickly to detract from that line of conversation, “But that's neither here nor there. The fact remains that I don't know if I could manage a store that sells that sort of... stuff.”

“Is it that you don't want to manage a store, or you just don't want to manage a store that sells that sort of... stuff,” Severus inquired, lightly mocking Hermione.

Hermione laughed a little, burying her face behind one hand before her laugh turned into a slight groan. “Well, my brother-in-law said I should think on it for a while before deciding.”
“Did he give a date before requiring an answer?”

“No. He just said that they were still looking for a location, and that I didn't have to decide anytime soon.” Hermione wondered if Severus would bring up the hypothetical Potions apprenticeship he had mentioned at their last meeting.

“Since you don't have to decide now, then maybe something else will come up in the near future that would be more compatible with your talents. And one has to consider the strenuous situation between you and your husband. Do you want to work for your in-laws while your marriage is on such shaky ground?” Severus noted, hoping it would give Hermione pause before agreeing to anything soon.

The ex-Death Eater wanted to unmask himself for Hermione, but decided to take things slowly. It was obvious that she was still adjusting to the knowledge of who he was. Severus would wait a few more meetings before taking off his mask and making both himself and Hermione openly deal with the knowledge of his identity. A few more meetings where they could still both pretend was not asking much. Perhaps a few more meetings would be all that was needed before Hermione would lean into his touch once more.

They whiled away the evening talking of safe and familiar subjects they had broached on previous evenings: Potions, the ineptitude of the Ministry and its bureaucracy, the subtle black humor of Hepstia the Mundane: Wild Witch of Westingate, which apothecary charges the highest markups, and recently published books currently available at Flourish and Blotts. Each subject settling them into more comfortable territory.

As the time for Hermione to depart neared, a quiet settled between them signaling an end to the evening.

“I was wondering...” Hermione broke the silence, uncertain how to proceed, then plowed ahead. “I was wondering if I could have one dance before I go.” She paused before intentionally adding, “Just as a refresher, of course.”

“Of course,” Severus replied, amused at her obvious attempts to cover up her discomfort. He wasn't sure if this was some test, or that Hermione was warming up to the idea of being attracted to him. He bowed his head and did not bother to hide a sly smirk, letting her know he was on to her, whatever her game was.
Hermione felt her stomach flutter at the sight of Snape's smirk. She wasn't sure if she should be afraid – very afraid – or take this as a challenge to herself; would she find herself no longer attracted to him while in his arms as they danced, or was this her own twisted logic to wind herself into his arms once more? Whatever the case, Hermione knew she had to see if she was still attracted to him, or if all her desire for him gone.

“Did you want to try the foxtrot or the tango?” Severus asked.

Feeling a little bold, she answered, “Perhaps, one of each would be best.” Hermione hoped she wasn't blushing.

“Yes. Perhaps.” A flick of Severus' wand and the furniture moved to allow them a space to dance.

Severus rose from his seat and extended his hand to Hermione, to help her up and escort her to the middle of the floor.

Hermione looked at Snape's hand, wondering: if she put her hand into his, would she travel down a path where there would be no turning back? If Ron ever discovered his wife had been secretly seeing Snape, she could easily imagine Ron doing something dangerously rash and possibly violent; whether to her or Snape, she could not guess.

Knowing if she did not settle in her mind once and for all whether she could ever be attracted to him, Hermione placed her hand in Snape's. Once in the middle of the room, she turned to face him while keeping her eyes fixed on the expanse of chest clad in wine-red linen in front of her. Hermione placed one hand on his shoulder and the other one in his expectant hand. Her skin tingled upon contact.

She felt betrayed by her own body. While her mind was trying to convince herself that there was no real attraction between them, that it was all based upon a fantasy, her body was falling into old habits when close to Snape: the tightening of the stomach, the light-headedness, the quickening of her heart and breath that were beyond her ability to control.

The music started and Hermione moved, prompted by Snape's pressing fingers in her back guiding her. Suddenly, the mere presence of his hand at her waist seemed much more intimate than ever before. They were far enough apart that their bodies did not touch, but as they moved to and fro, his legs brushed up against hers.
Trying not to focus on the temporary contact, Hermione listened to the lyrics.

“It seems we stood and talked like this before,
We looked at each other in the same way then,
But I can’t remember where or when.”

Hermione wasn’t sure if this was another case of radio syndrome, or if Snape had purposefully chosen this song.

Severus noticed how she would not look up at him. Her body felt stiff, and he could feel the trembling of her hands. He turned, pulling Hermione with him.

As they spun, Hermione was drawn closer to Snape, her body now pressed softly against his. Her breasts brushed up against his chest, and her nipples tightened in response to the stimuli. She didn’t want to be so close to Snape, as it was confounding her mind too much to be able to come to some clear and level-headed decision, but to move away from Snape’s embrace would be a clear sign of rejection. At this point, Hermione was unsure if she wanted to reject Snape, or wanted to explore if there truly was anything between them.

“As some things that happen for the first time,
Seem to be happening again.
And so it seems we have met before,
And laughed before, and loved before,
But who knows where or when.”

As the song ended, Severus twirled Hermione under his arm before bringing her back to his embrace. He could see the deepening rouge of her cheeks had more to do with their proximity than the exertion of the dance. The innocence of her blush was charming to him.

Before she could recover and step away from him, Severus discretely flicked his wand and had the music box play a slow tango.

Severus pulled Hermione close so that their bodies were pressed together snugly. As the music alternated between slow and sweeping strains of the accordion and guitar, to sharp, staccato punctuations, Severus changed his movements to match the music. One moment, they were gliding along in a sensuous chase across the floor; the next, he was pulling Hermione abruptly against his chest.
Hermione felt overwhelmed. The passion that she could feel Snape pouring into the dance made her head spin even more. Trying to ignore her body's response to him, Hermione reflected on the evening so far. Snape had neither treated her with the contempt or disdain she expected from him. He was kind and attentive as ever, feeding her, comforting her, and being the ever-patient friend.

She tried to banish the sudden image of Snape latched onto her neck, sucking and biting the skin from her collarbone to the spot behind her ear that Ron hadn't gone near in years. Her momentary reverie was broken when Snape twisted them about the floor and grabbed her firmly about the waist to bring her chest-to-chest with him once more, forcing her head to snap up and look him in the eye.

The song faded away, but Hermione could not hear it. The blood was pounding in her ears, drowning out all other noise. She stood there in Snape's embrace, unable to move or look away. Hermione's eyes traveled down to his mouth and noticed it was slightly parted as he panted, matching her own labored breath. She saw him lick his lips. Snape's mouth called to her, and for a moment she entertained the idea of leaning forward and kissing him.

When Hermione realized she was suddenly craning her neck so her lips could brush his, she stopped herself and suddenly turned away, though the raven-haired wizard kept his hands on her waist.

Hermione's breaths became strenuous upon realizing what she had almost done.

“You promised you would give me your answer tonight,” Severus said seductively, noticing how Hermione had almost kissed him, yet still pulled away at the last moment. He refrained from letting his hands wander lower, instead moving them to her upper arms.

She didn't know what to do. Hermione was at war with herself. Part of her was already kicking herself for pulling away from what could have been a possibly breath-taking kiss, part of her was berating herself for letting it get this far, while other parts were trying to convince her to run while battling with the faction of her heart demanding to stay and become Snape's lover. Hermione could not even say his given name in her mind. How could she kiss a man she still referred to by his last name even in her own mind?

“I'm more confused than ever,” she stammered.

“What are you confused about?” Severus gently prodded her.
Normally he would have become impatient by this point and snapped at her, but he had seen the struggle in her eyes as they had danced. He had been patient up to this point, and he would continue to be so. She was a source for ingredients, and though part of him began to loathe the idea that he would have to use her and ask her for said ingredients, he hoped that she would understand he wanted her, needed her for more than a handful of shredded boomslang skin or powdered bicorn horn. His soul needed her.

“Why have you been so kind to me?” she asked in a meek and pleading voice.

Her words lanced through him. Severus had expected her to question his actions, but to hear those words issued from her mouth hurt him more than he cared to admit.

His voice changed from warm and soft to icy and hard, “Honestly?”

Hermione shut her eyes tight, praying to have the strength to leave Snape's flat emotionally in one piece. She nodded.

“That first night I was kind to you because I was paid to be,” Severus stated bitterly.

Hermione wrenched herself from his grasp and ran to the fireplace, bracing her hands on the mantle. 'I was a fool to think he had changed,' she scolded herself, trying to will herself not to cry again.

Severus realized his emotions were getting the better of him once more, but that maybe his emotions could salvage the situation caused by his spontaneous lashing out. Following her to the fireplace, he placed his hands on the mantle next to hers without touching her, his chest inches away from her back, short of physically pinning her against the fireplace.

“Though I may have originally been paid to be patient and kind, soon afterwards it was no longer an act. I eventually came to know the woman that you are. I began looking forward to our evenings together,” Severus explained, finding it difficult to express his emotions after having suppressed them for so many years. It would only be with complete honesty that Hermione could truly trust him, so he needed to forthcoming. As awkward and foolish as he felt, it needed to be said. “I meant it when I said that I have never developed this level of friendship with another witch who came to see me. I do enjoy the time we spend together, our debates, dining with you; a few hours of sincere companionship, where it seems we have no false pretenses. Just two people enjoying each other’s company.” Severus moved his thumb to stroke the outside of her little finger to make the point that it was not just her mind that stimulated him.
That tiny caress of Snape's finger along hers was like a jolt of lightning that traveled through her entire body. Hermione could not move. She was paralyzed with confusion, fear, and panic. Snape could admit his growing attraction to her, yet she could not admit the same about him.

Hermione had been scared and reluctant to visit him that first night, but each meeting had made it easier to see him. Soon, she needed to see him, just as Snape had described: two people enjoying each other's company. But it was more than just his company Hermione wanted; she wanted Snape's body. She dreamed of him between her legs, fantasized about him moving in and out of her, and daydreamed of him carrying her off to his bed and ravishing her, making her submit to his seductive charms no matter how much she protested until she begged him for more.

“I understand,” she whispered, finding it hard to speak. Hermione didn't know if she fully understood or not, but she was beginning to see his point of view. She had just learned it was Snape, and she was becoming accustomed to the idea, whereas Snape had known it was her from the first day. Whatever animosity he held towards Hermione seemed to have melted away, and Hermione wondered if her own hostile feelings towards him would sublimate away, as well. “But there are some issues with myself I have to deal with first.”

A moment of silence stretched between them before she said, “For my answer: I'm not saying no, but I'm not saying yes either. I need to clear my head and think on this matter a little while longer.” Hermione took a deep breath. “You asked me to be patient with you before, concerning your mask. I ask that you give me the same courtesy regarding this.”

Severus moved a few paces away from Hermione before replying, “Yes, you have been tolerant with me, so I will do the same. I will wait for your answer when you are ready to give it.”

He preferred to demand an answer, but he knew that no answer could be forced from her with any more satisfactory result than if one was to force open a rose before it was ready to bloom. Only warmth and light could coax a rose to open up, inviting the admirer to smell its heady fragrance and marvel at its beauty. Severus would wait for Hermione to open up and invite him.

Turning to regard him from her place in front of the fireplace, she looked over her shoulder at the long, lean form of the former professor and ex-Death Eater. “Thank you,” Hermione said softly. Another moment of stillness filled the room before she announced abruptly, “I should go.”

Without another word, Severus fetched Hermione's cloak and slipped it over her shoulders, letting one knuckle graze the skin on her neck.
Hermione felt the hairs on her neck stand on edge from the casual touch, though it seemed there was nothing unpremeditated about it. She felt like she was under some plan of seduction, and though Hermione knew she should be wary whenever a Slytherin was involved in a plan, she couldn't help but find it alluring, to be the object of someone's desires.

She was ready to reach for the door knob and leave without another word when Hermione felt her hand grasped by Snape. Stopping to turn to see what he wanted, Hermione was speechless as he bowed to kiss her hand goodbye.

His lips remained placed upon the witch's knuckles longer than what was considered cavalier or gracious; it was flirtatious, presumptuous, and roguish.

Brushing his lips along the tops of her hand, Severus' eyes never left hers as he said in a deep and rumbling voice, “I look forward to your company Thursday night.”

Hermione stared at him, unable to break eye contact, fully aware that as he spoke his mouth grazed her hand, and his breath tickled the skin between her fingers in a way she found undeniably erotic. She nodded dumbly and swallowed thickly.

Without hesitation, Hermione left.

Once in the hallway, and after she had heard the door click shut, Hermione mumbled to herself, “I need a drink.”

Severus scrubbed his face and flopped on the bed, unable to comprehend how he had become this other person in Hermione's presence. He knew he had started this game the first night Hermione came to his flat and he had kissed her hand. Why he continued with this game of seduction he could only attribute to his growing attraction to the young brunette witch. Severus had never talked about his feelings before, preferring to keep them hidden and closed off, but for some reason, each visit by Hermione drew out emotions that he only attributed to lovesick fools, manifesting themselves in ways Severus found disturbing and yet equally freeing. Besides, he needed to be honest with her for the purpose of his escape.

A part of himself he never knew existed began to surface and assert itself over his consciousness, revealing the disconcerting truth. He was not acting with Hermione, nor was he keeping the usual rigid control over his emotions. Now that his emotions had been set loose, it felt like he was losing control of himself. It terrified Severus, upon reflection, that Hermione's simple words questioning his kindness, and her flinching from his touch, had hurt him to the point where it had felt like he had been physically harmed.
All those little things that had torn at his heart had been countered by Hermione's instinctual response to kiss him. She had caught herself before the act was completed, but he knew of her intent. It was enough to restore his faith that Hermione could care for someone like him.

Unable to deny his needs any longer, Severus stripped his clothes off and downed the fifty-four hour brewed sample of the male enhancement potion. Laying back on the bed, he grasped his cock in his hand and closed his eyes, imaging Hermione lying nude on the other side of the bed, touching herself for his voyeuristic pleasure.

Panting, he instructed his fantasy Hermione to thrust two, then three fingers into herself. Severus came hard as the image of her playing with herself filled his mind.

Breathless, he lay there feeling his erection return quickly. Knowing it was going to be a long night, Severus didn't bother to catch his breath before he started stroking himself again, mentally reenacting that night in the kitchen as he ground himself against Hermione's warm and inviting backside.

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Hermione meandered about Diagon Alley aimlessly, lost in thought.

'I almost kissed Snape.' The thought was not so repellent anymore. In fact, it had seemed pretty enticing at the time.

Passing by a side street named Glastonbury Court, Hermione realized she was near The Listing Broom. Turning around, she headed down the narrow street to an establishment that had a plaque hanging out front of a witch riding a broom that leaned to one side.

It had been ages since Hermione had been in The Listing Broom, learning long ago that she did not care to spend her evening keeping Ron company while he tended bar. She neither enjoyed sitting in the pub nor fending off advances of the odd, aged wizard that usually smelled of a mixture of old sweat and too much bad cologne.

Seating herself on a stool, she saw a young wizard about her age behind the bar approach her.

“What'll it be, Ma'am?” the dark blond man asked.
“You must be Pete.”

The wizard stood back and eyed her suspiciously. “Yeah, what about it?”

“I'm Ron's wife, Hermione. He mentioned Rufus and Rogina hiring you,” Hermione explained, understanding Pete's apprehension.

Pete relaxed noticeably and extended his hand, “Pleasure to meet you. What brings you in tonight? Ron's not here.”

Hermione shook his offered hand. “Yes, I know he's not here. I was on my way home when I passed by and felt like a drink.”

“So, what will it be?”

Hermione placed her elbows on the bar and her head in her hands. “Something strong,” she groaned.

“That good, eh?” Pete replied lightheartedly.

“It's been better,” she mumbled

Hermione had never felt so confused in all her life. She had always prided herself on knowing herself: what she was doing, where she was going, and what was happening in the world around her. Now she was unsure who she loved, if she wanted Snape or not, where her career was headed, the future of her marriage, or her sense of the world she lived in. Doubt and tumultuous bewilderment seemed to rule her life now.

“Care to unload your worries on me?” the barman offered.

Hermione shook her head. She had already begun confiding in one man; there was no point in telling Pete anything, as word might get back to Ron.
Pete poured Hermione some greenish-blue libation from a bottle that periodically spouted little jets of blue and green flame now and again.

“Our finest Fairy Brandy. This one's on the house.”

She had never drunk Fairy Brandy before and discovered that it went down like ice instead of fire. Upon reaching her stomach, tendrils of blissful euphoria unfurled throughout her body.

Sitting back on the stool, Hermione gave Pete a lopsidedly goofy smile.

“Feeling better?” Pete asked.

Hermione nodded, grinning like a fool.

“Care to tell me what the problem is now?”

She was dangerously drunk right now. The sensible part of her mind was screaming through the fog of Fairy Brandy to shut up and not say a thing. Somehow the frantic message reached the small part of her brain that was still functioning. That small part of her working mind was so concerned with keeping Hermione from spilling her whole secret about seeing Snape, that it didn't have time to stop the other part of her that made her climb up on the bar, lift up her blouse – exposing her brassiere-clad breasts – and start belting out a rousing rendition of “I've Got A Lovely Bunch of Coconuts.”

Rogina stepped out of the back room, wondering if they had another live one.

“Oh, dear,” Rogina gasped.

The pub co-owner valiantly tried to coax Hermione to get down off of the bar and pull her blouse back down, much to the dismay of the few male patrons who were enjoying the floor show.

“Come now, Hermione. Why don't you come to my office, and we'll have a nice sit down while I Floo Ron,” the elder witch said, as if speaking to a very small child.
Hermione was peacefully led to the back office, where she plopped herself down on a box of butterbeer next to Rufus' desk while Rogina went to speak with Pete.

Still in a magically-induced intoxicated haze, Hermione could barely hear Rogina over the thumping of her own heart, which seemed intensified.

“What did you give that girl?”

“Just a shot of Fairy Brandy. She asked for something strong.”

“Oh, dear Merlin. You didn't know better. Ron has warned me of how she can't seem to hold her liquor. Never mind. You tend bar, I'll be back.”

Rogina came back into the office to find Hermione staring vacantly at the Quidditch calendar on the wall opposite of her. Some player from Puddlemere United was doing loops, amused at how Hermione's head kept rotating with each turn, unable to move just her eyes.

Grabbing a handful of Floo powder, Rogina threw it into the fireplace and called out for Ron and Hermione's flat.

“Rogina!” Ron said with a bit of a surprise, his head suspended among the green flames. “What's wrong? Do you need to cancel our next dance lesson?”

“No. I think you'd better take Hermione home. Pete accidentally gave her a shot of Fairy Brandy, not knowing she's not used to stronger stuff,” Rogina explained, nodding her head in the direction of her temporary charge. Hermione's eyes were beginning to roll up into her head.

“Oh, bloody hell!” Ron exclaimed.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 41 A/N: For a wonderful piece of fanart depicting Hermione lying in Snape's arms on the bathroom floor, please see view lizardqueen's lovely illustration she...
drew/painted for me at:  

Kindest thanks to lizardqueen for submitting to my begging and drawing me something nice. Unfortunately, the only place you can view it is on my Tumblr page since she took the original link down long ago.

More UST (unresolved sexual tension)? You bet! Go ahead, call me an evil author, but if you think Hermione was ready to shag Snape, much less kiss him, you are sorely mistaken. Don't worry, she'll come around... maybe.

Thanks to my betas, JuneW and GinnyW, for coming up with the chapter titles. I liked their suggestions so much, I decided to use both. And I don't say this nearly enough, but please give a huge round of thanks to my fabulous betas who make my story readable, instead of painful: (in no particular order) Horserider, JuneW, and GinnyW.

The reference to a minty-green tan is attributed to the comic strip “Doonesbury.” It was from the late 80's or early 90's, a time long, long ago when I was younger, and much thinner.

Anyone catch the hint about Fairy Brandy? Here's another hint... the Green Fa–
"Psychiatric Help 5 Knuts — The Doctor Is In"

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Ron go to counseling. Severus gives a little therapy too, of the pharmacological kind.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Forty-Two
"Psychiatric Help 5 Knuts — The Doctor Is In"

Disclaimer: God bless our dear Miss Rowling. She lets us use her characters and concepts in a way that would make Anne Rice and her bevy of litigious lawyers roll over in their fake coffins. I will do my duty and disclaim that any of the characters or concepts from the Harry Potter world are not mine. They belong to the goddess of our universe, J.K. Rowling. Any original spells, potions, locations or characters I have come up with are purely inspired by Miss Rowling's work.

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Hermione sat on the poorly-designed replica of a Bauhaus style couch. The modern furniture in the waiting room was supposed to create a sophisticated and tranquil Zen-like atmosphere; instead, it made the place look cheap and dated. To add injury to insult, the couch felt worse under her bum than it looked.

Ignoring her soreness caused by the inadequately padded couch, Hermione shifted while turning a page in her newly purchased copy of The Magical Contracts of Marriage and Children. True to character, Ron did not even feign interest in her reading material; for all he cared she could have been reading How To Shag Your Ex-Potions Professor Without Getting Caught. If it wasn’t related to Quidditch, he didn’t notice or care.

Hermione did her best to concentrate on the text in front of her and not on the overwhelming heat. If she kept her eyes focused just right, she would also avoid the sight of Ron picking his nose, as if he was mining for something far up his nasal passages.

'A little farther up, Ron,' Hermione thought sarcastically. 'I don't think you have quite reached your frontal lobe yet.'
Just when Hermione was ready to whip out her wand and hermetically seal Ron's finger while it was buried in his snout, the door creaked open.

Both husband and wife looked up. Ron quickly pulled his finger from his nose while trying not to look guilty; Hermione closed her book, placing a marker where she had stopped reading.

The pair were greeted by a tall Muggle with short, dark brown hair. He was wearing a dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, as if prepared for hard work. “Ron, Hermione, I'm ready for you. You can come in now.”

As they walked into James Hoover's office, the marriage counselor apologized. “I'm sorry, but I don't have any air conditioning, just an open window for a bit of fresh air.”

Hermione could see the sweat on James' brow as he picked up a magazine and began fanning himself.

“Would you mind terribly if I cast a Cooling Charm?” Hermione offered.

“There are spells that act like air conditioning?” James queried.

“Hair conditioning?” Ron asked, looking a bit perplexed.

“No, Ron,” Hermione said, trying to not lose her patience. “Air conditioning, it's a Muggle thing – never mind.”

Ron had never grasped the concept of electricity, despite visits to the Grangers’ home, and she didn't feel like furthering his knowledge of Muggle technology at the moment. She just rolled her eyes and cast the charm.

“Thank you,” said the counselor.

The couple sat on either end of a long couch; Hermione closest to James' chair, and Ron slouched
at the far end with his arms crossed.

“Your wands, please.” James held out his hand, expecting both parties to willingly surrender them.

Hermione handed hers over without protest.

Ron pouted glumly before whinging, “I don't know why I have to give up mine. I'm not the one who cast the first hex last week. I'm not the dangerous one.”

The Muggle marriage counselor was unmoved by Ron's protestations, keeping his hand outstretched. “This is a new policy that all couples must abide by now. You and Hermione are not the only ones now who must give them up during counseling. Had I known how dangerous such spells could be, I would have made it my policy from day one. If it's any consolation, I don't let my Muggle patients bring weapons into their sessions, either.”

Ron seemed to find offense at James' statement, retorting, “I'm no Dark wizard! Witches and wizards do not just go around casting Unforgivables and hexes left and right like we're some uncivilized bunch of heathens or ruddy Death—”

“I meant no offense, Ron,” James interrupted, stopping Ron in mid-rant. “What I meant to say is that it seems that not only can your wand be used for many positive things, it can also, if the person feels threatened, be used as a tool that could harm another patient while in my office. I just can't allow that. Now, your wand, please.”

Ron seemed placated by James' statement, but still grumbled under his breath when handing over his wand.

James placed them in a drawer for safekeeping until the session was over. Hermione noticed that James did not lock the drawer. She made a mental note to discreetly inform James about the Accio spell, and would recommend locking the drawer in the future to discourage summoning it in the heat of the moment.

“Now, when we last left off last week, we were going into your grievances,” James began. “But since that session ended so disastrously, I thought we'd take a different route this week. I would like you both to move a bit closer to each other, turn so you are face-to-face, hold hands, and take turns telling each other something that attracted you to each other when you first started dating or at the beginning of your relationship. You can sit on the couch or use two chairs facing each other;
whatever is most relaxing for you both.”

Hermione nodded to the pair of chairs across from the couch, and Ron shrugged his shoulders in indifference to her suggestion.

Once husband and wife were seated in the chairs and holding hands, James said, “Who would like to go first?”

“I'll start,” Hermione said.

“Hermione, look Ron in the eye and tell him something that attracted you to him when you were dating,” James instructed the witch.

After clearing her throat, she said, “I thought you were very brave.”

“Thought? What? You don't think I'm brave now?” Ron retorted.

“What?” Hermione was perplexed as to what her husband was going on about.

“You said 'thought.' As in 'past tense.' You didn't say you 'think' I'm brave.”

“Of course I think you are brave now. James asked what I thought back then,” she said defensively.

James scrubbed his face in frustration. There were times he had thought about getting out of the counseling profession, and the Weasleys were certainly one reason for him to strongly consider it at times.

“All right. Ron, I don't think Hermione meant any slight by her inadvertent choice of tense. What I think you should be concentrating on is the sincerity of her words. I don't want you to nit-pick this apart, looking for any reason to cause another fight. I just want you to listen when it's Hermione's turn. Do you want Hermione to attack every little choice of word when it's your turn?”
“No,” Ron mumbled morosely.

“Okay, Ron. Now I want you to look Hermione in the eye and tell her something that attracted you to her when you were dating.”

Ron rolled his eyes up to the ceiling for a moment to think before looking Hermione in the eye once more. “I think you are really smart.”

“What?” Hermione shrieked and yanked her hands away. Standing up, she stormed to the other side of the office to get as physically far away from her husband without leaving the office. “This from the man who called me an intellectual snob?!?”

“Well, it wasn't so annoying when you were younger!”

“That's because I could be of use to you – helping you with your homework. You always kept on begging me for my notes and to copy my schoolwork. And when I did offer to help, you called me 'a nightmare!' You were making fun of me because you couldn't cast a simple Wingardium Leviosa the first time and I could!”

“That's 'cause you were being your usual bossy self. Snape was right! You're just an insufferable know-it-all!” Ron exclaimed with a sense of satisfaction that he had gone for the vitals, and his aim was true.

Hermione looked at Ron with shock. All the things she wanted to shout back at her husband about what Snape thought about her now, but couldn't reveal, added to her sense of growing frustration and hurt. Snape’s words came back to her, telling her he was tired of letting Ron verbally abuse her.

Squelching the budding tears, Hermione instead began focusing on the seething rage building within her. Normally she would have resorted to verbally attacking Ron by this point, but she was unable to form the words that would give her emotions justice.

James’ eyes bounced back and forth between the pair as if he was watching an intense rally at Wimbledon. None of this was going the way that it was supposed to. Both of these people had already destroyed so many bridges in their relationship that he wondered if there were any left to salvage – and he wondered if either of them truly wanted to salvage anything.
He did not normally tolerate name-calling in his sessions, however he knew that this was a major source of contention for the pair. He thought that rather than forbid the insults it would benefit them both if they discussed how they affected one another. “Ron,” he said, trying to bring the level of conversation back under control, “why did you call Hermione that? Are you aware that you are hurting her feelings?”

All Hermione could see was red. She had never understood the term before, but an intense red fog moved into her field of vision and clouded everything she saw. She could not focus on the words now coming out of James’ mouth. All she could hear were the vast array of insults playing through her head from her beloved husband.

'She is such a nightmare... Well, maybe if you weren't so fucking frigid, you'd actually enjoy a good fuck. But I guess that's too much to ask from such a controlling bitch like you!... Intellectual snob... You are a royal cunt with as much warmth as an iceberg... Snape was right! You're just an insufferable know-it-all!...

Before James could get an answer from Ron, Hermione screamed while launching herself across the room. Ron leapt out of his chair and began backing up against a wall in retreat, fear growing in his eyes. Hermione drew her fist back and unleashed years of frustration with a single punch. James felt as if he was watching a train wreck in slow motion.

Ron felt the world reel beneath his feet, compounded when his head snapped back and banged against the wall. Somehow, Ron suddenly found himself looking up at his enraged wife from the floor.

“HERMIONE!” James yelled and went to restrain the witch, pinning her hands behind her back.

“The bitch decked me,” Ron said plainly, looking literally gobsmacked while holding his aching jaw.

“Hermione! I will not allow physical violence in this office. Physical abuse is never allowed,” James yelled, trying to regain some control over the situation.

The tears started falling as Hermione bawled, “But you allow this bloody arse to verbally abuse me at every turn! 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me?!? ’ Fucking lie!” she wailed. “It hurts, Ron. It hurts so much! Just as much as if you hit me yourself, you inconsiderate, selfish prick!!!”
James wrangled Hermione over to the other side of the room and sat her down in a chair. He moved his hands off her person only after she promised to not attack Ron again.

“One more bout of violence, by fist or wand by either of you, and I will no longer agree to be your counselor!” James thundered, losing control of his own temper momentarily. He took a moment to collect his cool before continuing. “You are both here of your own free will. You made it clear you are trying to repair your marriage. Either you are both serious enough to make an effort to work together, or you are not. Now, do you want to work on improving what is obviously a seriously damaged relationship, or do you want to walk away? If you stay, you must abide by my rules of no violence of any kind ever!”

James ran his hand nervously through his short locks, dreading the amount of work it would take to repair the Weasleys' marriage, if it was salvageable at all.

“It was her idea to come here!” Ron shouted, as he hauled himself up off the ground and into a nearby chair.

James shot him a quelling glance. “Do you want to work on this marriage or not? It is a simple question requiring a yes-or-no answer, not snide commentary,” James snapped irritably, knowing he was approaching the bounds of unprofessional behavior again by losing his temper. “Well?”

Ron looked at Hermione with a murderous glare. “Only if she won't attack me anymore. Spider-Bogey Hex last week, a sucker punch—”

“We have made it clear there will be no more violence. Answer yes or no!” James said forcefully.

“Yes,” Ron growled between clenched teeth, still clutching his jaw that was beginning to swell nicely.

“Hermione?” James asked, turning to look at the witch who was silently crying in the corner.

Now was her chance: to give up, or make one last effort to save what seemed to be an unrecoverable marriage. 'I am not a quitter. If Ron is willing to try, then I am as well. I will not be labeled as the one who walked away from this marriage, though it feels like Ron has given up and is practically driving me away.'
“Yes.”

“Good,” James sighed with relief. “Before we can start addressing your problems, I think both of you need to learn some anger management.”

Severus excused himself from his present company with the explanation that he was going to make a pot of tea for his Tuesday night guest, Mrs. Waters. In the kitchen, a very tired Severus leaned against the counter. He massaged his right arm, which felt a little sore from overuse the night before. It had been years since he had engaged in a marathon wank session, this one driven by the need to fully test the strength of the male enhancement potion.

Not only had his arm strength waned over time, but recently so had his stamina for listening to women cry and bemoan the state of their awful marriages, as well.

That wasn't entirely true. He had no problem listening to Hermione tell of her troubles, as he was very concerned over her, but she didn't spend the whole time at his flat wailing and complaining, like Mrs. Waters was doing tonight. It was not that he particularly cared about the witch still sitting in the other room, but he felt obligated to listen to her sob and squawk every Tuesday about her miserable life, and it was beginning to wear on his nerves. Truth be told, Severus was beginning to feel that his account in the cosmic ledger of life was close to zero, despite all the years Albus had listened to Severus piss and moan.

Mrs. Waters was consistently morose and despondent. No amount of advice, sympathy, encouragement, or bolstering from Severus could get the witch to take any action to improve her situation with her husband or children. Currently, Mrs. Waters put up with a Lothario husband who drank frequently, and she suffered from her lazy and ungrateful grown children who constantly took financial and emotional advantage of her.

After listening to her for many months, Severus was beginning to suspect that Mrs. Waters enjoyed wallowing in depression. Likely finding some odd enjoyment from the heavy blanket of emotional weight upon her shoulders, possibly correlating herself to some tragic feminine heroine or martyr.

The teakettle whistled and Severus poured the hot water into the pot, along with some loose tea leaves and two vials of different potions he'd had Marf procure without Miss Brown's knowledge. Of the two vials, one was Aqueous Intrepidity, also known in more common circles as Liquid Courage, and the other was Humour of Humor. Though it was not exactly illegal to purchase or use them, it certainly was skirtsing close to the edge of legality to give them to someone unknowingly. Severus' altruistic intention was to improve her emotional state to the point where she would take some course of action to confront her family about the status quo. If anything, perhaps with a little spot of tea, Mrs. Waters would finally cut her children off from the family vault, and stand up to her husband's philandering and drinking.
Returning to his company, Severus offered his client a cup of tea. He also poured one for himself, though he had no intention of drinking it.

With a weepy sigh, the forlorn witch said, “Thank you so much. I'll take any bit of kindness, as it seems you are the only one to give me any.”

Severus watched as she took a sip, then another. Sitting back, he asked in his usual sympathetic voice, “How are you feeling now?”

The gray that seemed to color her cheek lifted, and her eyes brightened. “Better. Much better.”

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Hermione doubted any amount of counting to ten, breathing deeply, visualizing her “happy” place, or chanting to herself to relax was going to dissipate the growing animosity she harbored towards Ron. But still, she tried because she had promised she would.

“Now that we have our anger management tools, let's go back to what you said earlier, Ron. Why did you call Hermione that name?” James asked, feeling as if he had made some progress for once where these two were concerned.

Ron looked at the counselor blankly. “What name?” He had already forgotten what he had called his wife.

“You called her an ‘insufferable know-it-all,’” James reminded him.

Hermione closed her eyes, gritted her teeth and began muttering under her breath, “Relax, relax, relax,” while trying to listen to Ron's response.

“I called her that because that's what she is,” Ron replied, as if it was obvious. “She does nothing but sit with her nose in a book during all her free time; and when we talk, all she wants to do is talk about bloody Charms theory, or the most recent advancements in Potions research, or other such nonsense. She even brought a book with her to read while we were in your waiting room. I swear, the witch has never taken her nose out of a book for as long as I've known her. She was always bugging me to study when we were at school together; and now that I'm out of school, I don't want to bother with that stuff, since I really don't need to anymore. It just doesn't interest me.”
“And what does interest you, Ron?” James asked.

“Quidditch, of course!”

James was familiar with the concept of Quidditch, as described by his nephew, a wizard. It was because of his nephew that he had been encouraged to join the Muggle Alliance Network. Up to this point, he had found that many witches and wizards had the same problems as regular folks, or “Muggles,” as his nephew had informed him. James had been very successful getting a few “pure-blood” witches and wizards to get over the stigma associated with psychological counseling, and he felt a certain amount of satisfaction from bringing help to a segment of the population unfamiliar with this particular area of mental health.

The Weasleys had a problem with their marriage that he was familiar with. The husband was a sports fanatic, and the wife was an academic enthusiast. He had helped couples like this come to some middle ground, and he hoped he would be able to help these people as well.

“Hermione,” James said, turning to the witch who was trying to keep control of herself on the opposite side of the room. “Do you enjoy talking about Quidditch with Ron?”

“No, she doesn't,” Ron answered for his wife.

“He asked me, not you, Ron!” Hermione snapped back.

“Hermione is right, I did ask her,” James informed Ron. Turning back to Mrs. Weasley, he said once more, “Do you enjoy talking about Quidditch with Ron?”

“Not particularly. I don't mind the game, but to be inundated with Quidditch talk and nothing else gets to be rather boring.” Hermione explained. “I did one time try to ask Ron about the Charm on a new model of broom that some of the Quidditch teams were using, but he cut me off by saying he didn't know or care. He ‘just flew the damn things.’”

Hermione had a glint of triumph in her eye that she had at least made an effort in trying to find some middle ground, and that Ron was the one who was not trying at all.

“There she goes again, trying to be all superior-like!” Ron exclaimed.
Hermione felt slighted once more, and the tears began welling up in her eyes.

James needed to address Ron's belittling of his wife, as it seemed to be one of the key things that set Hermione off, helping fuel the anger between the couple.

“Ron, do you know that all your name-calling hurts Hermione? Are you aware of it?” the counselor asked

“Of course I am! Why do think I say it? To be nice?” Ron retorted, thinking James was pretty thick to be asking such an obvious question.

“But why are you trying to hurt Hermione with name-calling?” James queried.

“Because... because...” Ron could not finish his statement. He sat there dumbfounded, unable to come up with any reason behind his actions.

“How do you feel when Hermione wants to talk about things that interest her?” James prompted Ron.

“Like she's trying to make me look like a bloody idiot!”

“I do not!” Hermione shouted across the room.

“You do too!”

“Hermione, please,” James requested. “Right now we are trying to figure out why Ron calls you certain names. We will address how you feel in a moment. Now Ron, why do you feel she is trying to make you look like an 'idiot'?”

“Because she asks me things she knows I don't have the answer to, trying to show off just how bloody brilliant she is. And then she gets this look on her face; that condescending one she used to get when we were at school, when she would ask me if I had done my homework and I hadn't
gotten around to it yet,” Ron ranted angrily.

Turning to Hermione, James asked, “Hermione? Are you aware that Ron feels like this?”

“All he's ever said is that he doesn't want to talk about things that interest me, and that he doesn't care! He's only ever rolled his eyes and insulted me instead of saying anything like that,” Hermione retorted. “And I do not think you are stupid! If you were an idiot, you wouldn't be so good at chess!”

It was a ping-pong match, mediated by James, of how each felt and if the other was aware of the feelings the other caused by their words and actions. Hermione found it to be rather exhausting, having to deconstruct each little remark: the reason behind each remark, how such a remark made the other feel, and finally the response to each remark. Then the process would be repeated again. They spent the rest of the hour going through Ron's insult to Hermione and how that made Hermione feel.

Ron, once again, brought up the fact that Hermione had brought a book with her that evening.

“You want to know what I'm reading?!!?” Hermione shrieked. “HERE!” She reached into her cloak and pulled out a book. Stomping over to Ron, still seated on the other side of the room, she commanded him, “Read it!”

“The Magical Contracts of Marriage and Children.” Ron looked up at his wife with bewilderment. “So you do want to have kids?”

“NO!” Hermione shouted. “What I'm doing is reading up on what your mother obviously did NOT tell me before we got married. She never told me about what would happen if we were to divorce after we had children! She had said she would tell me everything involved with a wizarding marriage, but she never told me that if I had your children and then left you that I would die!”

“WHAT?!?!” James yelled in astonishment, suddenly forgetting his role as mediator.

Hermione turned to face her marriage counselor. “It looks like you need this book as much as I do,” she said dryly.

Mrs. Weasley gave James Hoover a brief overview on the differences between a Muggle and a
wizarding marriage.

When she finished, Ron said, “You're lying. My mother told you everything. She had to have told you everything. Why would she not tell you about such a thing? You must have known. You always read up on everything before doing anything,” Ron snidely commented.

“I didn't exactly have time, what with the attack on Hogwarts; the end of the war; the death of Albus, Minerva, Remus and Hagrid; the reconstruction; rounding up the last of the Death Eaters; trying to find a job; and looking for an apprenticeship,” Hermione explained hotly. “For the fact that I trusted your mother to inform me about everything, I was thankful that I did not have one more thing on my plate! And then there was planning the wedding, you leaving Auror school, and all that! Researching the mortal nature of a magically binding marriage when children are involved was the last thing I had time to do, though if I had known...”

Hermione stopped herself short of saying the obvious, but Ron finished Hermione's sentence for her.

“What then? Go on, say it! You never would have married me in the first place!” Ron screamed.

“I didn't say that!”

“But you almost did!”

Ron was right, Hermione almost did say that. She had even wished it.

The timer went off, and James announced that their time was now up. ‘And not a moment too soon,’ James added to himself.

“Now Ron,” James began wrapping up their session, “I want you to remember that Hermione is a Muggle-born, and as such, she initially grew up as a Muggle. Divorce is pretty common in the Muggle world, with no death resulting from such a legal action, even if there are children. Hermione comes from a culture where divorce is not looked upon adversely. And Hermione, I want you to remember that Ron comes from a culture that has a different attitude about marriage than Muggles. For the next week, I want you both to work on your anger management and on listening to each other. Okay?”
Ron folded his arms and looked away, nodding reluctantly. Hermione agreed tersely.

They collected their wands and exited James' office back into the special waiting room built for wizarding clients.

“I'd better go to St. Mungo's; make sure you didn't do any permanent damage,” Ron said brusquely, rubbing his still-aching jaw despite the use of James' ice pack.

Hermione did feel a bit guilty for hitting Ron. She knew she didn't have to resort to physical violence, but when he had called her that name, and made mention that Snape had called her that too, she went blind with rage. She barely registered what she had done until after the deed was accomplished.

“Is it still throbbing?” Hermione asked, truly concerned.

“Why should you care? You're the one who did this to me!”

“I'm sorry, Ron. I really am. I was just very angry at what you said. It hurt... a lot,” Hermione admitted, folding her arms across her chest, looking at her husband sullenly.

“Whatever,” Ron replied dismissively.

Grabbing a handful of Floo powder, Ron called out for St. Mungo's and disappeared in a green flash.

Hermione sighed and slumped against the wall, gathering her thoughts before using the Floo to go home.

Just as she was about to grab for the Floo powder, James came into the waiting room. “Hermione? Do you have a moment?”

“Yes. What is it?”
“Well, I was wondering if you could tell me how I can obtain a copy of that book you have,” James asked.

“It's available at Flourish and Blotts, a bookshop in Diagon Alley. Actually, I bought two. The other one is on wizarding marriage and divorce in the modern age.” Hermione dropped her head a little and delicately requested, “Could you please not mention the other book to Ron just yet? If he saw it, then he would get the idea that I want to divorce him.”

“Could you arrange for me to get both books, then?” James asked. “I will gladly reimburse you for them both.”

“Yes, I could do that.”

“I feel rather silly that I didn't know something as fundamental as that, about wizarding marriages,” the counselor admitted.

“Don't be. I've been a member of this community since I was almost twelve, married to a pure-blood wizard for almost four years, and even I didn't know that until last weekend. That's why I bought these books,” Hermione replied.

“Certainly takes the phrase 'till death do you part' to a new level,” he remarked lightly.

“Yes, it does.” Hermione could find no humor in James' tone, as she was faced with that particular decision.

“Do you want to divorce Ron?”

Hermione snapped her head up and looked at James with fright. “If I tell you, do you promise not to bring it up with Ron? Not just yet.”

James could see Hermione's apprehension in replying to his question. “Of course,” he assured her. “You have my confidentiality.”

“I have certainly entertained the idea as of late, thinking that maybe I married too young. Maybe if
I had dated around more instead of marrying the first wizard that came along who proposed... I don't know. I'm just very confused right now. There are a lot of things at work right now making me question everything,” Hermione confessed openly.

“If you want to come to me for personal counseling, I have several openings available.”

She shook her head. “No, but thanks. I have a friend right now who is helping me to get through some personal things. He understands me.”

“A male friend?”

Hermione understood the implication of James' question. “He's just a friend, nothing more.” 'For now, that is.'

“Just concerned,” James said. “In my experience, it's a special friend that sometimes becomes something more, and then the marriage begins to unravel from there. Sometimes we find comfort elsewhere when it seems to be lacking at home with our spouses.”

Hermione was thinking that her marriage had been unraveling for a long time, and she only recently noticed it, but she held her tongue. She had said enough to James for now. After promising to purchase the two books for James, along with obtaining a list of other books Flourish and Blotts had regarding wizarding family life, Hermione used the Floo to go home.

Once home, Hermione went to the bedroom to get ready to go to sleep. After pulling her blouse off, she looked at the bed.

She wondered when Ron would be home. Mrs. Weasley did not really want to be home when her husband returned, nor did she feel like sleeping in the same bed with him.

Putting her blouse back on, she went to the bathroom and grabbed her toothbrush, hairbrush, shampoo, conditioner, and deodorant. After picking out some clean clothes to wear the next day, and leaving a quick note for Ron telling of her whereabouts, she used the Floo to go over to the Potters’.

The next morning, Hermione trudged into the kitchen, hoping that Dobby was around to fix her breakfast. She had finally come to terms with the fact that house-elves found fulfillment by being
useful; however, she still continued to wish that all house-elves were free to pick and choose who they served, with pay, and without suffering abuse from their employers-cum-masters.

To Hermione's relief, Dobby had anticipated cooking for the extra guest in the Potter household, and had already gotten breakfast ready for her.

Sitting down, Hermione began eating immediately, knowing she could not dawdle. Since the lab had been unusable for part of Friday and all of Monday, she knew there would be a backlog of ingredients waiting to be tested, though most of what was in the lab Friday went up in flames, and Hermione had already completed the paperwork notifying suppliers of the loss.

Hermione heard Harry before he opened the kitchen door. He was whistling, “I've Got a Lonely Bunch of Coconuts.” She was beginning to regret telling Harry and Ginny about her momentary lapse of common sense and modesty.

Harry opened the door and stopped dead in his tracks. At least he had the decency to look sheepish when he apologized: “I'm sorry. It's just that since last night I can't get that song out of my head.”

She could have made a sarcastic reply involving a Pensieve, a wand, and his arse, but she didn't. Harry was just a convenient person upon which to focus her peevish attitude, and he didn't deserve to be her whipping boy. Instead, Hermione shook her head and gave a dismissive wave of her hand, signaling that she didn't want to discuss the matter any further.

Requesting to see Hermione's hand, Harry said, “Hmm, looks like Gin did a good job of fixing it. I'm surprised when you showed up last night your hand wasn't throbbing. I'm even more surprised you didn't break it.” He shook his head sadly.

“I really don't want to discuss this anymore, Harry. I already feel awful that I hit him.”

“Hermione,” Harry said, “I know you are in counseling now, but for Ron to piss you off to the point of laying him flat on his arse... the only other person I know to push you to that point is Malfoy. And I know how much you loathed him.”

Hermione hid her face behind her hands while trying to keep her thoughts as quiet as possible. If Harry caught a glimmer of the thoughts raging in her mind at the moment, the game would be up for both her and Ginny.
As if reading her thoughts, Ginny came into the kitchen.

“Morning, Hermione, Harry.” Ginny walked over and gave her husband a quick peck on the cheek.

Hermione watched the friendly exchange between husband and wife, as Harry gave her a quick squeeze of her hand in a return of affection.

Ginny sat down next to Hermione, opposite of her husband, and began nibbling on some toast.

After a moment of silence, as she studied the bottom of her mug of tea, Hermione said, “Thank you for letting me stay over. After that session, I don't think I could have slept in the same flat as Ron. I just get so angry at him sometimes. One minute he's being a complete wanker to me, the next he's actually showing a bit of the old Ron I used to know.” She sighed before continuing, “After he brought me home from The Listing Broom on Monday night, he was really sweet. He got me to bed, got me dressed in a nightgown, put a bucket by the bedside just in case, and had a vial of Hangover Relief on the bedside table for when I woke up. He never even made mention of the fact that Rogina called him to take me home. I'm just thankful Rogina never made mention of what I did at the bar.”

Ginny and Harry both started snickering behind their hands.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione groaned, “All right. Get it out of your system. Laugh!”

The Potters started laughing while singing the chorus to the song that Hermione was making rather infamous.

“All right! Enough!” Hermione demanded. “And please, really, don't tell Ron what I did,” she pleaded.

Ginny grinned at her friend in amusement. “Don't worry, Hermione. We won't.” The younger witch’s face became more somber when she added, “We don't want to see Ron and you find another reason to have another fight.”

“I don't know, Ginny. It seems that no matter what happens, we're always finding some reason to fight. And when we aren't fighting, well...”
How could Hermione tell them that Ron, best friend and brother to them, was unbearable company as of late? Just last night, during dinner, Hermione couldn't help but wish she was having dinner with Snape instead. Even dining alone seemed preferable than suffering her husband's presence, as Ron had recently started going on and on about his workout routine he had started that week to put on a little muscle. It was all part of his image makeover to prepare him to be the Mercury Broom Company's spokesperson, and for the upcoming calendar photo shoot. It was a topic other than Quidditch, but the way Ron droned on about “reps,” “crunches,” and “squats” was tiresome.

Harry patted Hermione's hand in sympathy. “I know things seem bad, but once you and Ron get some things ironed out in counseling, I'm sure it'll be better,” the wizard assured her.

Hermione could not help but glance at Ginny to measure her reaction. She didn't know what to expect from the redheaded witch. Sympathy? Empathy? Understanding?

“You have your anniversary coming up,” Harry mentioned brightly. “A little dinner, dancing, and romance should help some, too.”

“Oh, that reminds me.” Hermione turned to Ginny. “Can you take me dress shopping? I need something really nice to wear for my anniversary.”

“Sure,” Ginny replied. “How about this Saturday?”

“As long as it's before Ron's game, which starts at one.”

“Come over right after breakfast. I know just the place!” Ginny said with excitement. “And maybe the following weekend we can go to the spa again, and get you ready the weekend before your anniversary. My treat again.”

Hermione hesitated, but then agreed. She could do with another full body massage and day of pampering. It had been a very stressful month for her, but she could not allow Harry and Ginny to pay for her again. “Ron will be playing in Sweden that Saturday, so that works out perfectly! But on one condition: I pay for myself,” Hermione insisted.

“Fair enough.” Ginny finished the last bite of her toast and rose from the table. “I must get going now,” she announced and walked over to Harry. “Sorry I can't stay and chat, but I have a few errands to run before the St. Mungo's charity committee meets this morning at nine.” Leaning over,
she gave Harry a light kiss on the lips. “Will I see you for lunch today, Hermione?”

“Sure. What time?”

“How about noon at that little restaurant we went to in Wiltshire a few weeks ago?”

“All right.”

Hermione watched Ginny leave the kitchen with a bright smile on her face.

Once Hermione had heard Ginny leave by Floo, she looked up from her breakfast to regard her friend. “Harry?”

“Hrm,” he replied, while looking over the Daily Prophet.

“You and Ginny seem quite a bit chummier this morning. How are things going between you two? Better by the look of it,” she remarked.

Harry folded up his paper and set it down. There was a look of hesitation on his face before he answered, “Ginny and I have been doing a lot of talking lately. And while I couldn’t say that things are perfect between us, we have certainly cleared up a lot of misunderstandings that our relationship was built upon. So, now that there is no longer this constant level of tension between us, it’s been a lot easier for both of us.”

Hermione wondered just how much Ginny had disclosed to Harry. She doubted Ginny would ever mention Malfoy to Harry. She was aware of Molly’s false assumptions regarding Tom Riddle and what she thought he did to Ginny, but Hermione wondered what else they may have talked about to bring back an air of friendly companionship between them once more. She also wondered if she and Ron would ever get back to that level of civility again.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Severus double-checked the list in front of him. He wanted to make sure there was nothing he had forgotten before sending Marf off to the market today. It was only Wednesday, and Hermione would not be coming until Thursday night, but Severus could not stop the anticipation building inside of him.
It seemed his life now revolved around Monday and Thursday nights. He eagerly looked forward to those evenings with Hermione; and while Hermione was there, it seemed that life was tolerable for a short while. Once Hermione was gone and the night over, Severus counted the days, sometimes the hours, until she would return. Had Severus scrutinized his behavior, he would have been disgusted with himself. So to prevent a bout of self-loathing over his foolishness, he put it out of his mind; he attempted concentrating on his work, while all the while his mind was preoccupied with thoughts of Hermione.

He had barely touched his breakfast, as he had been lost in thought that morning, wondering what would happen with Hermione tomorrow night. Realizing the time, Severus took one last sip of tea before heading out. Severus was so preoccupied, he almost left his flat without his cloak.

‘What is it with me today?’ he scolded himself, as he put his cloak on, fastening the clasp at his neck.

’Could it be that you can actually see an end to your semi-imprisonment, what with Hermione coming around? That you’ll actually get those Polyjuice ingredients and be free?’

“That must be it,” he told himself aloud.

’Or could it be that you are falling in love with Hermione?’

The thought make him freeze in his tracks.

Severus had given himself, through the mental image of Albus, permission to fall in love. But to actually acknowledge that maybe he really was doing so seemed preposterous. He had never been in love before. How could he know this was the real thing and not some bizarre flashback to adolescence, mooning over some witch like some hormone-addled teenager whose brain resided solely between his legs?

“How could I be in love with her? She doesn't even know if she likes me,” Severus berated himself, disgusted with the idea that he might be suffering from unrequited love.

’She likes you, of course; it is just that she needs to accept the fact that she does, just like you need to accept the fact that you love her.’
Normally, this was the sort of conversation Severus would be having with the ghostly images of Albus and Minerva, not with himself inside of his own head. He had been worrying about his persona of Calleo and how that part of him would survive. Perhaps it was some way for this newly uncovered part to assert itself. Or it could be a trick by his mental version of Albus. It was getting late, and Severus did not want to go into the whole self-psychological analysis of love, denial, Albus and Calleo, all of them colliding in his mind.

Just as Severus was descending the stairs from his floor, Draco's door opened and two figures emerged. Severus recognized Draco's companion.

“Ginny, what brings you here this early?” Severus asked.

Ginny spun around to face the cloaked man on the stairs. “Just a brief morning visit, Severus.”

Severus thought about making a remark that that was an interesting euphemism for a quick shag, but held his tongue. It would only provoke Draco, so that the blond wizard would start making some rather pointed comments himself about Hermione's tenuous relationship with Severus. And Severus was in no mood to deal with those sorts of comments where Hermione was concerned.

“Will you be able to join Draco and me for Saturday dinner sometime soon?” the older wizard asked.

“Not this Saturday, but the following one. I've arranged to go to the spa that Saturday, so I'll be able to join you afterwards for dinner.” Ginny cast a smirking glance at Draco, knowing that they would have another lovers’ encounter that day in the secret grotto. Turning back to face Severus, she not-too-casually mentioned, “Hermione will be joining me that day at the spa, as well.”

“And what relevance does that bit of information have to me?” Severus replied rhetorically, putting on his mask of indifference.

“Nothing. Since we know how valuable Hermione is to our cause, I thought I'd just mention it. Nothing more,” Ginny said.

The witch turned and gave Draco a goodbye kiss before sweeping down the stairs and out of the building. Draco leaned over the railing to watch his lover leave the building, his gaze never leaving her form until she was gone from his sight.
The two wizards said nothing. They both walked in companionable silence down the stairs and into the morning air. The morning had started out muggy and too warm for cloaks, but Severus and Draco kept theirs on in order to keep straying eyes from noticing them as they traversed the narrow streets and alleys. If one wanted to keep from getting hit with an unwanted Confundus Charm or a temporary blinding curse, it was best not to scrutinize too carefully a fully-cloaked witch or wizard, no matter how hot it was.

Once the pair turned down the alley named Dorian Loop, Draco spoke.

“So, I take it from your sarcastic reply to Ginny that you still have not revealed yourself to Hermione.”

“If you are wondering if she knows, yes, she does,” Severus replied.

Draco almost stumbled over his own feet. “What? You never told me. When did this happen? Monday night? What did she say? Will she help us?!?” Draco asked, his voice rising in pitch to match his anxiousness.

Severus kept walking as he calmly said, “I never said that I revealed myself to her, only that she has figured out that it is me behind the mask.”

“So you took your mask off, right?”

Severus didn't answer, he just keep walking.

“Severus? Just what is going on?” Draco demanded to know.

“Patience.”

“PATIENCE?!?!” Draco's voice echoed down the alley.

“A little louder. I don't think the rest of Diagon Alley has heard you,” Severus quietly rebuked the younger wizard.
As they approached the building located at the end of the alley, a stubby house-elf opened the doors that lead into a sumptuous lobby. The two wizards walked into the building, past the house-elf receptionist who was busy scribbling away on a piece of parchment, and straight to the lift.

Once the lift started moving, Draco dropped his hood and confronted Severus. “All right. Nobody else can overhear us now. What do you mean she knows it's you, yet you have not revealed yourself? What sort of nonsense is this? More delays?” Draco asked tersely.

Severus kept his hood up, preferring to keep up his implacable facade of cool disdain. “Hermione needs time to adjust to the knowledge that it is me. She has already agreed to come to dinner as usual Thursday night. Once I feel confident that she will stay and help us, then I shall remove my mask. Until then, she would prefer to keep up the pretense of this little charade.”

The lift lurched to a halt at their floor.

Just as Severus was going to reach out and push aside the gate, Draco placed his arm in front of Severus, his hand placed on the wall next to the older wizard, blocking him from exiting the lift. “You mean you'll keep your mask on until you are done with this little charade.”

Severus did not bother to hide his harsh glare as he eyed the arm blocking him. He knew just how to break an arm in two with just the use of his hands and one knee. A clean snap, and Draco would not be able to wield his wand until he made the trip to St. Mungo’s to have it healed.

“I would think that you, of all people, would understand the need for subtlety in this rather delicate situation,” Severus hissed, not bothering to hide his growing anger at being questioned about his tactics.

“I understand, all right,” Draco retorted with equal enmity. “Each day that we sit here in England is another day that one of us could be discovered. Then it's goodbye freedom and hello Azkaban. But I suppose if you want to wait until you can bed your annoying little Gryffindor, that's your call.”

Severus grabbed Draco by the wrist and twisted him around quicker than the blond wizard could have anticipated. Draco was pinned up against the wall with his arm being painfully wrenched behind his back. Leaning close to Draco's ear so as to make his point clear, Severus snarled, “I would think that someone who is bedding an Auror's wife would be the last person to talk about taking risks and being sent off to Azkaban.”
With his cheek pressed against the wall of the lift, Draco said with defiance, “I love Ginny. I'd die without her; I would die for her. What's your excuse?”

Severus was so taken aback by Draco's remark, he let go.

Draco twisted himself free as Severus' grip slackened. The younger wizard stepped out of the lift and faced Severus, who still stood in there. “If you love her, that would be one thing. But if you don't, end this game and get the damn ingredients.”

Severus continued to stand in the lift. When the lift started to descend, he didn't bother to try and stop it, instead allowing the lift to descend and ascend once more before going to his office. He needed that time alone just to collect himself and put aside all thoughts of Hermione. If he bothered to analyze how much Draco's comment had unsettled him, he would have realized that he loved Hermione; then he would not have gotten any work done that day.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 42 A/N: A big round of thanks to Mollie Smith and Gill, who gave me professional feedback for the marriage counseling session part of this chapter. Their invaluable feedback help me keep the session somewhat realistic.

For Humour of Humor, I am using the British spelling of “humour” for the bodily fluid.

And please be sure to spare a little bit of your review for my wonderful betas who help me in so many ways (listed in alphabetical order this time): GinnyW, Horserider, and JuneW.

An extra round of applause to okonchristy (cocoachristy) for being my sounding board this chapter, and GinnyW for clarifying a few things during the counseling session and coming up with the "Peanuts" inspired chapter title.

B/N: Awww...thanks, bud! I love how you give us all these little goodies so we can see what is going on... good research to help develop your visualizations! ~Horserider
Severus' mind kept playing Draco's words over and over in his head.

'I love Ginny. I'd die without her; I would die for her. What's your excuse?'

Draco had no knowledge of how or why Severus' wife, Gabrielle, had died; only that she had. He had no idea how his words affected Severus.

'I didn't love Gabrielle enough,' Severus thought bitterly. 'That is why I let her and our child die.'

Over the years, Albus had reassured Severus that even if he had offered up his own life, there was no guarantee that Voldemort would have let Gabrielle live. It would be quite reasonable to believe that as soon as Severus' dead body had hit the ground, the Killing Curse would have been applied to
his pregnant wife as well. However, all the logic in the world could not stop the swelling of guilt inside Severus’ chest from practically suffocating him at times.

Severus felt like he was drowning. Ever since his fight with Draco in the lift on Wednesday and the following day at work, he would periodically bolt from his chair and throw open the window to gulp in fresh air from outside. He didn't care that he would have to reapply a new Cooling Charm on his office once more to counter the warm air rushing in due to the heat wave.

During those two days, the Potions master avoided interacting with Draco and Miss Brown. He did not join either of them for lunch, even when his company was requested by his employer. It was the most unproductive two days he’d had since he began his secretive tenure at The Lovely Lavender Company. Severus sat there staring at page 214 of a French tome on wild herbs of the Pyrenees, but he could not absorb the material. Wrapped up in his own thoughts, he wondered if, knowing then what he knew now, he would still have sacrificed his wife and child. As a double agent, Severus had been able to bring to the Order valuable information, important enough to tip the scales of the war in the favor of Potter's side. If Severus had been dead, what use could he have been to the Order? If he hadn’t allowed his wife to die, would he have ever realized the gravity of his youthful mistake when he joined the Dark Lord? Would he have ever become a member of the Order? Would Draco ever have had the strength to turn away from the Dark Lord on his own without Severus to guide him? Would Severus be sitting in Azkaban without a soul by this point?

It was a circular argument; all based on what he could have done differently. But to change one thread of the past unraveled the entire future that had brought him to where he was that day. To alter one action in the past would create a paradox of the reality he lived in today. There was no point in wishing the past could be changed. Gabrielle had died, and Severus lived with the shame that resulted from his cowardice. He had lived with this knowledge for twenty-three years; he would live with it for another hundred and twenty-three, that was if he lived to see freedom, if Moody didn't imprison him first.

Why was it that these memories, which he had retained – yet suppressed – all these years, suddenly bothered him to the point of complete distraction? Because the last time he loved another witch, she had died. And now he suspected he loved Hermione.

Severus could not admit in his mind he loved Hermione, but all the signs were there. Deep down he knew that just as Hermione had had her bouts of denial, so he felt entitled to a few of his own.

Glancing at the clock, Severus knew there would be no point in hanging around until five o'clock. He would not get any work done today, and he didn't feel like navigating crowded streets full of people trying to get home at the end of the day.

The Potions master grabbed his cloak and left, leaving no word with his employer that he was
going home early. Avoiding the lift to prevent coming across Miss Brown and Draco, Severus took the stairs. The temperature was still warm, but not nearly as oppressive as it was a few days ago. Severus liked the warmth of the summer sun on his black cloak, but was glad that it was not another sweltering day.

‘Warm climate, here I come,’ he thought to himself, remembering that Hermione was coming tonight, and that he was another day closer to freedom.

Once he was home, Severus went to the kitchen to begin preparing that night's dinner. He weighed the courgettes, mushrooms, tomatoes, and other ingredients before dicing and chopping them into cubes and slices with the precision that one would reserve for making a potion that required extreme care. Cooking was the only way for Severus to keep any of his knife-wielding skills, and he found the act so calming that he did his best thinking when he had a knife or a skillet in his hand.

Unfortunately, he did not have a chance to think in private about the evening ahead. Albus and Minerva decided to grace Severus with their presence as he began sautéing the onions.

‘Getting ready for another evening with Hermione?’ the translucent former headmaster asked as he moved about the kitchen.

“Obviously,” Severus replied sarcastically, as he checked on the cubes of oiled aubergine roasting in the oven.

‘What's on tonight's menu?’ Minerva asked in order to distract Severus. Or rather, it was Severus' own mind that made the mental projection of Minerva ask in order to preoccupy his thoughts.

“Loin lamb chops, ratatouille, and some nice crusty French bread. Nothing too elaborate,” Severus said, trying to convince himself that he wasn't making an effort to wow Hermione with his culinary skills, though it was a bit late for that.

‘Another dinner featuring French cuisine?’ the old Head of Gryffindor remarked with an arched brow. Her Scottish brogue sounded more pronounced, a trait that was her own equivalent to Albus' twinkling eyes.

Severus pretended not to notice what Minerva was insinuating. Maybe he had subconsciously chosen this menu, remembering fondly the way Hermione was so happy and grateful when he
made cassoulet, reminding her of her trip to France with her parents, and of better times.

'Did you buy any flowers for the table this time?’ Minerva asked offhandedly, her faint silhouette shimmering in the afternoon sun that streamed through the kitchen window.

“And why would I want to buy flowers?” Severus countered tersely, not bothering to hide his irritation.

‘Because it would make the table more presentable,’ the vision of the sagacious witch explained, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“What do you propose next? Bonbons? Poetry? A diamond-encrusted tiara with matching teardrop earrings, and a pearl choker with diamond uprights?” Severus snarled back at the vision of the old witch. He was so distracted, the Potions master almost sliced his thumb while dicing the green pepper.

’No, nothing that dramatic,’ Minerva replied, not flustered by Severus' tart comment in the least. ’Just a suggestion. Though, that does sound quite lovely, and she would be duly impressed. You seem to care so much about making a good impression for Hermione. I was just voicing a thought.’

Severus groaned. “All right, all right. Just stop nagging me. If there is time, I'll send Marf out for a little something for the table, but I refuse to go overboard like some besotted lovesick fool trying to woo his lady fair.”

‘A couple stems of flowers for the table would not be amiss,’ she said in conclusion.

Severus rolled his eyes.

'I don’t know why you are having such a hard time admitting to yourself that you love Hermione,’ Albus chided him.

“Who said anything about love?” Severus did not want to have this conversation again.

'Severus, you know as well as I do, for I am merely a projection of your mind, that you love
Hermione. The apparition of Albus moved to stand beside the younger wizard. *There is no shame in love. Love is the grandest of all the emotions man can experience. It brings us happiness, and makes our souls feel full of the matter that makes the universe spin and move.*

“Inertia?” Severus asked in a deadpan voice.

It was Albus and Minerva’s turn to roll their eyes. The ghost of Albus spoke with a little impatience in his voice. *It figures that you would get a sense of humor when I am trying to have a serious talk with you. But the fact that you are finally developing a sense of humor is a good sign that love agrees with you.*

Severus found that the way his conscience had manifested and asserted itself in such an annoying manner was sometimes more bother than to have any conscience at all.

“It doesn’t matter if I love Hermione or not,” the raven-haired wizard rationalized. “It seems clear that she does not love me, for if she did, she would have not stopped herself; she would have kissed me, and not questioned why I had been kind to her.” Severus stirred the sliced mushrooms in with the onions before he started chopping the basil.

*Give the witch some time,* Minerva advised him. *She must have very recently discovered it was actually you. And frankly, I would have been shocked to discover that someone who has been cooking for me and listening to me cry my heart out was the same man who would have verbally eviscerated me back at Hogwarts for what you would have called ‘childish sniveling.’ Face it, Severus. You were not a kind man back then, so of course she's a bit confused over this sudden change in your behavior.*

The pale vision of Minerva was right, but that only meant that he was actually agreeing with himself. Still, it was easier to deal with the idea that these thoughts came from someplace outside of himself.

“I think she is coming around, though,” Severus noted.

*And did you notice at your last meeting that she said neither your given name, nor your alias?* Albus pointed out.

Severus didn’t notice that peculiarity at all until his subconscious dragged it up and his hallucination of Albus mentioned it. Not once did Hermione address him as Calleo, but she did not...
address him as Severus either. For if she had said his name, that would mean the game was up and all the pretending between them would be done. The only pretending left between them was that Hermione acted like she did not know his real identity, but everything else was real and palpable, from the sexual tension to the warmth of feelings between them. Desire was one emotion that could not be easily faked, and Severus had no practice at it. With the other witches who had come to his bed, the desire was all based on his physical need for release between some woman's legs. Severus' desire for Hermione was rooted deep within him, in a part of him that was awakening for the first time.

By the time Severus added the tomatoes and herbs, then stirred before covering to simmer on a low flame for thirty minutes, Albus and Minerva had faded away. Left alone, he sank down on a nearby chair.

“Could it be that I really love her?” he asked himself.

Love was for fools and those who were not clever enough to avoid the trap set by Cupid. Draco was a victim, not Severus. But was Draco really a victim, or was he just one of the lucky ones who had found their one true love? Severus scoffed at the thought. Out of the thousands upon thousands of witches in the world, could only one be suitable for him or any wizard? Maybe it was that there were dozens out there, and one just had to come across one of those dozens in one's lifetime to make one think that they had found 'true love.'

But who, in this whole wide world, had ever captured his attention like Hermione? No one. Even with his own wife, Gabrielle, it had been with a slow acceptance of each other, and then by forced proximity that they learned to tolerate each other, eventually becoming friends. In time, would he have come to think of Gabrielle as his one true love? He had never even admitted to her that he loved her, not even once. It was only when she was gone that he had realized that not only did he miss her, but had in fact loved her too.

Severus began missing Hermione the minute she left his flat every Monday and Thursday night. He couldn't wait for her to return to him.

Looking at the clock, he noted that it would still be another hour and a half until Hermione would arrive. He figured it was time to begin preparing the meat for seasoning and to bring it to room temperature before cooking. As Severus minced the garlic and crushed the rosemary to release its oils and aroma, he wondered if he ever did admit that he loved Hermione, if she wouldn't think it was some ploy to ensure that he got the ingredients for the Polyjuice Potion.

“If I tell her, I can't do it before I get the ingredients. It would only make her question the sincerity of my feelings for her.”
Hermione kept buffing at her feet with the pumice stone, hoping to make them smooth and pretty.

'It's not like Snape is ever going look at my feet,' she thought.

'Yeah, but you are hoping there will be another wager tonight, and then you can win a foot rub.'

She did have to admit that she had thought that a foot rub would feel like heaven. Hermione made a note to schedule an extra foot rub in when she had her pedicure during her trip to the spa with Ginny next week.

As the witch stepped out of the shower, she heard Ron come home.

“There's some shepherd’s pie waiting for you in the oven, Ron,” Hermione called out.

Ron popped his head into the bathroom to find his wife drying her hair with a towel. Leaning against the door jamb, his eyes traveled up and down Hermione's naked body.

“What?” Hermione said defensively.


Feeling rather self-conscious, Hermione stopped drying her hair and wrapped the towel around her body.

“Why did you do that?” whinged Ron.

“I don't know,” Hermione threw back. “I've just never been all that comfortable with my body... that's all.” Well, it wasn't entirely true. She had started feeling self-conscious about her body only after Ron had started making the odd comment over the years about little things: her nipples, her hair, her breast size, her legs. Nothing too critical, but nothing too complimentary either.
“Fine,” Ron huffed, and left.

Hermione felt like banging her head against a wall. Instead of dwelling on what she could have done differently or trying to figure out what Ron had taken offense at, she ignored the whole situation and summoned another towel to finish drying her hair.

Once she was dressed in her new matching green top and skirt, Hermione went out to the kitchen to see if Ron had heard her and had found the shepherd's pie in the oven.

“What are you doing?” she asked, looking at the disaster Ron was making of her clean kitchen. “There is a perfectly good dinner ready and hot for you in the oven.”

“New diet,” Ron explained, as he pulled out some sliced roast beef and began eating it straight from the butcher's paper. “As part of my new workout routine and regimen to get my body into shape for the photo shoot, I'm on a strict high-protein, low-fat diet. Got to get this body ripped.” To make his point, he flexed his muscles in an exaggerated pose.

Hermione did not laugh, but she did hide her temptation to do so behind a smile.

“I've got to build up my pecs and delts, and work on my abs,” Ron said before swallowing a whole slice of roast beef in one bite.

It struck Hermione that Ron was talking about specific muscles. “You mean the Pectoralis major, the Deltoideus, and abdominal muscles?” Hermione clarified.

“Yeah, what you said.” Ron turned his back on her in order to search for the milk. “Say, can you get some skim milk next time you go shopping?” he asked.

Here she was, sincerely trying to find something of common interest to converse about with Ron, and it seemed he was shutting her out again. Maybe the use of the proper Latin terms for the muscles was making Ron feel stupid, so she took a different tactic.

“So what other groups of muscles have you been working on with these work-outs?” she asked, trying to sound sincerely interested.
“Oh, let's see. Quads and gluts on days we do leg work. Pecs, trap, delts, biceps, triceps on upper body days, and abs every day,” Ron listed off. “Is there any more fresh fruit?”

“There should be a whole basket of peaches and plums on the counter.” Hermione wondered why Ron didn't see the basket of fruit that should have been right before his eyes.

“Oh, you mean this basket” Ron asked, holding up an empty basket.

“That basket was full just a few days ago!”

“Sorry.” Ron shrugged. “Guess I should have mentioned that I've been eating a lot more fruit on this diet.”

Hermione wanted to yell at him that he could have informed her of his new diet earlier in the week before stranding her without any fresh fruit for herself. During the week, Hermione had only bothered to make tea and nothing else for breakfast, going back to her old habit of a scone on her way to work in the mornings. Though, if she had been paying any attention at all over the past few days, she would have noticed the disappearance of the fruit instead of being distracted with thoughts of Snape.

She held her tongue. In a civil tone she asked, “Any other new diet changes I should be made aware of?”

“Let's see. No candy, chocolate, cheese, fried foods, or butter. Cut down on the bread, eat brown rice, sweet potatoes, or whole grains instead. Lots of high protein meat, and fresh fruits and vegetables.”

Hermione could not complain about Ron's new dietary needs, as she had not been eating well lately either except on Thursday nights, and those nights because Snape had started cooking for her. Perhaps if she had more nutritious food in the house she would eat more. It was a false hope, but it seemed to be a believable lie at the moment.

“I'll keep that in mind when I go shopping next time. I need to get going,” Hermione said as she turned to leave. Maybe tomorrow she would try and talk with Ron about his new workout routine and get a real conversation going for once. It seemed like it might be pointless, but she was willing to try, since she had promised herself she would.
“Night. By the time you get home I should be asleep. Got an early day tomorrow,” Ron yelled to Hermione's back as he went looking for some carrots.

Hermione heard Ron, but said nothing to acknowledge him, thankful she would not have to watch the clock tonight. She could come home without the vision of a waiting Ron looming in her mind.

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“You wants Marf to go where, Master Snape?” the creature squeaked with uncertainty.

“To the florist.” Severus hated it when he had to repeat himself.

“And what should I buy at the florist, sir?”

“What else, flowers!” the wizard snapped. *How much more obvious could it be!*

“What type of flowers, Master?” the house-elf asked timidly, wondering if he was about to be smacked about the head like his former masters used to do with great regularity whenever they grew agitated with him, like his current master was becoming.

“I don't care. Anything! But not some huge bouquet, just a few stems of something to put in a little vase on the table,” Severus instructed Marf.

“We don't have a little vase, Master, sir,” Marf replied.

“Then buy one!” Severus ordered him. “Why is it that even the most simple instructions must be made so complex,” he muttered to himself.

“Yes, sir! I will buy your pretty lady-friend a couple roses. That will please her,” the small magical sophont chirped

“No! Not roses!” Severus interjected quickly. “I don't need anything so...” *Declarative?* “...sentimental.” He began to pace the main room, treading his familiar path along the Tabriz rug. “Something understated that won't be misinterpreted either.” Tapping his finger to his chin, he said, “A little fern for sincerity. Just one stem. And a sprig of peppermint for warmth of feelings.”
“But that is all filler, Master. What about flowers?” Marf asked, hoping he was not going to get yelled at for such a simple question.

“Something subtle. Something simple,” Severus thought aloud, ignoring the house-elf. “Something to convey the right sentiments.” Running through a mental list of flowers alphabetically and their meanings, Severus considered a few stems of azalea to signify, “Take care of yourself for me,” but remembered that the season for azaleas was long over. “Salvia,” he said when he finally reached the “S’s” in his head. “Blue salvia, to be exact.”

It was perfect. Salvias were just coming into season, and blue salvia captured his feelings perfectly.

Looking at the time, Severus said impatiently, “Well? She'll be here soon. Get going!”

Marf disappeared immediately, and Severus went about his flat making sure everything was prepared. The table was set, and he was dressed and ready for what he was hoping would be another wonderful evening ahead.

As the minutes ticked by, he anxiously waited for Hermione to arrive, but hoped she would arrive after Marf returned with the flowers. With a few minutes to spare, Marf appeared in the middle of the room holding a small vase with three stems of blue salvia, two sprigs of peppermint, and one stem of some common florist fern. It was simple, understated, and perfect.

‘You're fretting over something as simple as a few twigs of greenery?’

Before he could start another mental argument over how he was becoming some foppish admirer, the bed curtains changed from black to a muddied blue with broad strokes of clear yellow. Severus charmed the bed curtains back to black before he could notice the faint streaks of pink and purple.

‘So, she is feeling fear. Fear of what?’ Severus wondered.

The problem with auras was that a color could signify many things; dark blue could mean fear of self-expression, the future, or speaking the truth. It could be all three things, but the bold yellow told him of an awakening in Hermione. That also was open to broad interpretation. It could mean an awakening to the idea that her marriage was not worth saving, or it could be an awakening where her feelings for Severus were concerned, whatever they might be.
Severus heard Hermione's signature knock and was just about to open the door when he suddenly realized he had forgotten to put his mask on. He summoned his black half-mask with his wand, and quickly affixed it to his face before opening the door.

He stood there looking at her for a moment. That same odd fluttering in his stomach returned, as if he was flying a broom that took a sudden unexpected dip. Just looking at Hermione dressed in green with her purple cloak on made his chest feel tighter and his head a little lighter. There was nothing exceptional about the way she was dressed, nor what she had done with her hair or make-up. But just the mere sight of her was enough to make Severus feel not quite himself, as if he had imbibed a bit too much to drink. And he found he actually liked it, and didn't mind that he was a bit off-balance for once.

Remembering himself, he gave her a brief smile before bowing and welcoming Hermione in.

Walking into Snape's flat, Hermione could tell that something was different. She wasn't sure if it was her, Snape, or both of them, but the dynamism between them had changed. It no longer seemed like some game or hypothetical idea to the brunette witch, but something very real and potential.

Severus offered his arm to Hermione to escort her to the settee, and was pleased when she slipped her hand through the crook of his arm easily, while giving him a shy smile. He could feel the difference too, for Hermione's touch on his arm was like fire and ice. It burned him and made him want to shudder at the same time.

“May I take your cloak?” he asked, resisting the urge to lean in and brush his lips against the curve of her ear.

“Yes,” Hermione breathed, feeling suddenly nervous and overwhelmed.

As he helped her slip her cloak off her shoulders, Severus let the backs of his hands graze her arms.

“The color of your cloak is quite becoming on you,” Severus remarked, his voice barely a low rumble.

Hermione realized this was the second time a man had complimented her when she wore her royal purple cloak. “Thank you,” she replied in an equally barely audible voice.
If Snape was trying to seduce Hermione, he was doing a damn good job of it, but the raven-haired wizard was doing nothing different that night that he hadn't done before. So if he wasn't altering their usual routine, why was it that Hermione was considering breaking a vow she had made to herself on the walk-over from her flat?

As Hermione had walked in the sultry summer evening on her way over, she had promised herself that she would not let things progress any farther between her and Snape until after her anniversary dinner with Ron. She had to give her marriage one last try. If she and Ron could not reignite the spark between them – a spark that had never really existed in the first place – by the end of the night of their anniversary, then Hermione would consider taking things farther with Snape. If all the romantic trappings of a fancy dinner in an elegant supper club with dancing, wine, and the perfect atmosphere could not make Mrs. Weasley feel something for her husband, then maybe this was a marriage of convenience for her after all.

'Be strong, Hermione. Four more meetings, then you can decide,' she told herself. Hermione didn't even know why she was making herself to be true to Ron until her anniversary. She hadn't even decided if she could ever really be attracted to Snape, but somehow that question seemed to answer itself with her own promise.

As Snape went to put her cloak away, Hermione's eyes drank in the sight of Snape's form as he walked away. He had definitely put on some muscle and weight over the years, and it agreed with him. The former professor was wearing a black shirt and trousers, and the sight of him dressed all in black made it easier for Hermione to remember him walking the corridors of Hogwarts, his lean legs taking long strides, carrying him fast enough so that others had to jog to keep up while he seemed to hardly exert himself. Hermione suddenly remembered the black and gray cloaked figures she had glanced at one morning when she was in the Twenty-Four Blackbird Bakery last month; the tall form taking great strides, disappearing around a corner in a swirl of black cloth, the sound of his boots striking sinister notes on the cobblestones. That black silhouette had imprinted itself on her eyes and in her mind. She now surmised it must have been Snape and Malfoy walking the streets of Diagon Alley early that morning, though what they would be doing prowling about that early she would contemplate another time.

Hermione was jarred from her reverie when Snape reappeared by her side asking if she wished to rest first, or if she wished to keep him company in the kitchen while he finished preparing dinner.

“I'm fine. We can go to the kitchen now,” she answered with a warm smile. As he escorted her, she asked, “Is there anything I can do to help, or have you everything all ready for cooking?”
Hermione knew Snape would have everything ready, but she still felt some sort of obligation to offer. Politeness was always appreciated, and it seemed Snape had taken a liking to it, in contrast to her attempts to be polite with him years ago.
“Just the presence of your company will be enough,” Severus assured her, appreciative of her offer.

To Hermione, the kitchen smelled like one should. The air was redolent with garlic, simmering savory vegetables, and freshly chopped herbs, with the underlying aroma of yeasty bread warming in the oven.

Lined up in a neat little row was an assortment of tiny dishes holding small amounts of freshly chopped herbs and the garlic she had smelled. With her usual fascination, she watched Snape turn the flame on under the heavy cast-iron skillet.

“What are we having for dinner tonight?” Hermione asked, curious as to what gastronomic delights Snape had in store.

“Use your senses,” Severus instructed her. Now he definitely knew he was getting a soft spot for Hermione, as he would have snapped at anyone else that it was bloody obvious.

Glancing at the meat on the counter, she said, “Lamb chops.” Inhaling, she could smell the bread in the oven and vegetables of some sort in a pot on the cooker. “Bread, and...”

Leaning over to get a little closer to the cooker, she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply once more. There was something familiar about that smell, but she couldn't place it. There were vague memories that came with that scent, but no distinct image or memory triggered from the olfactory input that came to the forefront of her mind.

“I know I've smelled this before, I just can't place it,” she admitted prematurely.

“Care to at least guess which cuisine?” Severus asked, wondering if he could lure her into another winnable wager.

Hermione wondered if there was going to be another bet; Snape did not mention one, but that particular tone was in his voice that he always had before he proposed one. After the last major one, she knew better than to rely on her knowledge of food, as that had landed her blindfolded the whole night. If she was going to win, she would have to stick with potion ingredients. Hermione did have to concede that she did think another night with herself blindfolded might be an excellent way to finally determine if she truly was attracted to Snape or not. She hated to admit it, but her last memories of Snape’s face – from the night before her wedding to Ron – were not the most attractive ones.
Though Hermione had never considered herself to be a shallow person who was only attracted to someone based on looks alone, there was something to be said for a wizard who did not look like Alastor Moody, or a gaunt scarecrow. If Hermione really was attracted to Snape, then basing her opinion on his personality rather than appearances was a much more fair and equitable way of going about it. In reality, Hermione did have to admit, she was already attracted to him, and maybe this was another way for her mind to twist logic and make herself vulnerable to him once more.

The question was: How could Hermione propose another night of wearing a blindfold, and lose the bet while making it look like she had made an effort to win? She was willing to forgo a nice foot rub for another night like last week.

“Is this another wager?” Hermione asked knowingly.

“Care to make it one?” He smirked, hoping he could win another back rub.

She had to play this carefully, because she knew he would sniff out any duplicitous motives from her side. “What do you have to offer if I win?”

Severus moved behind her, pinning her against the counter. Murmuring close to her ear, he countered, “That depends on what you want.”

’Another dry-humping session right here, right now?’ Hermione thought, suppressing a devilish smile. Knowing this opportunity would provide a better chance to get her way, she renegotiated. “How about we decide on what we are willing to give up to the other if we lose. To lessen the temptation,” she reasoned, turning around to face Snape. She leaned back with a look of detachment, as if his suave charms could not sway her.

“And what are you willing to give up?” Severus challenged suggestively, leaning in closer, finding the conditions equally tempting as before.

“My sight for one more night,” she breathed in reply. “I am willing to wear a blindfold all night long next Thursday night.”

“That doesn't seem like you'd be giving up much with that offering. I would almost say that you enjoyed being blindfolded,” Severus countered with confidence.
“That may be, but don't tell me you didn't enjoy it as well. Imagine it,” Hermione purred sweetly. “I'm blind, and completely at your mercy.” Leaning forward to meet Severus and, with her breath caressing his ear, she whispered, “Do you want me completely at your mercy again?”

Severus wanted to groan and bang his head against the cabinet door behind Hermione. He was going to do something rash involving Hermione's knickers and her self-respect if he didn't get his hormones under control. Slytherins were supposed to be in control of negotiations, not be manipulated during them.

“I seem to recall not too long ago that I warned you about not teasing the animals,” Severus growled ferally, mostly due to clenching his teeth, as he was in agony.

His erection was caught in his trousers going in the wrong direction. More than anything, he wanted to readjust himself, but was in no position to do so with Hermione right in front of him. He was tempted to excuse himself and readjust himself in his bathroom, but then the moment would be lost, as well as his advantage. He decided to suffer through the discomfort in order to persuade Hermione into giving him a back rub instead. Then again, he had been kicking himself over the fact that he had under-utilized the situation when Hermione had been blindfolded, and he could have placed a few charms on his full-length mirror to satisfy his prurient curiosity. But first, as soon as Hermione would turn her back to him, he would use his wand discreetly for a little adjustment charm that he knew to be useful in such situations.

“Yes, I recall that conversation we had. It was in just about the same spot we are standing right now,” Hermione pointed out, glancing down at the counter and at Severus’ hand which was slowly inching its way along the tile and closer to her waist.

“Maybe your blindfold suggestion is not such a bad one after all,” Severus agreed. “But where would be the fun in me trying to win the bet if we both get something out of it? You just might want to lose on purpose.”

“What if you offer up something if you lose that we both might want?”

“What if you offer up something if you lose that we both might want?” he asked.

The tightening tendrils of desire curled in her belly. She didn't think it was possible, but she was even more turned on than she had been the previous week. All this innuendo, double entendre, and anticipation was driving Hermione quite insane. There was the briefest of moments where she
thought, 'Sod Ron, my marriage, and that damn promise to wait,' and contemplated begging Snape to shag her on the kitchen counter, but stopped herself. If she was ever going to do anything with Snape, she would have to do it when her head was clear and not fogged by animal-driven lust.

“I was thinking you can give me a massage. Tell me, have you ever given anyone a full-body massage?” She smiled, knowing that if Snape was this interested in her, he might not mind agreeing to this demand.

“Yes, but that requires you to get fully undressed. I will remove myself from the room while you undress and slip under the sheet.” Severus paused before adding, “Unless you don't mind my company in the room at the time.”

Hermione had no interest in winning the bet. She was going to get a massage at the spa anyway, so it didn't matter if she won or not. She did abruptly notice that she and Severus were slipping very close into temptation once more. It didn't stop her from fantasizing about Snape watching her undress and unable to satiate his desires, but then, her desires would not be satisfied either if it came to that arrangement. Instead of answering Severus’ rather suggestive suggestion, she turned away from him to face the counter.

“I think I'm ready to guess,” she announced, suddenly getting nervous that things were going to quickly get out of hand. If they started kissing and touching, it would not stop until Snape came inside of her. That thought made her leave the circle of Snape's arms, not for the aversion to the idea of it, but because of the strong appeal it held for her.

Noting her swift change in demeanor, he wondered what had brought it about. Wondering if he was too impertinent with his suggestion, he followed Hermione.

“Was I too forward?” he asked.

“No. Just avoiding temptation,” the brunette witch confessed.

“You still haven't made up your mind?”

How could she truthfully answer Snape without making him feel rejected? It had become pellucidly clear during their exchange she wanted Snape, but she had promised herself to wait until her anniversary. How could she tell Snape that she wanted him, but needed a little time longer?
Snape. How was it that she was tempted to shag this wizard until they both lay in a heap of sweat and exhaustion, and still think of him as Snape? 'His name is Severus.' She said it in her mind over and over, wondering how the sound of it would slip over her tongue when she spoke it. No matter what, she still could not say his name aloud, as that would end everything between them.

“After my anniversary, in two weeks, I will give you my answer,” Hermione told him. “I made a promise to myself to see if there is anything left between my husband and me. After my anniversary dinner, I will know.” There was sadness and resignation not only in Hermione’s voice, but in her face.

Deep down inside, she knew that she was only delaying the inevitable conclusions she had been trying to avoid regarding her husband and Severus, but she could not bring herself to admit them here and now. By giving a date, Hermione would have the time to gather her courage to face the truth that she was married to a wizard she couldn't stand, and loved an ex-Death Eater who banged other witches for money.

Hermione reached over and pulled the lip off the pot. She immediately recognized the vegetable stew as ratatouille. She had eaten it when she was in France, and her mother had prepared it occasionally.

Making an obvious effort, she closed her eyes, inhaled, and said with false uncertainty, “German?”

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Severus served up the ratatouille into a serving dish while Hermione waited in the other room. He had escorted her to her seat, then returned to the kitchen to bring out the rest of dinner, and to stew over the wager. He did not like the fact that he had lost; it was the principle of the matter. The game was rigged, as Hermione gave a purposefully wrong answer to reach her end goal. If he won or lost the wager, it was still was a pleasant outcome, but for the fact that the bet was skewed so that Hermione was able to get her way… That was a loss either way one looked at it, and he didn’t like losing.

He did not meditate on the subject for too long, for he remembered that Hermione would be accompanying Ginny to the spa the following weekend. Perhaps there was a way for him to possibly still get his way and get her back. Those little barbs she threw his way were lighthearted. It was a sign that she trusted him and felt comfortable around him, but he would still try to exact a little light retribution of his own.

Hermione patiently waited for Severus to return. She hoped he didn't mind her quip about having lamb two weeks in a row. It was all in jest, but she quickly amended her remark with sincere praise of Severus' cooking. Hermione still couldn't help herself when Severus seemed soothed by her extolment. She had added one last gibe that he would make a good little housewizard one day. Severus said nothing, but gave her another one of his unreadable smiles.
Trying not to get nervous that maybe she had been a little ‘too forward’ herself, Hermione studied the table. The smell wafting from the lamb chops in front of her made her mouth water. A bottle of Bordeaux wine was open and left to breathe. Once her eyes alighted upon the unpretentious arrangement of flowers and greens in the small vase, she began analyzing the flowers and their symbolism. She understood immediately the significance of the peppermint and the fern, but when she saw the blue salvia, her heart began to swell in her chest.

'Blue salvia: I think of you.'

It touched her more deeply than any bow or kiss of her hand. Hermione knew that a Potions master, such as Severus, would never randomly pick flowers without thinking upon the meaning behind them. It was the symbolic meaning of flowers and herbs that were frequently was associated with the medicinal properties of the plants.

'He thinks of me.'

Hermione felt pinpricks of tears forming behind her eyes. She was sincerely moved. Though flowers normally made her depressed, as she usually associated them with funerals, she wondered if maybe part of it was due to the fact that Ron never bought her flowers. She had always been a little jealous of other witches at work receiving flowers from their beaus. Ron had admitted that he never properly romanced her; her realizing that he had never bought her flowers, even before her aversion to them, made her tears spill down her cheek.

Just as she wiped away her few tears and sniffled, Severus emerged from the kitchen with the ratatouille and bread.

Hermione beamed a genuinely grateful smile towards him, and hoped that he didn't notice that she had been crying.

Severus wondered what had prompted that misty look in Hermione's eyes.

“I'm sorry if I seemed ungrateful for my remarks in the kitchen earlier,” she apologized. “I hope you know that I am extremely grateful for everything that you do. Making me feel so welcomed, dancing lessons, cooking for me, the flowers…” The brunette witch looked up at him to convey that the meaning of the flowers were not lost on her, and that she appreciated his sentiments.
Severus set down the items in his hands and was suddenly flustered. He felt awkward and unsure, now that Hermione had acknowledged the flowers on the table, and her possible interpretation of his purpose behind their selection. It didn't help the intense fluttering in his stomach with the way she was looking at him with those big brown eyes.

“I... It is no bother for me.” Feeling like a silly schoolboy with a crush, he dismissed his discomfit further by adding, “No need to thank me.”

But Severus was thankful for her gratitude. He felt appreciated, and that alone made thoughts of retribution for her ill-sense of humor flee from his mind.

To break the awkward silence that settled between them, though it was only Severus who actually felt uncomfortable, as he sat down he inquired, “So, how has your week been so far?”

Hermione was amused. She noticed that Severus was a bit unnerved by her remarks. It was sweet and equally astounding that a man who exuded confidence had become suddenly shy. She was awed when she quickly remembered how he had mentioned that he had never become friends with a witch like he had with her. Something had felt different from the time Severus answered the door that night, and Hermione wondered if he was feeling something deeper for her than just casual attraction.

Suddenly remembering that Severus was still waiting for an answer, she replied, “Do you want the good news or bad news first?”

“That depends. How good is the good news, and how bad is the bad news?” the raven-haired wizard responded.

“Well, the bad news is kind of bad with a good twist, or bad depending on your point of view, though I believe you would think it ended well.” Hermione paused. “I'm rambling, aren't I?”

“Yes, you are,” Severus said dryly, not refuting her.

“Fine, the bad news first. Counseling went rather poorly. I lost my temper and decked my husband,” Hermione confessed boldly.

“And this is a bad thing because...?” Severus was glad that Hermione had finally put up a fight
against the abusive, ill-tempered moron she had married.

“Because I lost my temper due to more name-calling, and I should not have lost my temper like that.”

“True,” Severus agreed. “You could have played the guilt card and made him look even worse in the eyes of the counselor. Now the counselor will have some sympathy for your husband since you attacked him twice in the Muggle’s presence. You are no longer looking like the brow-beaten wife anymore. You should have waited until you got home before giving it to him. Though a curse can be very effective, there is something very satisfying in the physical act. I do hope that you did not hurt yourself in the process.”

Hermione sat there a little taken aback by Severus’ comments. It seemed a little underhanded and manipulative, but Hermione had to admit there was a certain appeal to his logic. It wasn't a noble tactic, but it would have made Ron look more like the villain he had been to Hermione through all his poor behavior towards her over the years. It would require a level of resentment and spite for her to carry it out at the next appointment.

“I'll take it under advisement,” she noted. “And my hand is not worse for wear, after a friend healed it.”

“And the good news?” he prompted her, making a mental note to ask Ginny if she had been the one who healed Hermione's hand. Then rapidly crossing it off his list, as he realized that would only prompt Ginny to make more off-handed remarks about him and Hermione.

“That there is some justice in this world,” Hermione proclaimed. “I just heard that Trevor Spawn's pending apprenticeship has been rescinded. I am guessing that word got back to Potions master Dobmeir about the boy's incompetence, especially with him almost burning down the Ministry, and Dobmeir revoked his apprenticeship offer.” There was an unmistakable self-satisfied smile plastered on her face.

Severus wondered if Miss Brown's lawyers were the ones who had succeeded in finally getting the obligation and promise of an apprenticeship overturned, or if the boy's father had accepted the return of the fee. He had avoided Miss Brown's request for his company over the past few days, and wondered if this was one of the reasons she had summoned him. This was definitely good news for Miss Brown and all other affected parties, potentially Hermione as well.

“That is good news,” Severus replied with warm sincerity.
“Pity I'm too old to be accepted as an apprentice, otherwise I'd jump at the chance to fill in the position,” Hermione added, her voice filled with regret.

There was a moment where Severus contemplated telling Hermione the position was hers for the asking, but that meant an explanation of his need for her and the Polyjuice ingredients, his plan for escape, and everything associated with that tale. Besides, he would only tell her of the apprenticeship opportunity once she had agreed to provide him the necessary ingredients, as mentioning it beforehand would be misconstrued as blackmail, at least in Hermione's eyes.

He did drop one subtle hint in his vague reply: “Well, you never know.”

Hermione took Severus’ comment to be one of consolation to her circumstances. She launched into an in-depth debate with Severus over the article in *Obscure Oozes & Fabulous Fluids* he had recommended. They spent the rest of dinner talking about that one article.

As they sat on the settee while dinner settled, Hermione noticed how Severus' hand would begin to creep towards hers periodically. She made no effort to move her hand. It was charming how Severus would catch what he was doing and remove his hand from the seat and place it on the back of the settee or on his knee; sometimes he would busy his hands with his cup of tea. There were moments when Hermione swore Severus seemed cross with himself for trying to touch her, and that made her want to reach out and touch him more than she already wanted to.

Time passed too quickly for them, as they both lost track of time in each other's presence, and it was time to begin the dance lesson. Since their brush with temptation in the kitchen, they had avoided all physical contact with one another. Now, they would both have their strength of will tested with tonight's dance lesson and close proximity.

Severus did not care for Swing dancing. He felt it had none of the grace and elegance of the waltz, none of the sophistication of the Foxtrot, and none of the sensual passion of the Tango. It was all just a bunch of shuffling feet and flopping hands. Once Hermione seemed to grasp the basic moves of Swing dancing, Severus set the music box to play a variety of music so that they could practice all three styles of dancing they had been working on.

Pulling her close as they changed tempo to move in time with a slower song, Severus found the closeness of Hermione intoxicating. His head spun as if he had completed a series of barrel rolls on a broom.
As part of his Potions apprenticeship years ago, Severus was forced to drink several different potions in order to understand the physical effects on his own body. His master had always had an antidote ready to take once the potion had reached its maximum effect. One of the potions he had drunk that he still clearly remembered to this day was a Love Potion. All the effects were very distinct: light-headedness and/or dizziness, euphoria, possible giddiness, the urge to sigh frequently, a lack of concentration, obsessive thoughts about the object of affection, decreased appetite, poor sleep, bouts of uncharacteristic emotions and behaviors, and upset stomach (characterized by a butterfly-like sensation). Years later it seemed as though he was struck once more by many of those very same symptoms, especially with Hermione so close to him. However, the difference between the Love Potion and what he was currently experiencing was that this was brought on naturally. There was no antidote to what he was feeling towards Hermione, and he did not want to be cured of his condition. The only remedy was for Hermione to stay with him in his arms; only then would Severus not suffer from withdrawal when she would have to leave at the end of their night.

They continued dancing a slow Foxtrot, Hermione eventually resting her head against his chest and shoulder. Tilting his head to one side, Severus discreetly inhaled the scent of her hair, enjoying the softness of her waves and curls piled up on top of her head as they brushed against his cheek and temple.

Severus had taken for granted many of the simple things in life when he was younger, and he had learned the hard way the beauty of simplicity: a bowl of hot soup and good bread on a cold and miserable day; the first sip of wine as its flavors washed over the tongue and caressed the palate; the enjoyment of a good book in front of a crackling fire, and the warmth of a woman's body pressed to his as they swayed to the music. He wished that time and the world outside of his flat would freeze, and that they could spend the rest of eternity just wrapped in each other's arms, as the ex-Death Eater knew that it rarely got better than that very moment. It was sentimental wishing, and though Severus was not prone to being maudlin, even he could not deny that this was a moment that he would remember clearly in his old age and look back upon fondly.

As the evening progressed, Severus noticed Hermione's temperament reflected the mood of each song. While dancing the Tango, it seemed there was a smoldering fire that burned behind her brown eyes, and as they danced to Swing music, her mood lightened and she laughed gaily as Severus twirled and spun her about. They stopped for a while to rest and drink some refreshments as they caught their breath. Dancing and chatting the rest of the night away, the pair were completely unaware that Saturn was stealing sands of time from their hourglass. It was only when the clock on the mantle chimed midnight that Hermione and Severus became aware that the night was at an end.

As per their ritual, Severus fetched Hermione's cloak and helped her slip it on. Being a little more forward than the last time, he brushed the entire back of his hand along the side of her neck. Hermione closed her eyes and sighed aloud, turning her head to the side, instinctually inviting him to touch her a little more.
Severus held back. What point was there to partake of what he could not fully enjoy? Her body may have invited him, but she had made it clear that only after her anniversary would she give him a definitive answer. There was something noble in her promise to be true to her husband, though the bloody arse did not deserve such loyalty. It made Severus hope that if she agreed to help him and Draco – as well as Ginny – escape, that she would hold true to her promise. It spoke of her character, and though he would have preferred an answer anyway, it made her a witch of integrity in his eyes.

'Three more meetings and then I will know. Three more meetings and then I will remove my mask,' Severus promised himself. Now he was not waiting until Hermione was ready to deal with the fact that it was “Severus Snape,” but for the simple act that he would wait for her.

Whether her answer was yes or no, he could no longer delay the inevitable. After her anniversary on the twenty-first, there would be no more need for dance lessons. The season for the first batches of boomslang skin to begin arriving from Africa was approaching soon, and it was always a short season at that.

When Hermione noticed that she was still standing there with her head cocked to one side and Severus did not make another move based on her non-verbal encouragement, she righted herself, cleared her throat, and turned to face the wizard.

“I had another lovely night, all thanks to you,” Hermione professed, turning her eyes up and knowing the desire she felt for him was painted plainly on her face.

Severus did not trust himself to speak at this point. If he opened his mouth, he would no doubt say something gushing or fawning in nature, only to later cringe at the memory of it. But he should, out of courtesy, respond to Hermione.

He went on the principle of less is more, and only after practicing it in his head once to make sure it sounded eloquent and simple, Severus replied, “Monday I for await eagerly night.”

There! He kept it brief, elusive, and open to interpretation without misconstruing his desire to see her again. He said that he eagerly awaited for Monday night. But he couldn't understand what Hermione was smiling so broadly about. There seemed to be almost humor behind her eyes.

Hermione swore she would not laugh. The sound of his voice was so seductive and lulling, but when Severus’ words came out all jumbled up, it took a Herculean effort not to bust up guffawing
on the spot. She did not think that Severus, a man who has always come across as very dignified, would like a woman laughing over the fact that he had totally rearranged the words in his sentence. Instead, she bit down on the inside of her cheek until she was sure it was bleeding, while she still smiled sweetly at him. More than anything, it flattered her that a man such as Severus could be so discombobulated over her. It made her feel more alluring than she had felt in a very long while.

“I eagerly await for Monday night, too,” Hermione echoed.

Severus escorted her to the door. He weighed the option of kissing her hand, but was preempted when Hermione turned and slipped her arms around his chest and hugged him tightly. Severus returned the hug, fighting the urge to not let go of her. When her hands slipped from his back, he forced him own hands to retreat and opened the door.

She walked through the door and out into the corridor. When Hermione did not hear the door click shut after a few paces, she turned and regarded Severus. He was still standing in the door frame, watching her go. Though he had his mask on, Hermione could see the look of longing in his eyes.

Hermione recalled Malfoy looking at Ginny with a look of longing that day she had caught them together, and now she knew why Ginny risked everything to keep coming back to Malfoy.

For Hermione, it was that look on Severus’ face that made her feel not just alluring, but beautiful inside. That glowing beauty that cannot be bought from a store or sold in a jar. She would do anything to keep Severus looking at her like that forever. But she did not have forever, and it was past midnight.

She could have blown him a kiss, but she didn't. Hermione turned and left.

Severus leaned over the railing and watched Hermione until he could no longer gaze upon her form.

Once back in his flat, the place seemed empty, but for the lingering presence of Hermione's scent. With a flick of his wand, he unfolded his bed from against the wall and gracefully fell upon it.

Gazing up at the ceiling, Severus finally realized he had switched all the words in his parting to Hermione. With certain amount of resignation, and surprisingly without disgust, he admitted aloud, “I am a besotted lovesick fool.”
Chapter End Notes

Chapter 43 A/N: Flower symbolism used in this chapter:
Azalea - Take care of yourself for me; fragile passion; temperance; Chinese symbol of womanhood; Fern – Sincerity; Peppermint - Warmth of feelings; Salvia (blue) - I think of you.

For those of you who are not familiar with the term “sophont”, here is a definition and the origin of the word: an intelligent being, including humans as well as intelligent aliens. “We found an article by Poul Anderson in which he credited Karen Anderson with coining the word: we also received email from Karen confirming this, so the first use in print of this word will be found somewhere amongst the works of Poul Anderson. We would like to verify the usage in the 1966 first edition of the Trouble Twisters, or in any earlier work by Anderson.”
http://www.jessesword.com/sf/view/298

Severus was kind enough to let me watch and take notes when he made his Ratatouille. Our dear Potions master was very exact in how he diced and sliced everything, you do not need to be so precise.

**Severus’ Ratatouille**

1 ½ medium Onions  
½ lb Zucchini/Courgette  
½ lb Eggplant/Aubergine  
½ lb Mushrooms  
¼ lb Green Pepper  
1 lb ripe Tomatoes  
4 Tablespoons Olive Oil  
3 large cloves of Garlic (1 heaping Tbl)  
1 teaspoon Oregano  
1 Tbl Basil  
¼ tsp ground Thyme  
¼-½ tsp Salt  
Pepper to taste

Directions:

Peel and cut the aubergine into ⅛ to 1 inch cubes. Toss with 1 – 2 Tbl of olive oil. Place the oiled aubergine on a baking sheet and roast for 20 to 25 minutes in a 350F degree oven.

While the aubergine is roasting in the oven, dice the onion, halve and slice the courgettes (if the courgettes are large, quarter then slice), slice the mushrooms. Dice the green pepper and tomatoes into ½ – ¾ inch pieces. Mince the garlic.

Place the remaining olive oil in a large pot or Dutch oven, turn heat on high and add the diced onions, and sliced mushrooms. Sauté until the onions begin to become translucent then add the garlic. Sauté for a few more minutes then add the sliced courgette and green pepper. Cook for five minutes then add the diced tomatoes, roasted aubergine, herbs and seasoning.
Simmer on low heat for twenty to thirty minutes covered, then simmer for another twenty minutes uncovered.

Serves four to six people, depending on how much they like ratatouille. Warning, do not consume large quantities of ratatouille in one sitting.
“Sexy Dress, Sexless Night”

Chapter Summary

Though Severus is in love, the rest of his life is not exactly full of wine and roses. Hermione goes dress shopping, and learns that she should not mix alcohol with spite.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Forty-Four
“Sexy Dress, Sexless Night”

Disclaimer: With this disclaimer, I promise to love, honor and respect J.K. Rowling's intellectual property regarding Harry Potter. I will not make any money off of this, and will forsake all profit. I promise to cherish the ship of Severus and Hermione: In sickness and in health, for richer or poorer (poorer, as I am making no money off of this), during fluffy and angsty plots, till the implosion of the Internet do we part. Those whom I have paired in this fic, let no lawyer put asunder.

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A well-polished shoe kept tapping the floor with impatience. However, Severus would not be distracted from his task, so he kept scanning the case full of baked goods in front of him while continuing to ignore Draco's dramatic sighs.

“Just pick something, dammit!” the blond wizard ranted.

“I don't know what I'm in the mood for this morning,” Severus calmly replied, perusing the selection of scones still warm from the oven.

“Then get a brioche, like you always do.”

Severus didn't feel like a brioche that morning. Besides, he always got a brioche, and he was in the mood for something... different. He felt different, and his appetite reflected this change.
The employee behind the counter at the Twenty-Four Blackbird Bakery gave up waiting for Severus to make up his mind, and went back to the kitchen to rotate pans of pastries still baking in the ovens.

His eyes alighted on a selection of hot runic buns. There were twenty-four different symbols in a batch, each Ancient Rune symbolizing a different Nordic god and set of associated meanings. The set of twenty-four had not been broken yet, and Severus had his pick of any symbol. For those who believed in fate, it was considered lucky to have first pick from a batch. Severus considered it merely a sign that he had risen early and gotten there before any other patrons.

“I'll have the Wunjo,” he announced loud enough for the employee to hear and come back to the case to hand Severus a warm bun. The baked good had the Runic symbol of Wunjo, with looked like a Roman letter equivalent to a “P,” marked and baked into the top. The employee recorded their selections in the ledger, and the two wizards left to continue their habitual Friday morning trek to the Ministry of Magic.

But their routine had been changed by Severus' decision to get something different. By that one act, as they spoke to each other before they left the bakery, Severus did not eat a brioche, and instead of taking their usual long-legged strides to reach the Leaky Cauldron before the trickle of morning patrons began, Draco found that he had to stop and wait for Severus who was sauntering, trailing behind like some distracted schoolboy who had forgotten the purpose of his morning walk to school.

The younger wizard knew something was amiss from the moment Severus had fetched him that morning. They had not spoken of their exchange in the lift, and Severus behaved as if he had forgotten about it, which Draco deemed as unlikely as a troll winning the Ministry Award for Outstanding Achievement for Advancement of Magical Knowledge. Draco noticed that Severus would begin to smile and then catch himself before affixing his usual scowl back on his face. The darker wizard was always the more focused and dour of the two, and now it seemed the roles had reversed. Now Draco was the one who seemed short of humor and temper that morning, while Severus was lumbering along like a...

Draco could scarcely believe it, but he would never make mention of it. To do so would risk causing Severus to return to his normal, grounded, sarcastic self and verbally refute, with cunning ambiguity, any remarks Draco might make, no matter how off-handed they were. It was much better to sit back, observe and gather more evidence that Severus was acting like a man who had newly fallen in love. One could collect more irrefutable proof for blackmailing and tossing out the occasional sarcastic gibe this way. Draco had suffered enough of them from Severus when he was reunited with Ginny; it was only fair that Severus receive the same treatment.

Severus’ choice of hot runic bun told Draco that there was more at stake than trying to get a few Potion ingredients out of a certain witch. There was deadly serious business unfolding between
Hermione and the Potions master, involving happiness and more. Draco would have to write to Ginny to figure out what she could deduce from her outing with Hermione tomorrow. Witches loved to talk while they shopped and maybe Hermione would talk enough to give Ginny an idea of what was going on, since Severus seemed to be rather closed-lipped regarding his Thursday night client.

Severus didn't care at the moment that Draco was watching him intently. The young wizard had been postulating for weeks that he was getting rather attached to Hermione. There was no point in denying it was true. And even though he knew he was behaving uncharacteristically, for just this one time Severus wanted to enjoy the morning instead of rushing through it.

The window boxes that adorned the second, third, and fourth story windows were full of lush summer blooms. It was the last flush of flowers before the plants would wither, the summer would slip away to autumn, and the earth would begin its slow decline into winter's rest. Severus used to quietly revel in the glories of the seasons when he had lived at Hogwarts, and he had missed the dramatic displays provided by the Scottish countryside. Wizarding London provided very little in the way of experiencing nature, and Severus was not prone to mingling with Muggles in the large public parks. So this morning he would observe nature in her simplest form: a few geraniums that spilled over a window box and trailed down the side of the building. The garish pinks and scarlet reds stood out in stark contrast to the gray stone walls.

Draco was still eating his croissant when he quipped, “Who are you, and what have you done with Snape?”

“You usually deliver much better lines than that, Draco.”

“Well, I hope you are done sulking alone in your office, as Lavender has been unbearable these past few days. She is truly on a tear this week, and I will not be the one to bear the brunt of her attitude any longer. She can go snap at you, so I don't have to listen to her anymore!” Draco raved, his arms gesticulating his frustration.

“And just what has got Miss Brown so upset this time?” Severus asked, thanking his good fortune that he had not spent any time in her company over the past few days, judging from Draco's descriptions.

“I don't know, as she wouldn't say when I confronted her. But I did catch her mumbling something about 'having cake and eating it too, 'men are two-faced dogs,' and the like,” Draco informed him.

Severus meditated on the matter in silence as they finished their walk to the Leaky Cauldron.
When both well-cloaked wizards emerged from one of the many fireplaces in the Ministry of Magic, Severus scanned the atrium to see who was about. The fireplace next to the one they had emerged from roared to life. Kingsley stepped out into the atrium and spied the pair of wizards.

Severus and Draco both waited for Kingsley and fell into step behind the Auror, silently following him to his office.

Once the door was closed and the room secured, the tall, black Auror collapsed into his chair with a relieved sigh. “I'm sorry I'm running late this morning; there is still a lot of stuff to sort out at home,” Shacklebolt explained.

“Really?” Severus asked, trying to be conversational. “What has happened?”

“Oh, I guess I didn't tell you. I was separated from Amphegoria for a short while, but we have decided that I should move back home. We’re working out a few things,” he admitted, then quickly changed the topic.

“Let's get this over with, so we can get on with other matters that need discussing,” the Auror announced with the same level of disgust that Severus and Draco felt regarding their weekly pat question-and-answer script.

Severus wondered if this was the proof he was looking for in connecting Kingsley to Miss Brown, finding it to be a rather strong coincidence. Maybe Kingsley going back to his wife really was the source of his employer's bad mood, as described by Draco.

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Hermione woke to find that Ron was already up. She could hear him in the other room. Padding into the kitchen, she saw her husband going over that morning's Owl Post.

“Anything of interest?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah, a couple of things. Mum wants to throw together a little surprise get-together for Ginny's birthday this Sunday, on the tenth. And there is an invite to a dinner party tomorrow night. It's from William's wife, Christie.”
Hermione's face fell when she heard who was throwing the dinner party. “If she expects us to come—” she began to rail, but was cut off by Ron.

“We're going. William and I are good friends, and—”

“Such good friends that his wife couldn't bother to invite us to a dinner party before? Did you know that the only other time she has ever bothered to invite us to one of her parties was when she met Harry, that time after he and Ginny came to a game and she discovered we were good friends? Only then did she invite us, but only because of Harry,” Hermione complained loudly.

“Why didn't we go then?” Ron queried.

“Because Harry, Ginny, and I were all pretty disgusted with the way Christie was sucking up to Harry,” she explained.

“Well, the invitation does not include Harry. This is because William and I are mates,” he retorted. “Why do you have to try and sabotage something that does not revolve around you?”

“I'm not sabotaging anything, Ron. I just find it so convenient that after all these years, you finally get an invitation to dinner after you make first string, get your picture on the cover of *Quidditch Weekly*, and land a very lucrative endorsement deal! After Christie and her bint sidekick, Nicole, have pointed out very snootily that their husbands were rich, playing first string, and were famous, then made additional disparaging remarks about your salary. I find it ironic that now she wants us to socialize with her and their friends. Before she acted as if I wasn't fit to serve her own house-elves, and now she invites us to dinner. HA!” she barked sardonically. Hermione had worked up into such a state by then that she banged the teakettle about before filling it with water and placing it on the cooker.

“I want to go. I've had no problems with Christie before, and William is a mate,” Ron told his wife firmly. As Hermione opened her mouth to refuse, Ron added, “I go to counseling because you wanted us to. Come to the dinner party because I want to. Please, as a favor for me.”

Hermione was robbed of her retort by Ron's sudden bout of reason and politeness. Rooted to the floor, Hermione watched the steam rise from the spout of the teakettle starting with a few curling tendrils to eventually become a forceful jet, and still she could not think of a good excuse as to why they shouldn't go, other than that Christie was a complete and utter bitch.
As she poured the hot water into her mug, Hermione acquiesced. “All right. I'll do this for you since you asked so nicely. But if you expect me to put up with her insults—”

“Don't go to this dinner party expecting the worst, 'Mione. At least try and have a good time,” he begged. “And since Ginny is taking you dress shopping tomorrow, you should probably pick up something a little extra nice to wear for the dinner party.”

“I don't know, Ron. I feel uncomfortable enough as it is spending a lot of money on one good dress for our anniversary. To buy two… and you haven't even renegotiated your contract yet… I don’t know. I don’t want to waste money,” Mrs. Weasley rationalized.

“I will not go to that party with my wife looking like a frump!” Ron exclaimed.

“A frump?!? I do not dress like a frump!”

“Yes, you do. All the time!”

“I do not; and there is nothing wrong with simple classic clothes. Those trendy fashions are a waste of money; they are out of style before you even leave the store! I won't waste good money on something I can only wear once,” Hermione justified.

“Well, for Merlin’s sake, don't pick brown, black, or dark blue,” Ron barked at his wife irritably. “Buy something with a little flash or style.”

And with his parting words, he left the kitchen and headed off for some early morning training without another word.

Hermione was silently seething over Ron's remarks about her looking like a frump. She got the distinct impression that he didn't want her to buy a nice dress so much that she deserved it, but rather to make himself look good to the Kidds and their friends when they showed up.

If she was going to a dinner party tomorrow night, and was going to get dressed up, Hermione knew she needed a little more than just a new dress to look presentable.
Reaching for a new sheaf of parchment from a stack Hermione kept in the kitchen for Ron to use to reply to his fans, she jotted down a note asking Ginny for additional help, and sent the missive off with Pigwidgeon.

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'Be a little extra careful. Hmph!'

Severus thought on Kingsley's cryptic warning to keep his nose and wand clean. This only meant that surprise inspections were right around the corner, and Miss Brown still had not been able to get the Ministry to reconnect the Floo in Macnair's former residence.

Two wizards, both tall but completely different in their coloring as night and day, made their way to work after their weekly Friday parole meeting at the Ministry of Magic.

To keep his mind off of impending doom, Severus asked Draco a question that had been circulating in his mind since Hermione had mentioned her strange job offer. “Since you intend on doing all the advertising and marketing for all these new specialized potions coming out soon, where else will they be sold, besides apothecaries?”

“I wish I could tell you, Severus,” Draco answered, “but I can't. I'm under orders from Lavender not to talk to anyone, including you, about this.”

“Even me? But I'm working on the damn things!” Severus snarled at the absurdity of it all.

“Talk to Lavender. That's all I can say.”

Severus was set to hex someone by the time he reached Miss Brown's office. He didn't even bother knocking as he slammed the doors open to her office and strode in, radiating unquestionable authority.

“And just what is this business you mean by instructing Draco that he cannot inform me of where you will be peddling these damn sex Potions that I have developed?” Severus hissed venomously.

Lavender Brown was sitting in her tall-backed office chair with her back to Severus. She swiveled the chair around to glare at Severus with equal rancor. “Me, me, me! Is that all you men ever think about?” the witch spat. “I will not allow my plans to get overturned by loose lips and renegade Potions masters! You consulted with Hermione about the male enhancement potion without
notifying me beforehand, then dropped that little bomb in my lap about the royalties later. All I need is for you to casually mention some of my other plans to that witch, and then she goes and starts mentioning things to certain people, and then those parties will wonder how she came upon such information. This is a secret deal in the works for something bigger.”

“Then you could have just told me that it was proprietary information to the company, and I would have kept my mouth shut. I was a spy for the Order before you were an impulse in your father's libido! I think I can keep a secret as simple as whatever you are trying to keep from me!” Severus countered with a scowl.

“I thought you didn't care how or where these potions will be sold, ‘as long as it sells and you get your cut’.” A strand of hair came loose from her coiffure as Lavender jostled her head about, as she threw back Severus' very own words at him mockingly.

“I am just making sure you are reaching maximum market saturation potential when you launch this new line.”

Miss Brown found herself to be momentarily speechless. When she finally spoke, she said very calmly, “Why Severus, I didn't think you were ever paying attention to all that marketing jargon, much less cared to absorb it.”

“Of course I paid attention, I just don't particularly care to talk about it. Anything that helps line my vault with more gold is of interest to me. And now about this business about a larger deal at work?” Severus prompted his employer.

“I have your word that this is not for repeating to anyone else, except Draco, who already knows?”

“Of course you have my word.”

“I have a partnership deal going on with some old business partners of mine to open a shop catering to the sensually-minded witch,” Lavender said with a bit of smugness. “Besides apothecaries, these sex potions we have been developing will be sold in this store that will feature many erotic items for sale.”

“Let me guess,” Severus said dryly. “You'll be selling dildos, vibrators, erotic lingerie, and kinky sex costumes.”
Lavender bowed her head in deference to Severus' ability to be very quick with his deduction. “Very astute!”

“Not really. Hermione told me what would be sold at the store, as one of the twins offered her the job of managing the store,” Severus explained with a deadpan delivery. When Miss Brown's mouth fell open, he said with saccharine-sweet false surprise, “Oh, let me guess who these ‘old business partners’ are.” He threw back with the same mockery Miss Brown had given to him earlier, “Fred and George Weasley?”

Severus savored the moment as the light turned on and the gears in his employer’s mind began to smoke furiously.

The silence was broken when she finally screamed, “WHAT?!”

“And Hermione has also informed me that Trevor Spawn's pending apprenticeship is now null and void,” Severus continued, as if Miss Brown had not uttered a word. “Though I can tell you that between a managerial position selling venereal paraphernalia and a Potions apprenticeship, I think I can speak for her and tell you she’d rather take the latter. So there is no reason to panic that she will peddle your wares, and you may merely deal with the fact that she will help research and develop them instead.”

At this point, Severus would have risen from his chair to leave the room while Miss Brown continued to sit there looking completely stunned, but since he was standing, he merely turned on his heel and headed toward the door.

“I'm not done discussing matters with you yet,” Lavender announced acidly.

Severus did not care to have that tone taken with him. He stopped and pulled himself up to his full imposing height before turning around to fix the young witch with a harsh glare.

“I am not a servant to be summoned or dismissed in such a fashion. Think hard before you address me in such a tone again, Miss Brown,” he warned her. Severus took pleasure in the fact that Miss Brown seemed to recoil a little from his poisonous tone.

They had enjoyed an adequate working relationship over the years, but it seemed that since Hermione had been added to the mix, that association was coming under strain.
“I want to discuss Mrs. Waters,” Lavender said plainly.

“What about her?”

“I received an owl from her earlier this week saying that she no longer feels the need to rely upon you for comfort and is ready to take the necessary action you encouraged her to do,” Lavender ground out, trying to keep a civil tone. “I do not appreciate the fact that you have been getting rid of your clients without warning, Severus. Now you are down to just two clients a week.”

Severus inspected the curio niche next to him, and inspected it for dust in an indolent manner. “No,” he contradicted her silkily, “I have three: Miss Anne, Mrs. Paxton, and Hermione.”

“You have only two paying clients, Severus,” she corrected him. “So therefore you only have two clients on the books. With Moody taking a keen interest in my employment of you, I need to have something on record to justify your lodging and food; or would you rather I put Hermione on the books once more, only to come under scrutiny once you flee? Then she can explain to the world’s most conspiracy theory fixated Auror that she was not providing you Potions ingredients, and that she just happens to conveniently work in such a department where she could obtain them without record of purchase.”

Severus sat and stewed as he digested the implications of this predicament. He mentally kicked himself for not considering the set of books Lavender kept regarding who saw which gigolo, in order to cover her own arse with proof that certain employees worked for their own keep; he did not want Hermione to go to Azkaban for doing the right thing.

“All right. But no more witches who want a fuck,” Severus stipulated, then realized his demand after he had made it. ‘If Malfoy can make that demand after he realized he was in love with Ginny, then so can I.’

Lavender rolled her eyes up to the ceiling and sighed, “All right. But that will be harder to find. Currently, all the witches I know who might be interested are not necessarily interested in conversation only.” Fixing the Potions master with a look, she asked, “Why the sudden aversion to clients that require a certain level of intimacy? I know Mrs. Paxton hasn't asked you for a tussle in your bed for a while now, so that means you are just taking care of Miss Anne. One shag a week? For a man in your prime? And all those batches of male enhancement potion? How ever shall you test them all?” she asked with exaggerated innocence.

“Draco has offered to do some testing,” Severus replied coolly, not liking Miss Brown's implicating tone.
“But how can you compare Draco's observations objectively to your own... personal testing methods?” she asked. “There are six batches, and considering that since testing has begun you've only seen Miss Anne once, just how have you been testing the other batches, Severus? Is there something going on between you and Hermione Weasley?”

“Just conversation and dance lessons,” he replied with truthful confidence, though even if there was something more going on, he would easily lie about it to keep his employer's nose out of this one piece of his own personal business. If Severus would have an affair with Hermione, it would not be while he was on the clock for Miss Brown.

Lavender swiveled her chair so that she was facing away from Severus and the door. “Just wondering. I will let you know when I get a new non-shagging client for you, though it may take a week or so. I may have to wait until my woman's intuition kicks in and I find the right candidate.”

There seemed little left to discuss, and Severus did not want to stick around to be dismissed, so he departed. As he was closing the door, the wizard caught sight of an owl delivering a large bouquet of red roses as it arrived at Miss Brown's window. There was a card attached, but that was all he could observe before he shut the door. Later on he would have to stop by Miss Brown's office and see if the card was casually lying about so that he might glance at it, and determine if the flowers were an act of contrition of Kingsley for going back to his wife.

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When Saturday rolled around, Hermione was still vexed over Ron's comments about the way she dressed. This, from a wizard who thought that a paisley suit with a damask stripe looked pretty snappy. Perhaps Mrs. Weasley should not have gone shopping while she was still angry at her husband; maybe then she would not have bought that dress.

Hermione had overslept. By the time she woke up, Ron was already gone and she realized that Ginny was probably already expecting her. She rushed through her shower and dressed in the first clean, non-wrinkled garments she came across in her wardrobe.

Arriving at the Potter residence, Hermione found Harry was busy answering a few urgent Owl Posts, and Ginny was finishing her morning tea.

To her relief, Hermione was actually a bit early, and Dobby prepared some tea and toast with jam for her.
Ginny bid farewell to her husband with a peck on his forehead before the two witches used the Floo to go directly to Madame Maurelle Mandel's House of Haute Couture.

The two witches emerged from the fireplace into a grand lobby decorated in turn-of-the-century Parisian Art Nouveau style. The older witch suddenly felt under dressed, and rather... frumpy.

“Maybe I should have dressed a little nicer,” Hermione said out of the side of her mouth.

“Nonsense!” Ginny stated. “This is one of the few places where they don't judge you by what you wear when coming here. You should see what some witches wear when they come shopping here. One would think that they couldn't afford to even walk through the door of this place, until you see them drop a couple bags of Galleons on a dress,” the redhead informed her friend with quiet confidentiality. “This is one of the few places where you don't have to act like a stuck-up old bag to get good service; however, to get in the door, you have to be recommended by a regular customer. Fortunately for you, I'm one.”

This was good news to Hermione. Not only was she going to get decent service despite how she was dressed, but she would not have to act like a bitch to get any of the sales staff to pay attention to her.

“And who was your reference?” Hermione asked, wondering how Ginny got her introduction.

“Draco.”

“Malfoy?!” Hermione hissed in a frantic whisper. “Are you mad? What if someone talks and then Harry finds out?”

Keeping an equally quiet voice, Ginny replied somberly, “That was before the decree.”

Just as Ginny dropped the topic, a very petite witch with an elaborate chignon piled on top of her head emerged from behind the carved wooden divider depicting the goddess Diana hunting by moonlight, accompanied by a deer.

“Ginny! Ma chérie!” Madam Maurelle greeted Mrs. Potter.
Ginny leaned forward and exchanged a press of cheek and kiss with the tiny witch.

“Maurelle, I would like to introduce my very dear friend, Hermione Weasley. This is her first time here, and she needs your special help,” Ginny announced.

“If she is so special, then why haven't you brought her here before?” the elfish woman with black hair and rich brown skin teased Ginny, before going up to Hermione and rising up onto her toes to greet Hermione in the same manner.

Hermione easily remembered the customary greeting from her trip to France, and was pleased to see the exchange for Muggles and wizards was the same.

“A pleasure to meet you,” Hermione said, feeling very welcome.

“Please! Come inside! I have a salon ready for you; everything has been taken care of. This way, s'il vous plaît,” Madame Maurelle requested, directing her guests forward with a sweep of her arm.

Hermione found something warm and reassuring in the proprietor's presence. Perhaps it was that the French witch reminded her of Professor Flitwick in her cheerful and enthusiastic manner, and her diminutive size.

All three witches strolled into a room prepared for everything they would need for a morning of shopping. Ginny sat down on the overstuffed sofa as Madame Maurelle whipped out her wand and began waving it all over Hermione's body, taking down measurements. A floating piece of parchment and quill took down notes rattled off in French.

Madam Maurelle made a noise to signify that she was satisfied and swept out of the room in a flurry of activity, the quill still scratching away at the floating piece of parchment that followed her like a faithful familiar.

Hermione settled herself into a comfortable Bergère chair next to where Ginny was seated. As she plucked a Linzer tart off the trolley laden with tea and other comestibles, Hermione queried, “So what happens next?”

“In a few minutes this room will be filled with every dress in your size that will flatter your figure and your coloring. Madame Maurelle is very thorough, so that you do not waste your time on
dresses that do not look good on you. If you look good, then so does she. She has such a reputation, that's why she only takes new clients by introduction of her regular ones,” Ginny replied.

“Why haven't you brought me here before?” the older witch asked, trying not to sound hurt that she only just now learned of such a dress shop.

“That's because you would have balked at the prices before,” Ginny said simply. “Let's face it, before Ron's promotion to first string, you couldn't afford this place. If you have to ask the price, you can't afford it.”

Hermione made a small “O” with her mouth, as she comprehended why the service was so warm and friendly.

“I wonder if I brought enough with me,” Hermione worried aloud.

“Maurelle has one of the few establishments that has an agreement with Gringotts that your signature on the bill allows the goblins to enter your vault and withdraw enough money to pay it. I believe the Grand Royal Supper Club has the same arrangement, as well.” Ginny flicked her wand and levitated the pot to pour a cup of tea before the cup and saucer levitated over to her waiting hands.

Just as Hermione was going to launch into questions about why more businesses didn't have a wizarding equivalent of a checking account system instead of making most everyone rely on carrying around heaps of coins, several racks of dresses with matching cloaks, shoes, and accessories suddenly appeared, lining the walls of the private salon room.

Ginny rose from her seat and started looking at the dresses. “Now starts the fun part,” she announced gleefully, like a child let loose in Honeydukes with unlimited pocket money. Plucking a forest green silk dress off the far rack, she said, “Try this on!”

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So maybe it wasn't her anger that pushed Hermione to buy the dress she would wear to the dinner party later that night. It probably had to do with the two bottles of wine Hermione and Ginny consumed while the brunette witch tried on dress after dress.

There were so many dresses, and all of them were so flattering on Hermione, that she had set several aside. It was from this pile that she would select a dress to wear for her anniversary. But as the second bottle was drained of its contents, Hermione still had not found a dress she that wanted
to wear to the Kidds' dinner party. Everything was too formal or too casual, and Hermione wanted to wear something that was neither plain nor ostentatious. It was a delicate balance of looking dressed to kill, and not dressed to overindulgence.

It was when Hermione drained the last of her glass and found that there was no more wine open that Ginny came upon the dress.

“Ah, this is the one, Hermione. Wear this one tonight, and Ron won't be able to keep his hands off of you,” Ginny said as she pulled out a long black number with long sleeves.

Hermione squinted, as everything looked just a little fuzzy. “That won't work. Ron made a snide comments about no browns, dark blues, and blacks,” she said, mimicking the tone Ron had used with her earlier that day.

“Just trust me and try this on,” Ginny said, trying to convince her friend.

“All right,” Hermione muttered and levered herself off the couch. She discovered, gravity was indeed a bit arbitrary after drinking so much, since it seemed to have intensified a bit since they had finished the first bottle of wine.

Taking the dress from Ginny's grasp, she looked at the front and shook her head sadly. “This is way too conservative. The neckline is up at the collarbone, the sleeves completely cover the arms, Ron will definitely give me hell if I spend good money on this after he told me to get something with a little flash,” Hermione confessed.

“Look at the back,” Ginny urged her.

Hermione turned the garment around and blinked. “Where's the rest of it?”

Looking at the garment one more time, Hermione realized that this dress took the term “backless” to a new level.

“Try it on, what could it hurt?” Ginny egged her on.
Hermione was certain there were charms on Madam Maurelle's dresses to prevent witches as drunk as Hermione and Ginny from tearing them. After dropping her dressing gown, Hermione shimmied herself through the skirt portion only to stand there with her torso exposed while she tried slipping her arms through the sleeves. The sleeves were the only thing keeping the dress up.

Turning around in the mirror to examine herself, Hermione thought the front of the floor-length dress looked stunning. It was elegant and understated, but as she turned around in the three-way mirror, she got an eyeful of her back completely exposed. The back of the garment dropped below Hermione's waist so that it scooped just above the crack of her arse.

“I don't think it's supposed to go this low,” Hermione commented, wondering how she was going to wear tights with a dress like this.

“Let's ask Maurelle,” Ginny replied.

Mrs. Potter rang a bell, and the petite proprietor swept into the room only to stop and gasp in surprise. “That dress was made for you, my dear!” she sighed breathlessly.

“Is it supposed to go down that far below my waist?” Hermione asked.

“But of course! Not only does it show the small of the back, but the lower back as well. No man will be able to resist you once you wear this!” Madame Maurelle exclaimed.

“But how do I keep it staying up?” Mrs. Weasley asked, pulling at the left shoulder that kept trying to slip off.

“Sticking charms, my dear.” The small witch moved around Hermione, tapping her wand to various places along the edge of the fabric to secure the dress in place. “Now you could play Quidditch and that dress would not fall off.”

Hermione doubted she would be able to wear such a revealing garment in public, much less a Quidditch match. It certainly felt a little drafty with the dress on.

“Ah, you forgot the cloak that goes with it,” Madame Maurelle noted and fetched the accompanying piece from the rack. She placed the matching black silk cloak over Hermione's shoulders. “This dress is the latest fashion, and this cloak is one of the newest fashion trends.” The
cloak only came to the middle of Hermione's thighs.

“Should the cloak be this short?” Hermione liked how the ensemble went together. It could even pass for a Muggle evening dress that she could wear with her mother to the theater. At least the cloak completely covered the fact that her back was completely exposed to the elements.

“For evening dresses, it's the new rage in Paris, especially for summertime. If you wear this tonight, I guarantee every witch at the party will go out and buy a half-cloak. Did you try it with the shoes?” the shop owner asked.

Hermione slipped on the matching black satin heels and sighed. She looked great, and for once she thought her legs looked long and slender, not short and spindly.

“Well? You are going to buy this, right?” Ginny asked her. “You have to buy this dress, Hermione. You look fabulous!”

“What about tights?” Hermione asked.

“Voilà! Stockings,” Maurelle replied, whipping out a black pair from a box located in a hidden drawer along the wall.

Slipping the thigh-high stockings onto her leg, Hermione ran her hand along the weave and loved the silky feel of them against her skin. With the exception of her hair and lack of make-up, Hermione had to admit to herself that she looked pretty damned good as she examined the whole outfit.

“Aw, come on, Hermione. You have to buy this dress. Please?” Ginny pleaded.

“Your friend has good taste,” Madam Maurelle mentioned to Ginny, hoping to influence Hermione's decision.

‘Ron will kill me. Well, not kill me. What is the worst he could do?’ Hermione internally debated with herself. ‘He might lose his temper. But so what? Like he's never done that before. He did say he didn't want me to look like a frump, and to buy something stylish. Well, this is certainly stylish. More like elegant. I just wish Severus could see me tonight all dressed up.’
That thought sent her inebriated mind into a dream scenario involving her showing up at the Kidds' party on Severus' arm, and introducing him as her ex-Death Eater lover. She could imagine him hexing Christie Kidd for looking at her wrong. Visions of a little pile of smoldering ash where Christie once stood filled her mind. Hermione found the thought so amusing she started to giggle.

“You all right?” Ginny asked.

“Yes, I'll take it,” Hermione said on impulse, not caring in her current state of mind if Ron had a fit or not. “I'll have to learn that charm if I'm going to go bra-less, which I'll have to for this dress.”

“And have you decided on a dress for your anniversary?” Madam Maurelle asked.

After looking through the ones Hermione had set aside, Ginny and Madam Maurelle helped her pick a rich red sleeveless, floor-length dress. Once shoes, a matching cloak and accessories were picked out, the proprietor disappeared out the door with Hermione's purchases and to tally the bill, while Hermione dressed.

Once dressed, Hermione glanced at the clock and suddenly realized that if she didn't leave soon, she was going to miss the opening of Ron's game.

“Damn! I've got to get going, and you still haven't taught me that charm to hold everything in place without a bra,” Hermione noted with regret, rushing about to make sure she had everything before heading off to Chudley Stadium.

“Don't worry,” her redheaded friend assured her. “When I come over tonight to help you with your hair, as a dry run for your anniversary, I'll teach you the charm then.”

“Thanks!” Hermione gave Ginny a hug of appreciation for all her help.

Madam Maurelle came back with the two dresses and matching cloaks packaged up in large gold boxes, with smaller gold boxes containing the two pairs of shoes and accessories. “Would you like to take these with you, or shall I have a house-elf deliver them to your home?” the dusky witch asked.
“Oh! If you could have them delivered home, I would be grateful,” Hermione answered, dreading to see the bill that was drifting through the door ready for her signature.

“No problem at all, 'Ermione.”

Mrs. Weasley was presented the bill, and upon seeing the total restrained a strangled gasp that threatened to escape her lips. After she signed her name, the paper began folding itself up until it was just a tiny scrap of paper, and disappeared with a tiny “pop.” Madam Maurelle left the private salon after a round of effusive farewells and promises from Ginny and Hermione to return for a yet unannounced ball that the Ministry would be throwing in October.

Hermione was just about to leave when Ginny called her back over to the tea trolley. On the aforementioned trolley lay two vials of Sobering Solution. The older witch thought it was very prudent for Madam Maurelle to provide such a service to her customers, no doubt so that the husbands would think their wives had not been drunk off their arses to spend that amount of money on clothing. Ron would not accuse Hermione of being drunk if he ever saw the bill, but he would say she had gone mad. Hopefully, if she looked good enough in her new dresses, he would never ask how much they had cost.

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Severus sat in the kitchen procrastinating. He knew he should be getting ready for Miss Anne's imminent arrival, but could find little cause to motivate himself to get up, shower, and dress in clean clothes. At least he should freshen up, as he was sure he smelled of the onions that he had sautéed with the pork he had eaten for dinner.

Groaning with resignation and a small amount of reluctance, the raven-haired wizard rose from the table and went to the bathroom. He quickly completed his ablutions so that his person and breath did not reek.

Just as he was buttoning his cuffs, he heard Miss Anne knock.

Severus put on his Bauta mask, as he did not care to plaster on a convincing smile tonight for his client. In truth, he just wanted to spend the evening with a good book and a snifter of brandy, rather than the strawberry blond vixen. Even with more of his nights available recently, the Potions master was still behind on his reading.

He answered the door and ushered Miss Anne inside, his voice lacking the usual warmth and sincerity. Once the door was closed, Miss Anne threw herself at Severus with gusto, whinging about how she'd been itching for a good scratch from him all week long.
Normally, Severus would have happily obliged and started offering a selection of sexual situations to appease her appetite, but his libido did not rise to the occasion. Her presence was already tiresome, and he just wanted her gone. Remembering Miss Brown admonishing him about severing business relations with his clients, and how he was already short one client a week to keep up a believable front with the Ministry about his source of income, Severus accepted the fact that he was either going to have to fuck Miss Anne or find some other way to keep the nymphomaniacal nuisance amused, or at least quiet.

'If she was asleep, at least she wouldn't be bothering me,' thought Severus.

With a wave of his wand, he darkened the room and seductively asked his client to remove her clothing and lie down on his bed. He excused himself to fetch some items in his bathroom.

Rummaging through his cabinets, he found his bottle of essence of sopophorous bean that he used in his tea for sleepless nights, and his bottle of lavender oil. Summoning Marf into the bathroom so that he would not be involved in the handling of the ingredients per se, Severus instructed Marf to pour a measure of almond oil into a smaller container, then added two drops of the sopophorous bean essence and three drops of the lavender oil. He was just making a little massage oil for a client, but knowing Moody, he couldn't even be involved with mixing more than sugar with his tea to keep his record clean. He was pushing the limit of what he was getting away with as it was working for Miss Brown.

Upon returning, Severus suggested a little sensual massage to get Miss Anne relaxed and in the mood.

He started with her shoulders and back. By the time he reached her lower back, Miss Anne was snoring soundly and would be out for a few hours. Hopefully she would wake and not demand that Severus rend her sexual services. But how many weeks could he keep this up? Miss Anne was a witch with an almost insatiable carnal appetite. How many weeks could he get by with putting her to sleep before she started demanding that he shag her? It was a pity that he couldn't alter her memory to make her think Severus had shagged her, as that would make life so much easier.

Life would be a lot easier if Severus didn't love Hermione, but life would certainly not seem as rich as it had become lately. The dinners with Hermione were only one small aspect of her in his life. The conversation was intense, and on more than one occasion he had found himself shaking from the intensity of thought provoked by their debates. Hermione had made him tremble with stimulation and enthusiasm. Of course he had kept a bit of intellectual detachment in place, so as not to appear too emotional during their talks, but he had noted the rare occasion when his hands could not keep still.
Severus looked back down at the softly snoring witch and hoped she would not demand that he shag her when she awoke. He could do it if pressed, but his heart wasn't in it; Hermione was in possession of that particular organ.

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The Kidds were fashionable people who set trends, as well as followed them. The party did not start until eight o'clock, and dinner would not be served until nine. Hermione and Ron were both used to eating earlier, and so by the time they arrived they were both very hungry.

Hermione had stayed so late at Madame Maurelle's dress shop that she wound up eating the food available for sale at the Cannons’ game for her lunch. The Cornish pasties were not that good, and Mrs. Weasley threw hers away after eating only half of it out of desperation. By the time the game was over and Hermione got back home, there was no time for her to snack, as she needed to shower so Ginny could begin working on her hair and make-up.

Ron waited until the last minute before jumping into the shower. Hermione could not complain about his timing, as he wouldn't be able to see her dress without the cloak until after they were already at the Kidds' and he could not exactly demand in front of everyone that she go back home and put something different on... or maybe he would.

Slipping the dress on, Hermione prayed that Ron would not come out of the bathroom until she was completely dressed and waiting in the other room. She put the sticking charms on, slipped on her stockings and applied a sticking charm to them as well to keep them up, and then cast the charm Ginny showed her to her breasts to keep them up and in place so they would not sway about as she moved.

Dressed and with all the charms cast to keep everything in place, Hermione moved about and discovered the bra-less charm really did quite a good job, though she still fell somewhat naked without a bra on. Looking at herself in the mirror before she put her cloak on, she couldn't believe she was actually going to be wearing such a revealing dress. Granted, she looked great in the black silk dress and it made her look very womanly, but she dreaded Ron's reaction. The enchanted mirror, which would have normally made some sort of comment, was abnormally quiet. It was most probably still afraid that if it said anything, Hermione would hold good on her promise to send it to the bottom of the Thames.

“What was I thinking?” she asked herself. 'I must have been drunk at the time to buy this dress, as I certainly would not have bought this while sober.’

A mental vision of dancing with Severus while wearing the dress came to mind, and she shuddered as she speculated how delicious it would feel to have his hands on her bare back.
“Down, girl,” she chastised herself.

Grabbing her matching cloak, she put it on and waited silently for Ron in the living room.

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Hermione and Ron Apparated back to their flat. There was a moment of silence before they both started talking at the same time.

“What were you doing buying a dress like that?!?”

“I never want to be forced to endure that stupid, stuck-up bint and her snotty friends for an entire evening ever again!”

They let the other's statements sink in before answering each other.

“You said you wanted me to buy something stylish, Ron. Well, it is the latest fashion. Your own sister told me to buy it, and helped me put it on tonight. You wanted me as some piece of meat to show off on your arm like some damn trophy wife, so I think I rather fit the part in this dress. So I don't know what you are complaining about,” Hermione retorted.

Mrs. Weasley was feeling very resentful over how the whole evening went down like a lead feather in her book. Ron had acted like she was there to sit like a good little wife and not engage in scintillating discussion at the dinner table. He seemed chafed by the fact that she had tried to steer the conversation to more interesting subjects while he kept on trying to counteract her attempts at adult conversation by bringing up Quidditch, at which point all the males at the table would erupt into excited chatter and dominate the subject of discussion.

“I did no such thing!” Ron countered. “I did not treat you like some trophy wife! You could have been dressed more appropriately, though, instead of prancing about half-naked in that dress!”

“It's a backless dress, Ron!”

“I can see that!” Ron bellowed sarcastically.

“Most of the other witches at the party seemed to like it,” Hermione pointed out. It seemed
Hermione's dress was the only thing that the other witches at the party had liked about her.

“Yeah, only the ones whose husbands’ eyes weren't glued to your backside the rest of the evening!” Ron remarked hotly

“Oh, and your eyes were glued to Nicole Stewart's cleavage the whole time her husband's head was turned,” Hermione insisted with irritation.

“She had those two big buttons on her dress! How could I not notice that?” Ron said defensively.

“Those weren't buttons, those were your eyes!” Hermione fumed, angered by Ron's hypocrisy. “If you ever get another invite from the Kidds again, go without me. I will not be left to suffer those insipid witches while the ‘men retire to the library.’ All those other witches could talk about were children, fashion, and the latest gossip! Unbearable!”

“Unbearable because it wasn't intellectual enough?” Ron asked snidely. “You could have just been polite and just smiled and nodded. But no! During dinner you kept on bringing up the Goblin Rebellion and the Goblins' monopoly on the wizarding banking industry. Then there was the moment you brought up that play, ‘Merlin and Morgana: The Lost Years.’ I mean, what was that all about?”

“I thought a little cultural discussion would not be out of line, but it seems I was wrong. Are you happy now?” Hermione asked, her voice rising in pitch with her temper. “I admit I was wrong: wrong to assume that anyone at that dinner party had seen what is considered a classic play in the wizarding world!”

“Well, it can't be that much of a classic if only one out of twelve dinner guests has seen it,” Ron needleled her.

Hermione huffed in anger and began stomping about the living room. Tired of walking in her satin heels, she removed one of them and chucked it at her husband's head.

Ron caught the flying shoe with precision, as if he was catching a Quaffle. He dropped the shoe and marched off to the bedroom.

Still in a tantrum over her husband's attitude and the evening's events, Hermione paid little
attention to what Ron was doing until she was assaulted by a pile of bedclothes and her pillow.

“What's this?” she asked, looking at the pile of blankets on the floor.

“You're smart. You figure it out!” Ron yelled before slamming the door and locking it with a series of spells.

Hermione looked at the door and then once more to the heap on the floor. She couldn't believe it. 'He's kicking me out of the bed!'

Mrs. Weasley could have easily undid the spells Mr. Weasley placed on the door, but she was certain he might just physically carry her out of the bedroom and drop her on the couch, which would not only be humiliating, but more infuriating. Considering their volatile attitudes at the moment, it might not be wise to push the matter. It might result in a slew of hexes being cast, and the night ending with both of them at St. Mungo's.

Over the years she had kicked Ron out of bed a few times, and she had wondered if he would ever do the same to her. Her question now answered and her pride stinging, Hermione undressed and crawled onto the couch to go to sleep. She placed a sheet on the couch to lie on and a thin sheet over herself, as the night was fairly muggy.

'If I had brought Severus with me to that party, we could have spent the whole night talking with each other.' She snorted to herself. 'Severus would not have gone to that dinner party in the first place. I would have had a better time at his flat.'

Hermione sighed. She remembered that Severus said that his Sunday, Tuesday and Saturday nights were not available if she wanted to stop by in the evening. Her mind began to wonder if the witch who was at his flat that night came to see Severus for conversation or sex. It made her a little depressed just thinking of Severus in bed with another witch, holding her and lying with her.

Severus' vocation was a fact Hermione had come to grips with, but it still didn't help that she suddenly felt a pang of jealousy that she would have to share Severus with other witches. She wanted to be selfish and have Severus all to herself. Maybe if Ron made enough money, she'd spite her husband and spend it all on keeping Severus so that he didn't need to see any other witches for money. It was a foolish thought, but one worth entertaining for the fantasy factor alone: cuckolding Ron and spending his money on her lover.
Hermione hoped that her anniversary night was going to go much better than the dinner party. It seemed pretty evident that nothing was keeping her and Ron together other than marital obligation, but she would wait as she had promised herself.

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Severus noticed Miss Anne was beginning to stir. Putting down his book, he yawned and stood to stretch like a cat.

Sauntering over to the bed, he sat down next to her stirring form and stroked her back. “Have a nice nap?”

Miss Anne yawned with a snort, and rubbed her eyes like a sleepy child. “What time is it?” she asked groggily.

“It's one in the morning,” Severus informed her.

“What? How could you let me sleep that late?” the strawberry blond witch asked in a slightly panicked voice, as she bolted upright in bed. “I was supposed to meet some friends by midnight! Oh my God, I hope they are still there!” Miss Anne rambled to herself. She bolted from Severus' bed and began hastily putting on her clothes.

“I'm sorry,” Severus said with convincing sincerity. “Had I known, I would have woken you up earlier, but you fell asleep so quickly that I figured you must have needed the rest.”

“Damn!” she swore under her breath, as she fumbled with her zipper. “And I still didn't get a good shag in. Next week you'll have to make it up to me,” she said casually, demanding a rain check for an extra sexual interlude. “Gotta run,” Miss Anne announced before running out the door and slamming it shut when she left, not bothering to wait for Severus to show her out.

“Great,” Severus muttered to himself.

Severus had gotten out of one evening of fucking Miss Anne, but how was he going to keep this up? Miss Anne would get wise to the sleeping agent added to the massage oil soon enough, and then she would be demanding he shag her before a massage. He could just close his eyes and pretend it was Hermione, but he had been finding it hard to find the amorous inspiration to service Miss Anne even before he had come to the realization that he loved Hermione.
“I could always take the enhancement potion,” he noted aloud.

He imagined himself bored out of his mind while thrusting into Miss Anne. The gigolo had already done that one too many times. That scenario held no allure for him.

“Damn,” he mumbled.

Already figuring that it was Sunday morning, he counted the days in his head. “Eleven more days.” Eleven more days until Hermione's anniversary, and he would have his answer.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 44 A/N: The Runic symbol for Wunjo (W or V) symbolizes: Joy, comfort, pleasure. Fellowship, harmony, prosperity. Ecstasy, glory, spiritual reward, but also the possibility of going "over the top". If restrained, the meaning is general success and recognition of worth. It is also the happy rune representing perfection or happiness. (http://www.uponreflection.co.uk/runeworld/freyas_eight.htm)

According to one of the plethora of baby name sites out there, Maurelle is an old French female name meaning “dark and elfin,” and Mendel is a French male's name meaning “makes garments.” I figured I could use the masculine name for a last name.

I must admit, I snagged this exchange from Benny Hill: “She had that dress with two big buttons.” “Those weren't buttons, those were your eyes!”

And a huge round of thanks to my betas and all their hard work (in reverse alphabetical order): JuneW, Horserider, and GinnyW. And a big hug and cheers to okonchristy (cocoachritsy) and GinnyW for being my sounding boards and for bouncing ideas around. Thanks to JuneW for the chapter title.

B/N: Hmmm…no idea what you have in mind for the next chapter, but maybe Hermione could send Severus an owl? I hate to think of her all cold and lonely on the couch… worse, we have a lovesick Severus home all alone now… ~Horserider
Severus opened the door, and Hermione rushed to embrace him. She threw her arms around him, and buried her head in his chest.

“I'm happy to see you too,” Severus remarked drolly, swishing his wand to shut the door.

Her head still pressed firmly against Severus' chest, Hermione began to laugh as the tension began to ebb away. Keeping her arms about him, she inhaled and felt safe in the familiar scent that was uniquely Severus.

After exhaling a large sigh of relief, Hermione lifted her head up and smiled sheepishly. “I hope your weekend was better than mine.”

“If this is the sort of greeting I get after a bad weekend — please forgive me for saying — I hope next weekend is equally torturous,” the raven-haired wizard teased.

As they made their way to the settee, Hermione laughed at his comment, and clutched Severus' arm lightly to show her appreciation of his ability to put her at ease.
“Never have I so looked forward to the weekend coming to an end quite like this. Rarely have I looked forward to Monday morning work as a chance to escape,” she said dramatically, and conjured a handkerchief with which to mop her brow and the back of her neck.

Severus gave Marf the signal to serve refreshments. A large pitcher of chilled lemonade, two glasses, and a bucket of ice appeared on the low table in front of them.

Before Severus had a chance to serve up a glass of lemonade for Hermione, she sat forward and asked if he would like ice in his glass. Momentarily stunned that for once someone was making the effort to serve him in this environment, he finally answered with a nod of his head.

Accepting the glass with a smile and a “thank you,” Severus sat back and enjoyed a little hospitality thrown his way.

“Would you like me cast another Cooling Charm for you?” Severus offered as Hermione poured a glass for herself.

“No, thank you,” Hermione declined. ”Maybe another Cooling Charm when we are dancing, would be nice.”

They sat for a moment in silence drinking their beverages, the heat of the day having worn out both of them. Hermione was recuperating from the weekend more than from the heat.

It was still very hot on Monday, but not as sweltering as it had been the previous day. Ginny’s surprise birthday party that year had just happened to fall on the hottest day ever recorded in England. It was a few degrees cooler out in Devon where the Burrow was located versus London, but the oppressive heat had made everything wilt at the party, including the guests.

Hermione and Ginny, still upset over the way Molly had interfered with their lives, braved the heat to go hide out in the shed, with the benefit of some cold drinks and some Cooling Charms. It was easier to avoid Molly than confront her, especially at Ginny’s party, as that would cause a familial rift. Unfortunately, the overbearing Weasley matron sent one of her sons to fetch the birthday girl and the brunette witch. Hermione had been tempted to give Molly a piece of her mind, but it was too hot and too much bother to confront her mother-in-law on issues that were moot by this point; the wedding was long past. If Molly began nagging her in the future, Hermione would surely be tempted to verbally lay into the older witch.
Hermione noticed that even Harry and Ron were hiding out in the attic and had to be dragged downstairs to join the celebration. Once the cake was cut, and presents opened, Hermione begged off the rest of the party by feigning a visit by the ‘Old Crone.’

It was when she had reached the sanctuary of her own home that Hermione suddenly remembered she needed to take her weekly potion. She normally would have taken it that morning, but having to sleep out on the couch had thrown her off her weekly habit of taking it first thing when she awoke Sunday morning. Rummaging through the cabinet, she found her potion and noticed by the weekly color coding that her menstrual cycle should have started by now. A quick check of the calendar proved that she was late.

Panic and bile rose in Hermione's throat. She calmed herself by recalling that the only time she’d had sex with Ron during this cycle was that one night after she had that erotic dream of Severus; this quickly eased her mind that maybe she just skipped her cycle due to stress. Ron had not even climaxed that night, so pregnancy was unlikely. To be sure, Hermione cast a charm she had learned during her seventh year, and confirmed she was not pregnant.

By the time Monday rolled around, Hermione could not wait to go back to the office and lose herself in her work. Even Mr. Spawn, after losing his apprenticeship, seemed a bit more bearable. His ego had been knocked down a few notches, as there was now no apprenticeship to look forward to. By the time Monday evening came, Hermione could not wait to escape to Severus' for a while to unwind and find comfort by his presence alone.

The amicable silence was broken when Severus asked, “Would you care to tell me about your weekend?”

Severus had received an owl from Draco in the middle of the day, informing him that Hermione might be in a mood to match Ginny’s. The younger wizard had taken the whole day off to spend it in his flat with Ginny, celebrating her birthday in private, and had sent the note off to Severus while Ginny took a midday nap. The Potions master was aware of some of the gross details of the weekend concerning Ginny's party at the Burrow, but nothing more.

“Do you really want to hear in excruciating detail my account of suffering through the Dinner Party From Hell Saturday night, and then being forced to socialize with my manipulative mother-in-law yesterday at a birthday party?” Hermione asked dryly.

“When you put it that way, of course not.”
“To retell it would be to relive it. The only highlight of the weekend was dress shopping with a friend, and buying a couple of very nice dresses; however, I doubt you want to hear about the latest fashions, despite how much of my backside was exposed Saturday night, or how my husband complained about how revealing my dress was.” She tried to raise one brow to accentuate her point, but as Hermione lacked that particular skill, she wound up looking more wide-eyed than sarcastic.

Severus smirked. “If you are talking about wearing something revealing, then I am not adverse to listening in detail to what your dress looks like. You can skip the part about your husband's complaining,” he added indifferently. To add sincerity to his first comment, he scooted a little closer to Hermione and lightly stroked her hand that was resting along the back of the settee.

Hermione ducked her head down and blushed.

There were moments when Hermione would revel in the sexual overtures Severus made towards her, and she would mentally roll around in them like a dog on the summer grass. Then there were times, like this, when she felt completely inexperienced and out of her depth. Though Hermione was no virgin, she certainly had never fully experienced her burgeoning femininity until she had met Severus in this particular arrangement. It was only in the past several weeks that she began to understand the power of her own sexuality, and how that power ebbed and flowed between witch and wizard in the play of words and actions.

A feeling of confidence stole over Hermione. Playing the demure tease, she lifted her eyes to Severus’, which lay hidden behind his half-mask, and coyly replied, “Maybe I'll just have to wear the dress sometime so you can judge for yourself if my husband had cause to be upset.”

Hermione could not believe she was forward enough to say such things, but something about Severus brought a level of ease that made her say things she would not normally utter.

Severus rose from the settee and extended his hand to Hermione, knowing if they did not start lessons soon, the temptation between them would mount once more. It was better to be concentrating on dancing and the vision of Hermione's backside in a revealing dress, then to sit next to her and be tempted to just remove her clothes and find out what her backside looked like with no clothes on.

Besides, Saturday's visit at the spa was only just five days away.

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Thursday night could not come soon enough for Hermione and Severus.
Willingly robbed of sight for the night, Hermione let the familiar hand on her back and arm guide her to her dinner seat. This was part of the Thursday night ritual Hermione looked forward to. Severus would disappear into the kitchen and bring out some savory dish he had prepared, and Hermione's faith that men could do more than just eat food would be restored once more.

As Mrs. Weasley waited with anticipation to learn what Severus had prepared, she inhaled, hoping to detect a whiff of tonight's menu. The only thing she could smell were flowers. Smelling the air once more, she identified the scent as gardenia.

Smiling to herself, Hermione recalled the symbolism behind that particular flower. It had two meanings, and she wondered which one applied, or perhaps if Severus intended to use it because of both meanings.

'Which of the two does he mean? Does Severus truly think I'm lovely? Or does he have a secret love – for me?' She felt a contented warmth glow inside of her, flattered that Severus could mean either one.

Hermione heard Severus return with the food and place the dishes down on the table. There was the sound of scraping and sloshing. Hermione was tempted to peek, as Severus had not put a charm on her blindfold this time, but she refrained.

“I thought that since it has been so hot lately, we'd have a cold dinner tonight,” Severus announced. “I have a chilled soup, so if you'll allow me, I'll place a charm to protect your clothes in case you spill.”

Hermione gratefully accepted his offer.

Taking a sip of the soup, she said with surprise, “This is gazpacho!”

“Correct,” Severus replied. “I'm surprised you recognized the dish. This is not exactly a common soup in England.”

Of course Hermione recognized the soup. It tasted just like Ginny's gazpacho. “Where did you learn this dish, then?” she queried.
“My mother came from Spain, so of course there were some recipes she taught to me.”

“Really? What other ones?” Hermione asked, wondering what other dishes Ginny may have learned from Severus.

“Paella, chicken in sherry sauce, a few casseroles. Simple food, really.” Severus was pleased that Hermione seemed interested in learning more about him, especially since he knew Hermione better than she did of him.

“Did your mother teach you how to make that wonderful mango chutney you served with the lamb last week?” Hermione was really surprised that his mother was from another country, but she supposed that explained Severus’ dark features. She guessed that the light skin probably came from his father’s side.

“No, I experimented with a few chutney recipes before refining it to the one you had last week,” he informed her.

“Will you share your recipe with me?” Hermione asked. Reaching out her hand, she found Severus’ and stroked it lightly to help convince him if he was hesitant to share it.

“I can make a copy of it for you, but if you wish to make your own, you will have to do it soon. Mango season will last only one more month. After that you will have to wait until next May before you will have a chance to make it.” Severus pondered an idea, then decided to make the offer anyway. “Perhaps if you come over some weekend before mango season ends, I can help you prepare and can a batch of your own.”

It was a very attractive offer to Hermione. She wondered if she could get out of going to one of Ron’s Quidditch games with the lie that she had errands to run all day long, or perhaps she could come on a Sunday and spend the afternoon with Severus instead of staying home and doing all the housework while Ron avoided chores.

“Thank you, I think I would like that very much. Maybe in a couple of weeks. I’ll have to check when I can get away.” Hermione did not bother to hide her enthusiastic smile.

Severus and Hermione began to eat the cold poached salmon that he served with a chilled cucumber-dill sauce. Hermione ate a little slower than normally, as she was deprived of sight and had to maneuver her food onto her fork while blindfolded.
While Hermione was happily talking away, Severus quietly aimed his wand at the mirror he had carefully positioned so that he could see Hermione and himself in the reflection. He had already cast the Concupisco Aliquid Charm on the silvered glass; all he needed to do was activate the charm to see Hermione's physical desires reflected in the mirror.

At first nothing happened. It merely showed Hermione eating and talking happily with Severus. He wasn't even sure he had cast the charm correctly until he remembered that the charm would show all physical desires, not just ones of a sexual nature. To test to see if the charm really was in affect, the raven-haired wizard reached out and lightly stroked the top of Hermione's hand, curling one finger underneath to graze her inner wrist.

The mirror shimmered momentarily. Severus watched the mirror, transfixed by the sight of himself kissing his way up Hermione's arm to bury his face at the base of her neck. It truly was a feat in concentration to hold a conversation with the witch sitting across from him while he watched her carnal desires played out in front of him in the looking glass across the room.

At one point, Hermione noticed Severus seemed a little distracted. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, it's just that I'm feeling a bit warm. If you don't mind, I think I may unbutton another button on my shirt and roll up my sleeves. I think the heat is bothering me a little. Or shall I cast another Cooling Charm?” he offered.

Severus watched as the mirror version of Hermione began unbuttoning his shirt with haste, practically ripping it off his body in the process, while placing hungry kisses along his chest, progressing lower and lower towards the waistband of his trousers.

“Actually, I think a Cooling Charm would be a good idea,” Hermione replied, distracting Severus with her reply.

Severus turned to look at Hermione, but when his gaze returned to the mirror, the vision had changed to show the witch fanning herself in an attempt to cool down. In order to be able to finish his dinner without incident or doing something to embarrass himself, he turned off the charm on the mirror. Perhaps while they danced he could have the charm on, but then he decided it might be a bad idea to be so distracted that he would do something as foolish as stepping on Hermione's toes because he was too busy gawking at the mirror. It seemed his brain could not function properly while watching erotic images of him and the object of his own desires in compromising positions.
Focusing back on Hermione, he asked her how her Tuesday night counseling session went. She told him that it was nothing of note, other than painful and uneventful.

In turn, Hermione asked how his week had been, hoping that Severus would not view this as prying, but sincere interest in him.

He weighed the option of telling Hermione honestly about his meeting the day before with Calpurnia Fudge. Severus had listened to her prattle on about a masked Halloween Ball she had had the brilliance to come up with, and how the past cotillion season was just a complete disappointment, and perhaps a masked ball would make up for it.

Instead, Severus decided to be vague and slightly evasive. “It has been uneventful so far.”

He could have told Hermione about some hasty research he had done that week regarding temporary hair dye, but shelved that topic for another night.

“I’m sorry if I seem like I am being nosy. I won’t ask you again,” Hermione apologized.

“No, you weren’t being nosy. If there was anything of interest, I would have shared it with you. But some things I cannot tell you at this point. Perhaps later,” Severus said somberly. “Patience.”

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Hermione wondered if the salmon did not agree with her. She had been feeling a little off since they moved from the dinner table to the settee. And she suddenly felt a little tired, but chalked it up to the heat and long-term stress of the past several weeks.

Since dinner had been a light affair, they rested only for a little while before starting dance lessons. Into the third song of the evening, Hermione knew she was definitely not feeling well, but soldiered on until she noticed a familiar sensation.

“Excuse me. I really need to go to the toilet.” Hermione let Severus guide her to the bathroom door, and she rushed inside.

Once the door was shut, Hermione ripped off her blindfold. She knew exactly why she was feeling tired and unwell.
“Brilliant,” she muttered mutinously to herself. 'The Old Crone would have to come for a visit right now.'

Fortunately for Hermione, Severus had a well-stocked bathroom to meet his female clients’ needs.

After taking care of herself, Hermione looked about the counter for a bottle of A Little Witch's Best Friend. Hermione always kept a supply at home for herself, but she was not at home, and her period had come when she had expected to have skipped until next month. Just her luck, he didn’t have this particular potion.

While in the bathroom, there was a moment when Hermione weighed the option of emerging without her blindfold on, but in her current state, she did not want to change the status quo. Besides, she was the sort of person who never peeked at her presents before Christmas, and she enjoyed the anticipation of the day when Severus would finally take his mask off for her.

Severus wondered if Hermione was all right, as she seemed to practically run into the bathroom. When she emerged, she was looking a little pale and peaked.

“All you all right?” he asked with concern, escorting a weary blindfolded Hermione to the settee.

She hated it when her period would come. The fatigue would suddenly overtake her once it started. Usually, Hermione just wanted to curl up in bed and go to sleep after taking her cramping relief potion, which she would have to do without tonight until she could make it home. But she didn’t want to go home so quickly and leave Severus. There was only this night and one more meeting before her anniversary.

“I think I’d better rest right now.” Then, remembering that raspberry leaf extract was one of the major ingredients in A Little Witch’s Best Friend, she asked, “Would it be too much bother to ask for a cup of raspberry leaf tea?”

Severus understood completely. He could now see why she looked put out. After all, he was versed in Anatomy and Potions, and served for many years as Head of Slytherin. In that position, he often dealt with young witches during their cycles who had required discreet permission slips to suddenly go the infirmary. Hermione shifted uncomfortably on the settee and pressed her hands and arms along her abdomen.

“I’ll fetch you some tea myself,” he announced, and went into the kitchen.
As Severus placed the kettle on the cooker, he summoned Marf.

“Yes, master?” the house-elf warbled.

“Yes, master?” the house-elf warbled.

Please go out to Mrs. Weasley and ask if there is any potion you can fetch for her,” he said quietly so that Hermione would not overhear him speaking to the house-elf.

Marf disappeared and Severus remained in the kitchen until the tea was ready. With his experience over the years, the Potions master was comfortable with the idea of women's bodily functions. However, he knew that witches preferred to keep things discreet, as most wizards tended to have a horrific aversion to this singular aspect of women.

When Marf returned to the kitchen, Severus went back out to the main room with a fresh pot of raspberry tea. An empty bottle of A Little Witch's Best Friend was on the low table, and Hermione was curled up on her side on the small settee.

Upon hearing Severus return, Hermione sat up and apologized this time for lying down.

Severus stood before her and held out his hand. “Stand.”

Hermione said pleadingly, “I really would love to, but I’m not feeling quite up to any more dancing right now.”

Severus continued standing in front of her and said gently once more: “Stand.”

Reluctantly, Hermione blindly reached out her hand, and let him help her up.

Turning around, Severus flicked his wand, and his bed unfolded itself from against the wall. Guiding her to the bed, he gently commanded her to lie down and rest.

Hermione let her shoes slip from her feet as she curled up on Severus' bed, listening to her friend go back to the low table and pour her a cup of raspberry leaf tea.
After sitting up momentarily to take a sip of hot tea, she lay back down and smiled weakly in the general direction of Severus. “Thank you.”

Severus set the cup of tea on his bedside table, and moved around to the other side of the bed to sit next to Hermione.

Hermione rolled over so she could at least reach out and touch Severus, and went back into a fetal position.

“Has the potion helped?” the Potions master asked.

“It helps with the cramps, but does nothing to relieve the fatigue that happens that first day,” she answered.

“Have you tried taking it with an Invigoration Draught?” he asked, curious to the effects of combining the two different potions.

“I tried that once, but swear I’ll never try that again.” She groaned just from the memory of it.

“What were the effects of taking both potions?” Severus asked, now truly intrigued. It had been a while since he had a good Potions problem to contend with.

“You know how when people are suffering from trauma and bleeding, they are given a sedative and not a stimulant?”

“Yes...” he prompted her.

“There is a reason why. Anything to increase circulation and metabolic rate tends to encourage more bleeding. And the Invigoration Draught tends to counter many of the pain-killing properties in A Little Witch's Best Friend,” Hermione explained.

“Well, what ingredients are in A Little Witch's Best Friend?” he asked.
“Raspberry leaf extract, black cohosh, chamomile, shepherd's purse, woodruff... I can't remember
the rest. This potion usually sedates me enough so that I don't feel the pain, but makes me where
I'm a little muddled,” she admitted.

Severus cast a Summoning Charm to retrieve the empty bottle, and reviewed over the list of
ingredients.

Hermione just enjoyed the feeling of lying down on a nice, comfortable bed, and could sense
Severus on the bed next to her. She started to drift off when she heard Severus snort and huff a few
times.

“What's the matter?” Hermione asked, knowing there was something bothering him.

“Tell me: Is this the only potion on the market for feminine complaints of this nature?” the Potions
master asked.

“I don't know. It's what Madam Pomfrey always gave me at school,” she replied, too groggy from
the potion to pretend Severus would not know that she was referring to the healer at Hogwarts.
“There are a few others, but the list of ingredients tends to be the same, so I stay with this brand,
because I'm familiar with it.”

Severus gave another snort of disgust. ’No wonder some of my female students looked like they
were in a potion-induced haze,’ he thought. Now he wished he had paid more attention to what
Poppy doled out to the students.

“It's no wonder you want to curl up and go to sleep after taking this. It's mostly a sedative and
analgesic. This potion lists that it includes chamomile, but does not list if it uses Roman or German
chamomile. And it states thyme, but doesn't say which variety of thyme it uses. And once again for
marjoram, wild or otherwise. Why it does not include balm is beyond me. At least there is storkbill
in this inadequate potion.”

Hermione hummed to acknowledge she heard Severus. She laid there quietly absorbing his self-
lecture on what was wrong with A Little Witch's Best Friend, listening to the sound of his voice
and finding comfort in the way it lulled her into a more restful state.

“A tonic that would relieve a witch for such problems should have elecampne,” the Potions master
continued with his rant. “And not to mention mugwort and parsley,” he added.

“You'd think a Potions mistress would come up with something better,” Hermione mumbled drowsily into her pillow. “Something that relieves the pain while keeping you alert.”

“Considering the small ratio of Potions mistresses to Potions masters, I'm not surprised one hasn't gotten around to it,” he commented.

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked, suddenly feeling a little more alert with Severus' last statement.

“When you applied for all those Potions apprenticeships, how many were masters and how many were mistresses?”

Hermione had never noted the number of Potions mistresses she had owled for an apprenticeship. Now that she thought about it, there were only two out of thirty who were witches. “About twenty-eight masters and two mistresses.”

Severus hummed in agreement, accentuating his point. “Looking from this ingredient list, I would guess a wizard created this potion roughly based on a list of complaints written down by a witch with no regard to researching any herbs that would actually help her ailment. There are other herbs that would treat the problem without drugging a witch into such a stupor that she wouldn't care she was in a fog, unless that was the Potions master's intention.”

“Well, anyone who could come up with a better elixir that could take care of the pain with none of the drowsiness would make a small fortune,” Hermione said sleepily before drifting off, enveloped in the scent of Severus that permeated his bed clothes and pillow. She tried to remember to ask Severus why there weren't more Potion mistresses, but was asleep before she could ask her question.

In her journey to the dream world, she reached out and draped her arm over Severus' thigh.

Startled by the contact, he wondered what Hermione was doing, but soon realized that she had gone to sleep. He stretched out a tentative hand and stroked her back and side. Hermione's innate response was to snuggle closer to the stimulus. Gazing down at her prone form curled up against his leg and hip, he realized this was the first time she had ever been on or near his bed. This was not what he had hoped for when finally getting Hermione into his bed, but there was a certain level
of contentment gained from seeing her like this. For a moment, he idly thought it would not be so bad to go to sleep every night with her in his bed like this, only to wake up to the same simple, yet fulfilling scene.

There was the temptation to lie down next to her and let their bodies mold into one another. The probability that Hermione would cuddle up and spoon against him was likely.

'Patience,' he told himself. He had asked for it from Hermione when she asked about his life earlier that night, and he would have to exercise it with pursuing Hermione. It wasn't so much chasing after this witch, but waiting for her to come to her decision clearly. The witch had asked for a little patience from him as well, and he would wait. If the reward to reap was a willing and guilt-free Hermione in his bed, then he would gladly wait.

"Marf," Severus called out quietly.

The house-elf appeared next to the bed, eagerness brimming in his large eyes.

"Please go to my office at work and fetch me my copy of Lakshmi's Gifts to All Women. It's a green leather-bound tome written in Sanskrit. You'll find it on the bookshelf to the right of the door on the second shelf from the top," he carefully instructed Marf. "And there is one other book I want you to fetch for me. Madame Repeter's Guide to New World Plants. It's on the shelf just below the other book."

He knew exactly where those particular books would be, as he had referenced them recently when researching the natural lubrication potion for witches he had just developed.

Marf returned quickly and handed him the books, careful not to wake up his master's guest.

Severus began leafing through the two books, looking up the properties of certain herbs that he thought might help Hermione. To think that something so ineffective had been on the market for so long without a better potion coming along astounded him. He was surprised that Miss Brown had not approached him with the prospect of creating a more effective elixir that would ease the pain and cramping, while allowing the witch to stay alert. If Miss Brown was not so set to get this new product line of temporary hair dyes tested and ready by September first, he would drop that project.

It was that damned masked Halloween ball that had put some of his other research on hold while developing an array of colors one could apply to the hair and easily wash out with no trace. There
were charms one could do to change the color of one's hair, but charms, especially for the less than talented, were unpredictable and could fail at the most inconvenient times; at worst, the color would be far from the one desired and the charm irreversible. Miss Brown wanted a huge selection of colors available in time so that people could get robes and dresses to match their masks and colored hair.

After a few hours, Hermione began to stir. She still had an arm draped over his thigh, and his buttocks were getting a little sore from sitting in the same spot for so long. He could have removed Hermione's hand, but he instead chose to sit and continue to feel her snuggled up alongside of him.

Noticing her blindfold had skewed slightly, Severus summoned his mask with his wand, as he had the freedom of not wearing one that night so far. He could easily guess that Hermione would wake and not remember where she was, or why she was wearing a blindfold.

Hermione felt so comfortable and relaxed as she awoke. Fluttering her eyes open, she wondered why it was so dark, but then felt the blindfold over her eyes. She was about to reach up and remove it, but then remembered why she was wearing it.

Severus watched Hermione's movements and her momentary disorientation. He decided to have a bit of fun with her.

“Good morning,” he said warmly.

“What?” Hermione shouted and bolted upright in bed.

Severus chuckled that he had gotten the effect he had been shooting for. In order to show her a little mercy, he said, “Don't worry, it's only ten-thirty.”

“Ten-thirty in the morning? Oh, no! I'm late for work, and Ron will wonder where I've been and —” she began rambling, ready to rip off her blindfold and run out the door.

“I'm joking. It's not morning,” Severus assured her, placing a calming hand over hers which was reaching for the blindfold. “It's still Thursday night. It's ten-thirty in the evening,” he informed her, still amused at her panicked reaction.

Severus felt rather pleased with himself that he had given her a little harmless teasing that resulted
in such a reaction; it made up for the lost bet and teasing she had given him the previous week. Of course, he would still try and see her secretly at the spa in a few days.

“Ooh!” the witch huffed in irritation. Hermione flopped back down on the bed. Rolling back on her side, she blindly reached out for Severus’ leg; and when she found it, she gave him a light smack on the leg. “That's for playing such a cruel joke on me,” she scolded him.

Severus could have easily straddled her and pinned her down, restraining her so that she could not assault him anymore. It would be too easy to return the playful slap with more roughhousing, but that would be testing the limits of his restraint. It was already too tempting with Hermione lying there in his bed blindfolded. A flick of his wand and she could be laid out nude, spread-eagle on his bed.

Of course he wouldn't do that, unless she asked him to.

Severus decided that his resolve was wearing thin, and it was better to send Hermione away for the night than suffer from his unfulfilled desires tempting him to be rash.

“You should go home and rest,” he told her.

Severus retrieved her cloak while Hermione sat up and blindly smoothed herself down; knowing her clothes probably looked a bit rumpled.

Once her cloak was on, Hermione turned and embraced Severus. “I still had a lovely time, despite...” She paused, hugging him tighter. “Thank you. I'm sorry I fell asleep on you once more.”

“Don't worry about that. I still had your company as you slept,” he said quietly.

'Only one more meeting left,' they both thought.

“Until Monday,” Severus said.

“Until Monday.”
Chapter 45 A/N: Thanks to GinnyW for the chapter title suggestion, a quote from Aristotle. And thanks to my betas (in random order): Horserider, JuneW, and Ginny. And extra round of thanks to GinnyW and okon (cocoachristy) for being my sounding boards as I write each chapter.

According to records, on Sunday August 10, 2003, it was 38.5 Celsius (101.3 F) in Kent.

Concupisco: (Latin) to covet, aim at, desire eagerly.
Aliquid : (Latin) someone, somebody, something.

The herbal property differences between Roman chamomile (Anthemis nobilis) and German chamomile (Matricaria chamomilla) is that German chamomile is an antiphlogistic (an agent which reduces inflammation), and a calmative; while Roman chamomile does not have those properties. The Roman and German chamomiles are both anodynes (an agent that soothes or relieves pain) and antispasmodics. (“The Herb Book” by John Lust.)

According to “The Herb Book,” mother of thyme (Thymus serpyllum) has been used to relieve painful menstruation; whereas garden thyme (Thymus vulgarus) is commonly for throat and bronchial problems, and a warm infusion promotes perspiration.

Sweet marjoram (Majorana hortensis) is good for gastritis; while wild marjoram (Origanum vulgare) has antispasmodic and calmative properties, along with many others. It is noted in “The Herb Book” that wild marjoram will help relieve abdominal cramps in women, and will regulate a woman's menstrual cycle “if taken three or four days before the regular time.”

Balm has been noted to have antispasmodic, calmative, and emmenagogue (an agent that promotes menstrual flow) properties. Storkbill has been used to treat difficult or excessive menstruation. (“The Herb Book”)

“Lakshmi, the meek, docile wife of Vishnu and a fertility goddess in her own right.” http://sangha.net/hinduism.htm

Peter is the French word for fart. I remember when I took a year of college French (oh, so long ago) that when we used the word “répête”, we were stressed to use the proper vowel pronunciation. Otherwise, if we asked someone to “répètez” (repeat) what they had just said, and didn't use the proper pronunciation, it sounded like we asked someone to “repetez” (fart again). So of course I had to throw that in somehow. Of course, one cannot read that word and not think of Le Petomane. http://www.johnbarber.com/pujol.html And yes, Mel Brooks did swipe that name for the movie “Blazing Saddles” and used it for his character, Gov. Le Petomaine.
A ray of morning sunlight in Hermione's eye awoke her. Out of habit, she reached across the bed only to discover Ron was already up. By the time she was in the kitchen, she had surmised that her husband had already left for his Saturday game in Sweden. Ron's coach preferred to have the players use a Portkey to their game destination early in the day, to let them acclimatize to the local weather.

With the exception of Tuesday night, things had gone rather smoothly between Hermione and Ron that week. It helped that Hermione was gone Monday and Thursday nights, and Ron had been gone for the past couple of Wednesday nights for dance lessons with Rogina at the Listing Broom.

During Tuesday's session, James, their marriage counselor, had brought up the idea that maybe Hermione and Ron should take dancing lessons together, but both Ron and Hermione seemed to find the separation between them as a relief to the pressure of living with one another. Ron seemed to fumble for the words to express he did not want to start taking lessons with his wife. Hermione, equally adverse to the idea of losing her two nights a week with Severus, quickly came up with the excuse for both of them that their anniversary was almost here, and changing dance instructors at the last minute might be disruptive to the lesson plans for them. Mr. Hoover countered with the
Idea that maybe after their anniversary they might find some common hobby they could share. Neither Ron nor Hermione felt the desire to agree to such an idea. However, neither wanted to be the one to decline the suggestion either, for fear that it would make one of them appear that they were not willing to ‘try.’

Hermione meditated on thoughts of Severus as she sipped her tea and stared out the kitchen window. Since Thursday night, one thought had kept popping up in her mind.

'I have literally slept with Severus. Not slept in the sense of the euphemism, but slept in his bed with him next to me.' The thought made her blush.

But she had fallen asleep in his arms before. It was on the settee before, but the idea that she had lain in his bed made all the fantasies she had of Severus seem all the more vivid, for now she could imagine the feeling of his bedclothes cushioning her back and the scent of his pillow. She found herself wondering what Severus smelled like during sex.

Ron smelled like grass and the Quidditch locker room at Hogwarts. The couple of times she ventured into the changing room at school, egged on by Ron to find some interesting place to have sex during their seventh year instead of in her safe and secure Head Girl’s room, she found the scent to be… unique. Not quite offensive, but not exactly heady either.

After thinking about Severus once more, and avoiding thoughts of Ron, Hermione realized she had a prime chance to sample the sexual wares that the twins sent via Owl Post the week before. Digging around the pantry, she found the untouched box still under the cleaning supplies.

Opening the box to inspect the items, she wasn’t sure to be embarrassed, shocked, or titillated. Attached to each one was a little card with the item’s name, description, and brief set of instructions.

Pulling out the smallest dildo, and holding it between her index finger and thumb like it was a piece of dead vermin, Hermione turned the card and read aloud, ‘The Junior Assistant: For those who need a little help through their day. To activate the Vibration Charm, say, 'Cauldron bottom thickness.' To end the vibration charm, say 'Demotion.’”

Hermione laughed realizing that the twins had named a simulated prick after their older brother, whom they had called an officious, bureaucratic little prick on many occasions.
Lifting out the biggest and most frightening of the assorted ‘toys’ — perplexed as to how a two-headed vibrator was all supposed to fit into one orifice — Hermione read the card: “The Decadent Doppelganger: For those who want to double their fun. To activate the Thrusting Charm, say ‘Seconds, please.’ To end the charm, say, ‘I'm full.’” Her face turned scarlet when she suddenly realized where the vibrator’s second head went.

Hermione was quite astounded that the twins could create magical items that did not require the use of a wand to activate or end the spell, realizing that customers would not want to bother wielding their wand – the wooden one – while in the middle of sex.

There was one that looked very different from the rest, not like an erect penis at all. Glancing at the card, she almost dropped it out of shock. “The Lone Rump Ranger: The ultimate butt plug. Heigh Ho, Ranger, AWAY!” She put that one back in the box, unwilling to read any further. There was a moment where she wondered if Ginny's western-themed party for Harry had inspired that one, but pushed the thought aside.

There was “The Mighty Mountin' Man: Guaranteed to explore your uncharted territory,” the “The Stratospheric Stud: Bringing your orgasm to new heights by sweeping you off your feet and onto your back,” and “Wobbly Wiley Willy: Looks like an ordinary Muggle torch until you turn it on, and it turns you on.”

By the time she had looked over each one while wondering how the twins had come up with those names and corny descriptions — and avoiding thoughts of how the twins created the prototypes — Hermione had no extra time to experiment with any of them. She looked over the selection and picked The Junior Assistant to take with her to the spa. Ginny usually took a couple hours for her massage and body scrub, so there would be a few hours where Hermione could have some private time in her cubicle. Besides, she had so much practice being quiet during masturbation (not that she was ever that vocal with Ron anyway), she was sure she could be discreet enough so that no one would ever know what she was up to behind the partition.

Severus and Draco reached the Madam Hope's Eternal Springs and Day Spa on the men's side. Once settled into their cubicles, this time picking a couple of cubicles decorated in Russian Baroque, they started off with a nice sweat in the sauna.

Since it had been warm recently, the dark-haired wizard excused himself after five minutes for a dip in the cold plunge pool. Once Severus shut the door to the sauna, he summoned a house-elf.

“Mrs. Hermione Weasley is booked to come here today. I want you to take care of a couple of things for me. First of all, I want you to adjust the schedule for Mrs. Weasley's massage so that she goes into massage room number seven. Then at the last minute, I want you to tell the masseuse or masseur that another masseur will take care of Mrs. Weasley. I need you to get me one of the
uniforms and tell me what time her massage is, as well,” Severus instructed one of the day spa house-elves.

The house-elf looked at the wizard oddly with a vacant stare for a moment before Severus barked, “Do you have a problem with that?”

“No! No, sir!” the house-elf squeaked. “Will you be needing anything else, sir?”

“Yes. And I need this done discreetly. I need you to do a few more errands as well. Take care of the first task, and I will instruct you on what else I need done. And make sure that you do not approach me while Mr. Malfoy is around,” he added, not wanting to deal with the comments Draco would make if he learned of what Severus had planned later that day.

The two witches stepped into the lobby of the spa, and Hermione paused to take a deep breath. With her eyes closed, Hermione exhaled and already felt the tension ebb away.

’I could have taken Severus up on that massage, but I will certainly appreciate it more today since I’m so tense. Besides, Severus is just plain tempting, so it was just better not to accept his offer,’ Hermione convinced herself.

Hermione and Ginny were led to their cubicles and left to undress.

The cool white of the Corinthian columns contrasted starkly to the ornate tile mosaics on the wall and floor, and the wooden récamier piled so high with soft cushions and pillows for luxurious comfort.

Hermione hung her clothes and robe on the charmed valet set up in the corner that would present her with perfectly clean and pressed clothes at the end of her stay. From her cloak pocket, she removed an item wrapped up in a plain brown paper bag, hoping the house-elves would not go poking about her cubicle, and placed it on the table next to the enchanted valet.

’I really should get one of these valets for the flat someday.’

“I’m sorry that Ron didn't like your dress, Hermione,” Ginny called out over the partition.
“I told you not to worry about it, Ginny,” Hermione responded. “The only one who didn't like my dress was Ron. It's not your fault. Besides,” she added ruefully, “if it wasn't the dress, I think he would have found something else to complain about. He had already laid into me for trying to partake in the dinner conversation.”

“By your description, it sounds like the party was a bore,” the redhead said.

“It was. Remember how bad it was when dealing with Christie and Nicole that one time you and Harry came to the game?” Hermione asked.

The brunette witch grabbed the vial she had picked up at the Apothecary before meeting Ginny, and drank the elixir. Feeling a small, brief stab in her lower abdomen, she knew the potion was working. Now she could go and enjoy her day at the spa while menstruation was halted for the next twelve hours. Hermione wished that the potion would stop her from having her period entirely, but a fertile witch's body demanded that a lining would be produced and expelled monthly. The Menstruation Cessation Draught is only meant to provide a bit of convenience when menstruation would happen at an inconvenient time.

“Uh-huh,” Ginny replied.

“Imagine that all evening long.”

Ginny groaned in sympathetic pain for her friend.

Hermione emerged from her cubicle and finally noticed that the day spa seemed rather deserted. It was August, and like most of the Muggle world, many wizarding families went on holiday around that time of year. It also helped that the recent heat wave had driven people away from spending their leisure time in a sauna, steam room, and hot springs.

With fewer witches around, Hermione felt a little less self-conscious about herself and walked around with just a towel around her waist and another one thrown over her shoulder, like Ginny.

As they settled in for a good sweat in the sauna, Hermione was quietly pensive. She almost asked Ginny why she had finally decided to sleep with Malfoy, but remembered that Ginny said it happened so suddenly. The redhead witch mentioned that one minute she was getting a neck rub from Malfoy, and the next minute they were naked and making love. Hermione’s belly tightened with desire from just thinking about how easily she would probably part her legs if Severus gave
her that full body massage, and then allow him to take her.

Hermione threw a towel over her head for fear Ginny could read her mind by the look on her face as she thought of Severus giving her a massage.

“Yes it too hot for you?” Ginny asked, noticing Hermione placing the towel over her head.

“No.”

The older witch went on internally debating if she should even ask Ginny questions about what it was like falling in love with Malfoy; how she dealt with the fact that he sleeps with other witches for money, and did the guilt over cheating on her husband ever tear her apart? But since Hermione guessed that Ginny and Severus were friends – a thought still incomprehensible – she wondered if any of her questions would get back to Severus. Once again, she curbed her curiosity, not wanting the answers, partly out of fear for implicating herself for contemplating an affair with Severus.

Wishing for a little more privacy in which to let her mind meditate on matters, Hermione left the sauna and jumped into the cold plunge pool, enjoying the shock to her skin. The temperature change left her skin tingling and hyper-aware of the small eddies and currents within the pool.

Floating face-up in the natatorium, her hair splayed about her like some star burst halo, Hermione let herself drift about as her mind tried not to focus on Severus, and on the significance of her upcoming anniversary dinner.

Though Ron had said he wanted a chance to properly romance her, Hermione noticed that her husband had made no move to do anything other than tell her to go buy some nice dresses, which he complained about anyway, and making reservations for dinner. All those other weekends he could have been taking her for a nice picnic or little Sunday jaunts to the coast, but hadn’t. If anything, it seemed Ron was just going through the motions.

Hermione could not entirely blame her husband. She could have suggested those ideas herself, but did not feel inspired to be thrown into a potentially romantic situation only to have it soured by more bickering and arguments. Somehow the idea of a nice day out only to be eventually ruined would only heighten Hermione’s disappointment, thus being reminded just how ill-suited they were for one another.

It was depressing. The more Hermione thought about how her marriage was disintegrating faster
than the tattered curtains in the kitchen, she just wanted to expel her breath and sink to the bottom of the pool.

'I wonder if Ron would mourn for me if I drowned.'

The morose part of Hermione envisioned a relieved Ron, free of the burden of having to face another argument with her as he stood by her grave.

Blindly staring up at the dome above her, featuring stained glass water nymphs gamboling about in a cascading stream, she wished to be free of such mortal burdens, like a conscience. It would be so much easier if she did not take certain aspects of her life so seriously, like her marriage vows; her friendship with Ron, which seemed like it was almost irreparable after suffering the battering of four years of marriage; and attitudes towards sex and love.

'Wouldn't life have been simpler if I could just have sex and not attach some great emotional substance to it,' she mused.

Hermione knew she was not the sort of person who could go about sleeping with a random wizard for a one-night stand. There had to be some sort of connection for her to allow any physical intimacy. Thoughts of Severus came right back to the forefront of her mind with that bit of introspection.

There was a stronger and more visceral connection to Severus than she had ever felt for Ron, or even Viktor. If Hermione wasn't married, especially to Ron, she would have slept with Severus weeks ago, even before the emotional connection became so cogent.

Memories of Severus making her skin ablaze from his covetous hands, and his far from chaste breath along her neck, overwhelmed her. Hermione shut her eyes, trying to fight the desire within her that threatened to break her normally calm exterior with the hysteria of a woman gone mad from sexual unfulfillment after being swallowed and repressed one too many times.

Hermione swam to the edge of the pool, and decided it was time to go sit in the steam room for a while.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

“Are you sure this won't permanently color my hair?” Draco asked wearily.
“Miss Brown and I spent all this week perfecting it. All tests on hair collected from the salon here at the spa seemed to indicate that it would wash out completely,” the Potions master assured him. “Besides, if it doesn't, we can just chop it off and cast a Hair- Thickening Charm.”

Draco shuddered at the thought of having his precious platinum locks shorn off due to a miscalculation in the development of a potion.

Severus was adding a bottle of “Autumn Wheat” to his own locks, praying his calculations were correct.

As both wizards stepped out of their shower cubicles with the dye applied, rinsed, and temporarily set, they regarded each other.

“You look rather nondescript with medium brown hair, Draco. You could blend easily into a crowd with that hair color.”

“And you look... different.” The younger wizard was trying to be very diplomatic. “I think it's the black eyebrows that make the whole look not quite right, Severus.” Draco scrutinized Severus one last time and shook his head, obviously keeping his comments to himself.

“I'll be back in a few hours to rinse this out, Severus. If it doesn't come out completely, you'll have to answer to Ginny. She rather likes my hair the way it is... er... was,” Draco remarked before wrapping a towel about his waist and heading off to the secret grotto.

Severus waited until Draco was gone before going to his own cubicle and getting dressed in one of the day spa uniforms that the staff wore. After looking at himself in the mirror, he did agree that his eyebrows were a rather strikingly different from his now dark ash blond hair. Grabbing the bottle, he carefully colored his brows while dreading the thought of having to grow new ones.

Tying the dressing robe about her, Hermione announced to Ginny that she was ready to go with her. When no answer came back, Hermione checked Ginny’s cubicle next to hers and discovered she was already gone.

'Funny, I didn't hear her leave.'

Shrugging it off, Hermione headed out to massage room number seven located at the end of the
hallway in the central section of the spa.

Once inside the massage room, she found a note waiting for her on the table.

“Please disrobe and lie on the table.
Place these cucumber and tea essence infused pads on your eyes.
When you are ready, call for me and I will come in.”

The last time Hermione was at the spa, they didn't offer her this little amenity. Lying down on the table, face down, she placed the eye pads in place and felt them cling to her face with a Charm that felt very similar to the one Severus had used on her blindfold that first time.

“I'm ready,” Hermione announced in a clear voice.

With her face down on the table and her eyes closed, the prone witch heard the door open and shut.

“Oh, good, I see you found the eye pads,” a gentleman with a vaguely familiar Scottish accent said.

“Yes, thank you. That is a rather nice touch. Is that new perk that goes with the massage?” Hermione asked.

“Some of the other masseuses and masseurs use them,” he remarked, unsure if it was actually true.

Severus moved closer to Hermione and felt his heart quicken.

'This is foolish,' he thought to himself. 'Why am I doing this?’

He drew the sheet down off her shoulder to rest it across her hips, and stared at the expanse of her bare back. He studied the sight before him: the way her back tapered to her waist only to flare out of her hips in a smooth and gentle curve. Now he remembered why he was doing this.

“Can you tell me if there are any areas that are bothering you that you want me to concentrate on, or do you just want a general full body massage?” Severus asked, his voice an imitation of
Minerva's brogue as he remembered it.

“Well, I spend most of my day on my feet hunched over a cauldron, so upper back and lower back mostly,” she informed him.

Severus poured some almond oil into his hands and warmed it before placing his hands on her back.

Hermione could smell the scent of almonds in the air, and was brought back to the night she gave Severus a massage while blindfolded. The feeling of large warm hands on her felt good. Especially when the masseur applied pressure and her muscles began to relax from the application of a well-placed thumb and heel of the hand along the knotted up ropes of muscles along her back.

“Oooooohhh,” Hermione groaned in appreciation.

There were Charms that could give the same end result as a massage, but there was something about the human touch that could not be replaced or faithfully duplicated.

Severus began to think that this was not such a good idea after all. It was after he had sent the house-elf on his set of errands that the wizard began to question what insanity was driving him to do the things he was doing. Granted, wizards had fallen in love for centuries before he came along, but Severus wondered if all of them were setting themselves up to be Fate's fool, as he suspected he was becoming. He wished love was a simple transaction to be bought at one's leisure, but he had been thrust into a marriage before knowing that love cannot be forced upon those who do not choose it willingly. Love happens to those who least expect it, and Severus loved Hermione, no matter how hard he had tried to stop himself from reaching that glorious destination.

Working on Hermione's Trapezius, he dug his thumbs into a particularly tense trigger point that elicited a sharp intake of breath.

“Too deep?” he asked.

“No, just tight. Sometimes you have to really work on a muscle to get it loosened up.”

There was a sense of déjà vu for both witch and wizard.
As the masseur massaged the various parts of her back, Hermione mentally listed off the muscles in that region of her body, then went on to list the bones, ligaments, and tendons. Normally, whenever she got a massage, the masseuse or masseur chatted about various things, trying to get Hermione to talk about herself. She was thankful that this masseur was quiet and allowed her to just enjoy the silence. The only sounds heard were her breathing, deep and even; and the masseur's hands rubbing the oil in his hands to warm it before applying it to her body.

'Hmmm, he's very good. He certainly knows all the spots where I ache.'

Severus exercised restraint and avoided touching Hermione in a sensuous manner. No matter how much he wanted to graze his hand lightly along her shoulder or up the back of her thigh in hopes of making her gasp with pleasure, he refrained. It seemed the more he touched her, the more he wanted her.

By the time the hour ended, Severus was ready to bolt from the room. However, it wouldn't be prudent to let his disguise be ruined by revealing himself. Severus' desire for her now bordered on obsession, and he was going to any length to satisfy it in any small way he could. He was losing sight of the objective of the whole exercise. He needed Hermione for his freedom, not fulfillment of his base physical needs.

“I recommend you go and rest for a bit before slipping into the hot springs. Give your muscles a chance to rest before applying heat,” he advised Hermione, and left the room quickly.

Stealthily entering a hidden passageway, Severus made his way unnoticed to the spot he had discovered one time while wandering around the secret passageways hidden behind the walls to and from the secret rendezvous spots of the spa. It was next to one of the many secret passage entrance points, and he hoped Ginny would not come upon him there.

Hermione felt a little disappointed, as she wanted to thank her masseur for one of the best massages she had ever had, and to ask his name. She rose and put her dressing gown back on, and headed back to her cubicle to rest as her masseur had advised her.

Reaching her cubicle, Hermione went inside and saw a flower sitting on the récamier.

Next to the single gardenia was a note. Hermione picked it up and read it.
“Lovely.”

Hermione smiled to herself. She wondered if Severus had sent the flower to her at the day spa, as she had mentioned to him that she was going. If she had her wand with her, she would have cast the spell to tell who was the author of the note was, just to be sure. As it was, she would have to wait until she got home and compare the handwriting to the letter he had sent her weeks ago under the alias of Calleo.

If Severus did send the gardenia, she wondered if maybe the flower’s second meaning also applied.

Severus had heard the movement of fabric telling him of Hermione's return. He removed the piece of mosaic tile and peered through the tiny hole. The view of Hermione's cubicle was not complete, but he did have a clear view of the couch and part of the mirror.

Watching Hermione see the gardenia and note filled Severus with anticipation. He was pleased at her reaction: the shy smile, and the way she clutched the small piece of paper to her bosom before heaving a sigh and rolling her eyes up to the heavens.

He hoped to get a glimpse of Hermione completely disrobed so that he could gaze upon her fully. What he expected least of all was for Hermione to reach for the plain brown bag and pull out a small dildo.

With her back towards the mosaic on the wall through which Severus spied her, he could catch glimpses of her face in the mirror's reflection. There was a heated bloom on her cheek that told of deep embarrassment. Hermione ducked her head out the cubicle, looking up and down the walkway to make sure no one was around, before walking over to the reclining couch.

Severus watched in awe as Hermione dropped her robe, and he was able to see her nude for the first time. The sight of Hermione's feminine form unfettered by clothes halted the breath in his chest.

Hermione was not the most beautiful, nor voluptuous, nor the most curvaceous witch he had ever seen (and he had seen many). It was the inner beauty in her that made her perfect in his eyes.

He watched, transfixed, as she reclined back and propped her feet up on the end of couch. In one hand, Hermione had the gardenia he had sent her, in the other a small red dildo. Hermione trailed the flower along her body and circled her areolas, brushing the petals along her skin before bringing it up to her nose to inhale its fragrance, and dragging it back down along her skin.
Severus swallowed hard as Hermione parted her legs and trailed the gardenia up the inside of her thigh. Since his view was restricted, he could only assume she brushed the flower along her labia, as she then stifled a sigh and arched her back.

His erection was pressing against his trousers begging for some attention after watching Hermione arouse herself. Unable to deny his own needs, Severus pulled out his cock and began to stroke himself, picking up the pace when he watched Hermione guide the dildo between her legs. All warning thoughts about Ginny possibly stumbling upon him fled from his mind. He could not see Hermione's hips or pubic region, as part of the couch blocked that area from view, but he could tell when she inserted the dildo into herself when she gasped harshly before quieting herself once more.

Hermione's body began to move in a rocking motion, and Severus missed the Charm she uttered with a whisper. There was a strangled sob that came from Hermione as the dildo began to hum quietly, and he could only guess that it was enchanted to either vibrate, slide in and out of her, or both.

His view of the mirror gave him a partial view of Hermione's face and the exquisite pleasure she felt. Her visage twisted and contorted with each arrested moan. Hermione let her head hang over the side of the couch so that Severus had a view of her face upside down in the throes of an impending orgasm.

Hermione quickened her movements, and Severus' hand matched the pace of her movements.

Severus fought with the limited view that the small hole in the wall afforded him, bobbing and weaving his head about in order to get a better look. From one particular angle he could view one breast and its puckered nipple, as she played with it with her free hand.

Watching Hermione come, her teeth biting down on her lip, eyes squinted shut, toes curled and gripping at the upholstery, and hand frantically guiding the dildo in and out of herself, Severus reached his own orgasm quickly.

Choking back a guttural grunt, he closed his eyes for only a moment as his own orgasm overtook him, and felt his essence spill down and slick his hand and pulsing cock. He continued to pump his hand up and down, wishing desperately that he could be buried within Hermione at that moment. As he opened his eyes and peered through the small hole again, he saw Hermione panting and gasping, face flushed, and eyes drowsy from her release.
Severus felt equally exhausted and suddenly disgusted with himself, but he could not tear his eyes away from the sight of a post-climatic Hermione stroking her skin with one hand and languidly rubbing her fingers between her legs with the other.

Flaccid and revolted at his own pathetic behavior, he slunk back to the men’s side of the spa.

"What would Hermione think if she knew I was watching her like some peeping Tom?"

Severus took a scalding-hot shower in hopes of washing away his guilt.

"What am I doing to myself?"

He was pinning his heart's hope on a witch who was married. Hermione had not given him a straight answer yet if she would have an affair with him, but the likelihood was looking grim in his current state of mind. The witch was being noble and true to her husband when Weasley did not deserve it. Would she really be able to be unfaithful to her husband when her soul was guided by such moral character? The prospect seemed dim.

"Why am I holding out on sex?" he questioned himself. "If Hermione's anniversary does go swimmingly, and Weasley pulls his head out of his arse and woos her back to his side, where does that leave me?"

Severus poured shampoo over his head and began washing out the temporary hair dye.

"Is love a euphoric madness that men suffer blindly, not knowing what depths they are sinking to?"

He scrubbed at his hair and scalp frantically while likening himself to the turtle that had been put into a cauldron full of cold water, and then slowly boiled to death.

"What if she mistook the flower to be from her husband and not me?"

Severus rinsed his hair and began to scrub his skin in an act of purification and self-flagellation.
‘What if Hermione sees me without my mask and realizes she just could never want me like that?’

Feeling like he was stringing himself along with false promises of a pipe dream, Severus vowed not to hold himself back from satisfying his own needs until Hermione gave him a definitive answer.

After toweling his hair off, he noticed that the color washed out completely, but there was a heavy film left on his hair.

“Great,” he muttered to his own reflection in the mirror, “back to being a greasy-haired git.”

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Pacing the length of his flat later that night, Severus felt tense beyond all reason. He glanced at the clock and noted that Miss Anne was late once more. Storming over to his wardrobe, he pulled out his cloak. An extemporaneous plan formed in his mind. He would go down to the Leaky Cauldron and travel via Floo over to the Three Broomsticks to go for an evening walk amid the familiar and tranquil Scottish countryside.

Severus needed to get out. He was willing to brave the Saturday evening crowds at the popular pubs just to escape from Diagon Alley and London.

‘Why didn’t I just tell Hermione who I was, get her to agree to get me the ingredients, and then wait to see if we could be attracted to one another?’

He knew why. Severus was afraid that if revealed himself too soon, Hermione would have fled, realizing all the private things she had told a former professor. And once she began showing her attraction towards him, he was willing to wait another week or so in order to enjoy her company. But now it had gotten completely out of hand. He felt like he was debasing himself entirely because of an obsession he had for Hermione.

Severus loved Hermione, but he wondered if his love was bordering on lunacy.

Just as Severus reached for the doorknob, he heard Miss Anne's knock.

“Accio mask.” Affixing it to his face, he opened the door and scowled behind his fabric-and-leather visor.
“Hello,” Miss Anne chirped. Sauntering into Severus' flat, she made no apology for her tardiness, as usual.

Just as he shut the door, Severus grabbed her upper arm in a vise-like grip. “You're late,” he growled dangerously.

There was a brief look of worry and disdain that crossed Miss Anne's face before Severus shoved her roughly onto the bed.

“Hey, easy,” she warned him.

Tossing his cloak aside, not caring if it wrinkled or not, he advanced on Miss Anne, who was lying haphazardly on the bed where he had pushed her.

Without preamble, Severus began unbuttoning his trousers and pulled himself free. He wasn't fully erect yet, but it was hard enough. Lying down on top of Miss Anne, he grabbed at her skirt, yanked it up, pulled her knickers aside, and thrust into her.

Unprepared, Miss Anne gave a small cry, partly out of surprise and partly out of the unexpected pleasure of being taken so forcefully.

Severus closed his eyes and thrust into the witch lying beneath him with the sole purpose of releasing the unbearable tension that had been building up inside of him for what seemed like weeks. He gritted his teeth, growled, and pumped his hips with a sort of savageness he didn't think himself capable of.

Miss Anne began to howl aloud, her euphoric cries ringing his Severus' ears, but he knew it was not Hermione's voice.

Clamping a hand over her mouth, the raging wizard continued pummeling himself into her. “Quiet!” he commanded her, still not pleased when she still wailed through his hand.

Not bothering to wait for Miss Anne, Severus allowed himself to come. His hips stilled, and he allowed himself the brief pleasure of emptying himself into Miss Anne.
Still dressed, with his trousers hanging half way down his thighs, he rolled off his client and onto his back, his chest rising and falling with each gasping breath. Staring at the ceiling, he felt his body relax fully for the first time in a while, but the enjoyment was only physical. Inside, Severus had never felt so hollow. The act of sex itself had provided him the release he had denied himself, but his heart still longed for Hermione.

Severus knew he was not promised to Hermione alone, and she had admitted that she could deal with the fact that he slept with other witches. Why had he been saving himself for Hermione when he could have been having sex all this time? Romantic love? It was silly, but maybe he had been caught up in the illusion of love, as well as the reality of it.

Besides, Hermione was still sleeping with her husband, so why should he not get some sort of gratification until Hermione could tell him yes or no? And if the Ministry came poking its head about and reviewing Miss Brown's books, how could he explain his ability to earn a living as a gigolo without shagging anyone?

Looking over at the witch who was lazily smiling at him like a Cheshire cat, he thought that maybe he should keep at least one shagging client on his roster until the time would come when he could decide if Hermione was the only witch he truly wanted to bed.

Monday night sped by too fast for both Hermione and Severus. For Severus, holding a fully-dressed Hermione in his arms proved to be unbearable since he knew how her bare flesh would feel in his hands, and how her face would look like when she came. Temptation was driving him to even bolder actions.

Dipping Hermione, he would press his cloth-covered cheek against her throat, and when they tangoed, he danced as if he truly owned Hermione, evoking the sordidly passionate origins of the dance.

Hermione noticed the way Severus' hand roamed about her possessively as they moved. Had they been in public, the way they grasped and grabbed at each other could have been considered a bit too affectionate or forward.

Severus couldn't believe it, but for once he was jealous of the husband. Weasley, who obviously did not appreciate what was right before his eyes, could gaze upon her nude form, wake up to her in his bed, eat dinner with her most every night, and make love to her – which he certainly did not do very well – any time he wanted.
It was time to say goodnight, and both of them stretched out the ritual to an agonizingly slow pace. Severus offered Hermione one last cup of Turkish coffee before she left, which she gladly accepted. Hermione mentioned some articles she'd like to discuss the next time they met.

It suddenly stuck them both that Hermione would not be coming to his flat in three nights for dinner, conversation and more dancing. Next Thursday she would be at the Grand Royal Supper Club with her husband.

“Maybe I can come over next Monday...” Hermione left her sentence hanging unfinished, like some story without resolution.

“Yes, next Monday. Maybe you can come over a little earlier, and we can have dinner?” Severus asked, feeling his stomach twist with the uncertainty and anticipation.

He knew that the next time they saw each other, Hermione would give him her answer. Brushing his hand along her cheek, he saw the tears forming in her eyes. Just as they began to spill, she clutched at him desperately.

“I don't want to go,” she whispered, trying to make it not come out like a pleading sob.

That declaration alone gave Severus hope.

They stood there for the longest while, neither speaking. They knew that the next words were to be of farewells.

Hermione felt like she was being overly emotional and silly, but she didn't care. She had grown accustomed to Severus in this arrangement. She knew that giving him an answer, the next time they met, would be changing their relationship.

A melancholy mood stole over the witch, the same one that she would feel on Christmas Eve knowing that all the festivity and merriness that seemed to infuse into her soul from the season would soon be gone. After Christmas, all the decorations would be taken down, all the cheer that made everyone smile a little brighter would disappear, and the snow would seem less festive and a little colder. There would be no presents left to look forward to unwrapping.

She wondered if she would be disappointed if she said yes to Severus after unwrapping him.
Hermione had wanted to be with Severus so badly, but felt duty-bound to Ron to try one last time.

Her tears continued to fall silently, and Severus could feel the warmth of them as they wet a patch on his shirt. He could have asked Hermione if she was looking forward to her anniversary, or what her dress looked like, or if Mr. Spawn had been tolerable that day, but the time for small talk had passed. It was time for her to go, but he could not release her.

This time, it was Hermione who made the first move to part. Gazing at Severus, she could almost imagine what he looked like without his mask. His personality seemed to create a mental picture of his face, replacing the ones she had of him the night before her wedding. Now she wondered how close her image of him would match reality.

“Until...”

“Next Monday.” Severus watched as her brow furrowed and the tears returned.

“I don't know why, but it seems like next Monday will take forever to get here. It's just a week,” she said, trying not to whimper from the way it felt like her heart was being torn from her. Hermione wiped at her wet eyes and cheeks.

Severus produced a handkerchief and presented it to Hermione.

She smiled and gave a little laugh. “Thanks.”

“You're welcome.”

Hermione made a gesture to return his handkerchief, but he shook his head.

She could have mentioned that she would give Severus her answer the next time they met, but it was obvious they both knew it. There was no point in mentioning it again.

“I have to go,” Hermione said regretfully.
“I know.”

After one last embrace, Hermione turned and left, not looking back to see if Severus followed her to the door, or if his eyes watched her as she left him.

It was a few days before the moon’s last quarter. And as Hermione stumbled along the narrow alleys, blinded by her tears, the moon watched from above, like some lazy silver eye unwilling to pass judgment. The moon had seen too many women leave their love unwillingly in the dark of night.

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It started Tuesday morning with a vial left on the kitchen counter.

“Ron? What’s this?” Hermione queried, holding up a recently drained vial containing the dregs of some unknown substance.

“That? Oh, just a supplement the trainer gave me. I’m supposed to take it twice a day. Once during breakfast, the other during dinner,” Ron replied, digging into a heaping bowl of freshly cut-up fruit and a bowl of unsweetened porridge.

As Hermione cleaned up the pits and scraps Ron left on the counter, she asked, “What’s in this ‘supplement’?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, what is it supposed to do?” she inquired.

“It’s supposed to help me gain muscle.”

“Gain muscle?”

“Yeah. Since I have a body type that tends to be on the leaner side, my trainer said I needed to take these supplements in order to help my body build more muscle,” he explained.
Hermione lifted up the vial and closely examined the couple remaining drops of fluid clinging to the side of the vial. Inhaling, she could not identify any particular ingredient. Tasting a dab from her finger, Hermione winced at the extremely bitter flavor.

“And just how is it supposed to help you gain muscle?”

“I don’t know, but just look at these results so far,” he exclaimed enthusiastically. Standing up, he pulled off his shirt, and flexed his chest and arm muscles.

Hermione was stunned. Looking at her husband, he looked like he had gained half a stone of pure muscle.

“Ron…” Hermione had not noticed the transformation in her husband. She had rarely seen him undressed or shirtless during the past month, and the change in Ron’s physique was startling. “Ron, how long have you been taking this potion?” she asked wearily.

“Past couple of weeks. Pretty effective, huh. Why do you want to know?”

She weighed voicing her concern over the dramatic change versus remaining silent. Ron’s body certainly did look nicer and more defined, but she was alarmed at the rate in which this change was taking place. One thing Hermione knew was that for each Charm and Potion that altered the body significantly, there was usually a seldom talked about side-effect. For most growth charms, the after-effect was a body depleted of calcium and protein, resulting in weakened muscular strength and muscle cramps unless countered with a protein and calcium supplement.

Even the Polyjuice Potion had a side effect of extreme exhaustion after transforming back into one’s original state. The Polyjuice Potion provided the magic for the transformation, but the body still had to undergo two metamorphisms. After Harry and Ron had returned back into their natural state after taking Polyjuice Potion on Christmas Day during their second year, the boys slept for a full thirty-six hours straight, not realizing they had missed Boxing Day entirely. Hermione decided to keep quiet and get a sample of the potion to test herself, to see if she could identify some of the ingredients.

“Just curious,” Hermione dismissed her own question easily.

Moving about the kitchen to make herself breakfast, she poked her head into cupboards and drawers looking for where Ron kept his supply of muscle-gaining supplement. When Hermione
could find no vials in the kitchen, she waited until Ron had left for an early morning workout before delving into the bathroom cabinets and Ron's drawers.

“Eureka!” she pronounced upon finding Ron's stash of supplements.

It would take at least a few days to figure out what most of the components were, as reverse-engineering a Potion was much harder than brewing one.

During Hermione and Ron's Tuesday night counseling session, she noted Ron's behavior was changing like his physique. In a fit of exasperation, Ron picked up a chair and was about to throw it against the wall when he caught himself, and he put the chair back down with trembling agitation.

Her husband paced James' office with nervous energy, and the floor of their flat received the same treatment when they got home. Ron did not come to bed until long after Hermione went to sleep.

Wednesday night, Hermione found respite from Ron's presence. He was at The Listing Broom for one last dance lesson with Rogina. Hermione reflected on her own visit to The Listing Broom just a few nights prior.

After Hermione had parted from Severus in tears that Monday night, not wishing to go home until she had collected herself, she ducked into the old pub to thank Rogina for giving her husband lessons. There was one comment that Rogina had made that confused Hermione a little. The older witch had noted that she didn't think Ron needed lessons that badly; except for some guidance on how to lead, Rogina commented that he wasn't that bad of a dancer. That particular statement sat in Hermione's mind, and she worried at it like a threadbare blanket, picking at the loose threads and frayed corners.

Just as Hermione could no longer stand examining the mystery of Rogina's remark, Ron returned home.

“Hermione?” Ron called out as he walked through the door.

“Right here,” Hermione responded, as she had been sitting in the dark instead of reading a book like she normally did when Ron was at dance lessons.
“There you are,” he said huskily.

Hermione was surprised by Ron's sudden change in attitude. There was something different about him as he walked over to the couch where she sat.

Removing her legs from the couch so her husband could sit down next to her, Hermione gave a squeak of surprise when Ron hauled her up off the couch, and into his arms.

“I've been anxious to get home and see you,” he growled as he entwined his fingers into her hair.

“Ron, what's going on?” she asked nervously, stunned by his very forthright behavior.

“Since I've been on this supplement, I've been feeling randier and randier. I left lessons with Rogina a bit early so I could come home and see you,” he told her. Leaning down to whisper in her ear, he murmured, “It's been too long, Hermione. I need you.” Ron tilted his hips forward and pressed his erection against Hermione's belly.

She opened her mouth to discuss the fact that his behavior over the weeks could not be easily dismissed, and a few platitudes about lust was not going to suddenly “turn her on” when he finally had the urge to have sex. But before she could speak, Ron kissed her, shoving his tongue into her mouth.

Hermione started to give a grunt of protest, but being held by strong arms and feeling Ron's desire for her straining against his trousers, she relented for the moment.

‘Oh God, if I'm willing to give up the chance to tell Ron that he just can't have me at his beck and call like this, and let him do this to me, I must be in desperate need of a good shag,’ she thought before she started to lose herself in the moment.

Ron moved his mouth along her cheek and down to her throat where he began nipping with his teeth.

“Ow! Too hard!” Hermione complained, feeling her skin pinched between his teeth and wondering if he had left a good set of teeth marks on her neck.
Ron growled as he gave a chuckle.

Hermione should have had the sense to know that Ron never was this sexually assertive, but at the moment she didn't care, as she had been feeling recently that if she didn't get laid soon, she would cry.

A strong hand grabbed at the fabric of Hermione's blouse and there was a slight tearing noise. “Easy! Just wait and I'll unbutton it,” Hermione said shortly, trying to enjoy the feel of Ron's mouth moving along her collarbone.

Her hands moved quickly to remove the blouse and discard it onto the floor. Before she could finish shaking the sleeves from her hands, Ron's own hands were greedily kneading and massaging her breasts, and tugging at her brassiere.

“Don't worry, love. I'll buy you a new blouse if I've torn that one,” Ron spoke against her skin. “Anyway, after what you spent on those two dresses, you owe me a good shag.”

Hermione was already kissing Ron's shoulder in hungry haste when his words finally sank into her brain. Lifting her mouth from his skin, Hermione asked, “What exactly do you mean, I 'owe you a good shag’?”

Ron was already trying to unbutton her trousers when he said, “It was nothing.”

Removing her hands from his body, she pried herself out of his grasp, stood back, and with her hands on her hips, confronted him. “No. It was something. Just what do you mean by: ‘After what I spent on those two dresses that I owe you a good shag’?”

There was a hungry look in Ron's eyes as he regarded Hermione in her half-dressed state. “All I meant was that you spent a lot of my money on two dresses; one of which I didn't particularly care for. I think I deserve a little compensation,” he explained, becoming impatient.

He moved forward to embrace Hermione, but she backed away. “Oh, no. You think that because I spent some money... our money on a couple of dresses, the second one you commanded me to get, that I owe you a fuck? I don't think so.”

“Oh, c’mon, 'Mione. Don't be like this.” Ron moved forward quicker than Hermione anticipated,
and she was snared into his embrace. “I know you need this as much as I do.” He jerked his hips forward, pressing his erection along her still-clothed mons.

Hermione began pushing Ron away, placing one hand at his shoulder and the other at his chest, trying to keep him at bay. “Don't be like what? Thinking that you're treating me like a piece of property, like... like... CHATTEL?” she yelled in disgust.

Ron grumbled and let go of Hermione. Pacing the floor in front of the couch, he yelled, “You just can't let us have just one good shag, can you!”

“A shag where you make me feel like a prostitute? Letting you extract payment for a dress that I would have gladly saved up the money myself to pay for if I knew you were going to be like this?” Hermione snorted and turned her back on Ron. “I'm sorry, but I'm not for sale.” She silently wondered if Severus ever felt this cheap and degraded.

“I should have known better. Once a lousy shag, always a lousy shag,” Ron muttered derisively with narrowed eyes. He turned and walked to the door.

“Where are you going?” Hermione asked with alarm, noting that it was late.

“Out!” His response was punctuated by the slamming of the front door.

“Lousy shag!” she huffed. “I'll show him!”

Suddenly thoughts of sleeping with Severus just to prove that she was not a “lousy shag” came to mind. Sex for vengeance seemed very attractive at the moment.

Hermione could not wait until her anniversary dinner was over with so she could go to Severus and shag him with a good, clean conscience. Proving to not just Ron, but to herself, that she could be a fabulous fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 46 A/N: Thanks to robinknutsen2 for helping me come up with a few of the sexual toy names.
If you would like to see a picture of a récamier and the person who that piece of furniture was named after, please visit:
A récamier is a daybed styled like a Roman reclining couch.

One last item: I did write about the stained glass water nymphs before I saw GoF in the theater.

Gardenia has two symbolic meanings: “You are lovely” and “secret love.”
"Some Enchanted Evening"

Chapter Summary

The Weasley have their anniversary dinner at the Grand Royal Supper Club. Hermione is nervous about the evening ahead. However, as the evening progresses along at the Grand Royal Supper Club, Hermione comes to some rather obvious conclusions. Alas, the night winds up being full of surprises for Hermione, both good and bad.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Forty-Seven

“Some Enchanted Evening"

Disclaimer: Oh, that I could make money from writing this fic, and make a living by borrowing Rowling's characters for profit. Alas! I cannot. These characters are hers alone, and I cannot lay claim to them, nor make any money from this fic that uses them. Woe is me! Maybe in my next life I'll hit the literary jackpot.

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“I'll be fine. Everything has been taken care of,” he assured her. “The only thing left to test today is the beaver tails and the banshee toenails.”

Hermione hesitated between going, which meant trusting Mr. Spawn to be left alone in the lab for the rest of the afternoon, or shooing him out and closing it up, preventing another possible catastrophe. “If you're really sure,” she said, hesitantly.

“Listen,” Mr. Spawn said in a contrite voice, “I know I've botched up things in the past, and I'm really sorry. I just thought...” Trevor humbly dropped his eyes to the ground. “Now that I lost my apprenticeship, my father has financially cut me off, and after my screwing up and almost burning down the Ministry, I don't think there is anyplace else that will hire me. I need this job. I really need to keep this job now.”

It was hard for Hermione to tell which emotion was stronger after Mr. Spawn's confession: pity, or satisfaction that his arrogance had resulted in him finally taking his job seriously.
The compassionate side of Hermione won out. Walking over to the young wizard, she patted him on the shoulder consolingly. “You've made some very good progress these past few weeks.”

Mr. Spawn gave a feeble smile of gratitude for her words. “You should go if you're going to get ready for your anniversary. Have fun tonight.”

Hermione's stomach sank as he said the last words. She felt doubtful that she and Ron would have anything but “fun” tonight, not after her harsh exchange with Ron over his insensitive comments about her owing him a good shag as payment for the two dresses she bought at Madam Maurelle Mandel's House of Haute Couture.

Returning an equally faltering smile to her co-worker, Hermione replied, “Thanks, I will.”

Gathering her things before Apparating over to the Potters’, Hermione double-checked to make sure she had everything, ticking off items in her head as she would need them when she got prepared, starting with her ablutions.

'Shampoo, conditioner, soap, Sleekeazy’s Sculpting Hair Philter Foam, deodorant, hair pins, combs, nail polish, make-up, perfume, knickers, stockings, shoes, dress, cloak... am I forgetting something?'

Hermione would brush her teeth before going over to have Ginny help her get ready for the evening.

She flopped onto the bed, arms over her head in surrender, and stared up at the ceiling for a moment to clear her head. Ginny had suggested that Hermione come over to her house so that the redhead could help her with her hair and make-up. Her sister-in-law also had mentioned something about Ron coming over to pick up Hermione, like it was a real date before they had gotten married, thus adding a bit of anticipation to the evening ahead. Hermione supposed that, if anything, not having Ron around while she got ready might make it easier when coming to deal with spending a whole evening alone with him. It would be harder for Ron to start a fight before the evening really began if Hermione wasn't around the flat.

“Jewelry!” Hermione said aloud, bolting upright on the bed.

Digging round in her bureau drawers, she removed her jewelry box, which she kept next to her
escape box. Hermione took a moment and opened the box containing her secrets. Removing the two pieces of parchment, she drew her fingers lovingly over the letters. One wasn't even a proper letter, just a simple missive with one word.

“Lovely.”

She smiled to herself before putting the letters away and returning her escape box back in her drawer. Hermione had cast every spell she knew to reveal the letters' author, but the only name that appeared was “Sabotage Ends Laid.”

Opening her jewelry box, she pulled out the pair of sapphire and diamond earrings her parents had given her as a graduation present. The Grangers had been very disappointed to learn that Hogwarts did not have a formal graduation ceremony for the parents to attend, and they had given the earrings to her the night after she came home on the Hogwarts Express for the last time. There had been a small celebration dinner Hermione's parents had held for her, knowing their daughter would be gone the next morning to continue her work on a war they did not understand. Hermione never asked her mother if she knew that sapphires symbolized clear thinking, but figured that she bought them because they were Hermione's birthstone.

'I'll need to think clearly more than ever tonight,' she thought ruefully.

This was the night Hermione had been placing so much importance upon, and now that it was almost here, she dreaded to know how it would end.

“Oh, I wish I could see you before you go out, all dolled up, dressed to the nines!” the enchanted mirror said, finally speaking up for the first time in weeks.

Looking at a very animated and cheerful version of herself in the glass, Hermione felt as if she was peering in on some alternate reality of herself. There was no trepidation in the expression reflected back at her. Every single out-of-place hair was shown, but none of the emotions matched what she was feeling inside.

“Maybe you'll see me when I get back tonight,” Hermione said as consolation.

“Oh, I hope so!” the mirror said.
Gathering all her items together, Hermione finally Apparated over to the Potters’ to begin the usual ritualistic preparations for the hopefully fabulous evening ahead.

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Ginny was busy combing a long hank of hair, smoothing it and rolling it up into a magical heated curler that would transform the frizzy mess into sleek and well-coiffed curled tendrils. Hermione was applying a layer of Lovely Lavender’s One-Coat, No-Smudge, No-Chip, Perfect-Every-Time Nail Polish. The nail polish color that matched Hermione’s dress and accessories was given the name of “Take Me Now Red.”

Hermione thought of another much more vulgar verb that fitted the intonation of that phrase better.

Tugging at her dressing gown to make sure her breasts were covered, the brunette witch asked, “Are you sure Harry is not coming home?” Harry had seen her many times in her pyjamas while at Hogwarts, but she felt a bit self-conscious about it now that she was older and married.

“He sent an owl home this afternoon that he has to work late tonight, so we'll have the house to ourselves. Dobby is over at Bill and Fleur’s for the night, so it’s just us until Ron shows up,” Ginny explained, gritting her teeth as she held a short row of hairpins in her mouth.

“Oh.” It was a relief to Hermione that no one else would witness her growing apprehension, which she didn't bother to hide from Ginny. ‘If Ginny has been talking to Severus, she must already be aware of how I feel about tonight... unless Severus hasn't been talking about us.’

Hermione's mind was already spinning, trying to sort out what Ginny knew and didn't know about her and Severus, and decided to avoid a headache by pretending that Ginny didn't know a thing.

With a little time and a lot of work, Hermione was finally ready.

Ginny whistled long and low. “Wow. You look unbelievably fantastic. If Ron isn't bowled over, he must be a poofter,” she joked.

Hermione laughed. The likelihood of Ron being attracted to men that way was as likely as Voldemort coming back from the dead as an Evangelical preacher.

Just as Hermione put her earrings on, Ron called from the living room downstairs.
“Oh! He’s here!” Ginny squealed with excitement. “Wait a moment before making your grand entrance; I want to turn down the lights a little for the mood.”

The redheaded witch bolted for the bedroom door, and Hermione could hear her thump down the stairs like a rambunctious child beating a path to the Christmas tree on Christmas morning.

Standing up, Hermione smoothed down the front of her dress and looked at herself one last time in the mirror. She barely recognized the witch staring back at her. Every hair was in place, the circles under her eyes were gone, and her skin glowed. What surprised Hermione the most was that a few scraps of fabric sewn just the right way could make her look like she had this sensuous figure with curves in places she didn’t know she had them.

“It's just a red dress,” she said to herself.

It was a red sleeveless floor-length dress that happened to have a low V-neck line that showed off her cleavage, clung to her torso in such away to compliment her slender frame, and flared out from the hip into an A-line to allow movement for dancing. It was so simple, yet stunning. And the color brought out her natural coloring in such a way that Hermione actually considered buying a ruby-red cloak for everyday wear for the winter.

Hearing Ginny calling her from below, Hermione straightened her posture, checked to make sure all the sticking charms for her dress and the bra-less charm for her breasts were in place, and exited the bedroom to descend the stairs. As she began walking down the carpeted steps, Hermione finally caught sight of Ron in his new dress robes.

'Oh, my.'

Ron was in a well-cut set of smart-looking robes the color of dark caramel, and it looked like he had gotten his hair cut as well. With his hair off his forehead and out of his eyes, he no longer had that boyish look about him, but finally looked like a man.

Hermione started getting nervous as she reached the bottom of the stairs, as Ron had said nothing, but continued to stand there with a stunned look on his face and his mouth hanging open. She hoped he liked the dress, because she certainly did not think he could find any fault with it – she prayed.
Walking up to her husband, she stretched up the last inch that her feet could extend, as she was already wearing three-inch heels, and placed a little kiss on Ron's cheek.

“You look very dashing, Ron.” Maybe if she started the night out on a compliment, that might set the tone for a good evening. She could detect the scent of cologne on Ron; he smelled of grass, summer rain and lemons. It was a bright and sporty scent.

Ron finally closed his gaping gob and gasped, “You look bloody amazing.” His eyes roved over Hermione as if he had never seen her before in his life.

Ginny cleared her throat, and suddenly Hermione became aware of the witch standing next to her husband.

“Ron.” Ginny nudged him. “Don't you have something you want to give Hermione?”

“Oh! Right!” Ron said hastily, and pulled a small glass box from inside his cloak.

“Oh, Ron,” Hermione said with awe. “It's lovely!”

Presented on a little satin pillow was a spray of small red rosebuds attached to one of her combs that went with her dress. Hermione wondered when Ginny had managed to sneak the comb out to get the flowers attached and get it to Ron in time, but then decided she just wanted to enjoy the moment instead of analyzing how and when events had taken place.

“Really?” Ron smiled. “I thought, you know, how you are about flowers...” he trailed off.

Ginny, sensing the awkwardness between them, stepped in and said, “Let me help you put that in your hair, Hermione.”

Hermione bent down while Ginny affixed the comb, then artfully placed a curl to intertwine with the arrangement of tiny roses.

Ron gave Hermione a quirky smile when she stood back up for Ron to survey the addition of the floral comb in her hair. There was almost a glazed-over look in his eyes, and Hermione found it
Ginny gave her brother another nudge to prompt him along.

“Right!” Ron announced brightly. He stuck out his arm jauntily and smiled broadly. “Lady, your chariot awaits.”

After Ron helped her with her cloak, they made their way towards the back garden. Hermione thought Ron was joking with the chariot remark, but not by much. Just beyond the back door was a carriage drawn by two matching gryphons, both bearing a brindled coat of gold, bronze, and darker bronze feathers.

There was almost no room for the gryphons to move and the coach looked like it barely squeezed into the back garden, ready to spill over into the Muggle neighbor's yard, but it fit just the same.

There was no coachman. As Hermione approached the carriage, holding onto Ron's arms so she would not fall while traipsing over the weathered bricks in her new heels, the door opened and a set of brass steps cast in an ornate filigree design unfolded before her. Careful as to not get her heel stuck into the open metal work, Hermione made her way into the carriage, followed by Ron.

Once the door shut, Hermione barely had a chance to wave goodbye to Ginny before the two gryphons crouched and then leapt into the air, causing the carriage to rock about with a great lurch. The carriage and gryphons, along with the passengers inside, became invisible as they ascended above the London rooftops and flew into the evening's blue sky.

Hermione let out a small shriek of surprise and checked for her wand strapped to the side of her thigh, snuggled into the wandholder loops on the side of her silk stockings, as she was thrown against the back of the carriage seat while Ron sat there as if nothing was too amiss.

As the carriage leveled out, Hermione was able to see the English countryside whizzing by far below like a verdant quilt, much like the time she rode on an airplane with her parents to France when she was younger. This time, however, the cabin was not pressurized; and it was magic keeping the velvet and tassel-trimmed box aloft, rather than the laws of physics and the experience of a professional licensed pilot.

Shortly after the carriage leveled out, Hermione could tell they were beginning to descend towards their final destination. Fortunately, the gryphons’ angle of descent was much more gradual than
during the takeoff, and soon the wheels of the carriage made gentle contact with the roadway, only jostling Hermione slightly in the process.

Glancing out the window, Hermione recognized the village they were approaching; it was the same one that Ginny and Hermione went to for lunch recently in Wiltshire. Looking out the window on the other side of the carriage, Hermione spied a stately mansion that she had not noticed before atop a hill overlooking the village below. In the light of the sun that was nearing the horizon, she could see the ivy creeping up the walls and overtaking the exterior facade. The great yew hedges that circled the perimeter of the property looked like they had not been trimmed in at least a few years. No lights glowed from the mansion’s many windows, and it appeared to be abandoned.

Their carriage came to a halt and then inched along in a queue of carriages, letting patrons disembark at the front doors of the Grand Royal Supper Club. There was a wizard dressed in midnight blue robes with a reservations book floating next to him. An opalescent blue-and-silver quill, most likely a feather from a Peryton as Hermione noted from far away, jotted down notes as the wizard in the dark blue robes greeted each approaching couple warmly. It was when Hermione finally saw the flash of the photographer's bulb go off that she saw the familiar face standing to the side.

“Rita Skeeter,” Hermione growled under her breath with disdain.

“What?” Ron asked.

“Rita Skeeter,” Hermione pronounced much more clearly. “She's back to trolling for celebrity trash to make up, I'm sure.”

“Brilliant,” Ron murmured in agreement with his wife's assessment.

“Let's just ignore her. Maybe she won't recognize us,” Hermione suggested hopefully.

Finally it was their turn to get out of their carriage. Ron stepped out and thankfully helped Hermione down, but then started walking off without waiting for Hermione. Frozen to the spot, Hermione debated whether to just ignore his faux pas and catch up with him, but Ron stopped and went back, fetching Hermione to escort her before the situation became embarrassing.

“Ah! Mr. and Mrs. Weasley!” the maître d' exclaimed with a saccharine sincerity that made
Hermione's skin crawl.

Rita Skeeter caught the name and quickly rushed along the length of velvet rope that kept her aside while the patrons entered the establishment unhindered. “Hermione? Is that you?” the witch in violent orange robes called out.

Hermione closed her eyes and tried not to physically cringe at the sound of Skeeter's voice.

“Hermione, dear! I would recognize that darling figure anywhere! You certainly are looking well. Is Ron’s and your presence here tonight a sign that your husband has finally made it?” Rita asked, not bothering to wait for Hermione or Ron to answer before assaulting them with a barrage of questions, each more offensive than the last. “Will you be leaving your career in the Department of Standards & Regulations to finally start that family you've put off for so long? Or is Ron sterile? Will you be adopting any of the orphans left over from the war, in sympathy for your friend Harry Potter, who never had a real wizarding family of his own to raise him and had to live with those Muggles who mistreated him for so long?”

Ron and Hermione openly gaped, unable to comprehend what would possess Skeeter to come up that line of questions. Thankfully, they were spared from answering her inquiry when the carriage behind the one the Weasleys rode in opened up, revealing the next guest to the supper club.

“Lady Battenberg!” Rita called out and charged off towards a stunningly beautiful witch with strawberry blond hair who held an air of grace about her that Hermione envied.

The maître d' ushered the Weasleys through the door, and Hermione stood in the lobby, awestruck at the opulence set before her. There were panels of amber, used like sheets of colored glass, set into a pair of gold gilt doors to separate the lobby from the main dining room. The amber and gold doors were flanked by columns of lapis lazuli, which were topped with apple-colored jade capitals carved with the faces of famous witches and wizards. A swag made of olive and laurel interwoven with golden apples and silver berries hung above a transom set with large faceted golden topaz, aquamarines, spinels, and cabochon opals depicting the constellations of the night sky. She could hear the muffled sounds of the orchestra through the doors.

Glancing to her right, Hermione saw a purple carpeted staircase with a heavily carved, gold-gilt banister leading up to what looked like a private door. Before she could wonder where the stairs led to, the doors opened and Hermione and Ron walked into the main dining room of the Grand Royal Supper Club.

There were about fifty tables of various sizes, accommodating between two and eight people,
arranged around a large dance floor, and a second tier raised above the main floor featuring another couple dozen tables. There was a stage, decorated with the same grandeur as the rest of the supper club, where the orchestra sat. On the dance floor, couples moved around the floor with a synchronization that made the mass of their heads appear to be a swirling whirlpool from Hermione's perspective on the upper landing.

Ron did not rush ahead, but thankfully offered Hermione his arm to help her down the staircase. She wished she scuffed the bottom of her shoes up or at least put a No-Slip Charm on them, as she could feel her feet fighting to stay on the plush carpet that kept changing colors slowly from red, to dark purple, to royal blue, to forest green before fading back to a deep red.

'At least the carpet didn't have moving patterns of paisley or plaid, or I would have gotten motion-sick and lost my balance,' Hermione thought, remembering the large area rug George had recently put in his living room. While crossing it the first time she almost fell over, her inner ear thrown off by the optical illusion of the floor moving beneath her feet.

At the foot of the stairs, another wizard in dark teal robes welcomed them.

“Mr. and Mrs. Weasley!” their host greeted them in the same manner that Hermione found to be simpering and equally as oily as the wizard with the reservations book. “I am so pleased you have decided to come here to celebrate your anniversary with us. Let me show you to your table.” The wizard with salt-and-pepper slicked-back hair bowed graciously, and then led Hermione and Ron through the maze of tables.

Ron dropped his arm and lightly grasped Hermione's hand, leading the way behind the host. Hermione felt like she was being pulled along, and had to skitter along once or twice to keep with her husband's long strides. It would have been more gentlemanly for Ron to let Hermione follow the host first, but the fact that he still was holding her hand was something.

“Here you go, a romantic table for two,” the smarmy wizard announced with a sweep of his arm.

Hermione was surprised. The table was close to the dance floor, (without being right next to it) close to the center, and not shuttled off to the side.

Ron made to sit down without waiting for Hermione, then caught himself and stood up. Walking over to Hermione, he helped her with her cloak and then into her seat before going back to his own seat to sit down. She gave him a trembling smile of appreciation, and it looked as awkward as she felt.
“Here is tonight's menu,” their host announced, accepting Hermione's cloak. With his wand, he conjured two menus, which he presented to them, like he was handing over some sacred artifact. “And our wine list,” the older wizard added, as he handed over to Ron a leather-bound tome as thick as *Hogwarts: A History*, and just as heavy.

Looking daunted by a wine list that was longer than any book he had ever completely read, Ron accepted it and set it aside; the compendium listing all the wines in the restaurant's extensive cellar made the table list slightly.

There was a moment when Hermione and Ron looked at each other with the exact same thought etched plainly on their faces.

'Okay, now what?'

They smiled nervously at each other before diverting their eyes to take in their surroundings, in order to avoid the silence that demanded that someone speak. It was by no means quiet in the restaurant, as the band played a lively tune that made Hermione tap her foot unconsciously in time to the music.

Hermione's eyes wandered over the walls hung with huge mirrors that reflected the diners and dancing couples; there were huge baroque gold candelabra sconces set between the mirrors. Above her was a rotunda that added to the acoustics of the environment, amplifying the sound so that it reached all corners of the restaurant equally. The rotunda was made out of glass, showing the approach of sunset and twilight in the night sky. Gradually her eyes took in the fine linen tablecloth, and the delicate white china with a gold gilt edge. Hermione noticed the repetition of gold in the décor theme, and found it all to be a bit much for someone raised with Muggle tastes, and whose parents had an affinity for Danish modern. Even the flatware was gold-plated.

Not yet ready to try and engage Ron in conversation, Hermione turned her attention to the band, which then transitioned to a slower-paced song. A chanteuse in a gold silk gown, that matched the robes of the band members, began serenading the dancers with lyrics about forbidden love and lamentations on the foolish choices of her heart. Hermione remembered hearing that song the first night she started lessons with Severus. Of course, at the time she knew him as Calleo, but now she knew who he really was. Memories of the many dance lessons she enjoyed while being twirled about and dipped in his arms came back. A secret smile spread across Hermione's lips as she recalled the first time Severus taught her how to dip, and how they had fallen over in a jumble of limbs and tangled bodies.
Hermione was jarred from her thoughts when Ron asked suddenly, “Do you want something to drink?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. That sounds good.” She hoped she looked like she was having a good time.

Two glasses of water appeared on the table while Ron began flipping through the wine list.

Over the sound of the band and singer, Hermione could hear her husband mutter, “Why can't these things ever be simple: red wine or white. Why is it broken down into bloody regions, and what the hell is a Cabernet Sauvignon Blanc? I thought that was a red wine...”

Hermione was tempted to suggest a nice simple white wine to start out the evening, as a white wine would not affect the palate as much as a red wine, especially since she didn't know what they would be eating later on, but Ron seemed intent on making a good impression.

“Oh, there we are. Champagnes!” Ron said, running his finger down the long list of sparkling wines. His brow furrowed. “Merlin! There are bottles of champagne on this list that cost over twenty-five Galleons.”

Hermione winced, hoping no one overheard. This was the sort of place where if you had to think twice about the price, then maybe you couldn't afford to eat here.

Leaning over the table and speaking in hushed tones, Hermione suggested, “You don't have to break the vault; I'm not a connoisseur. Pick something, just not the cheapest one on the list,” she added, feeling a little self-conscious, and not wanting to appear too price-conscious.

It was odd; Hermione usually never really cared what others thought, but in this environment, she wanted to present a respectable facade that would not attract attention to herself by demonstrating that she and Ron were not sophisticated enough to be there.

‘If Severus were here, he would know exactly what to order.’

She stopped herself. This night was supposed to be about her and Ron celebrating their anniversary. Not some mental comparison about how Severus would have done things differently
Ron spoke his request for a bottle of moderately-priced champagne, and the bottle appeared on the table. As if guided by invisible hands, the cork came out with a sharp “pop,” and then settled into the champagne bucket stand that materialized next to their table. The wine list disappeared and was replaced by two champagne flutes.

Hermione worried for a brief moment when Ron pulled out his wand and charmed the bottle to levitate out of the ice-chilled bucket and pour into the flutes. She had watched Severus pour champagne by hand for her before, tilting the flute so that the bubbly wine slid along the side of the glass instead of hitting the bottom directly and frothing over the sides, which was exactly what was happening when Ron guided the bottle to pour.

“Bugger!” he hissed, and leaned forward to sip at the frothy head trickling down the side of the glass.

It was one thing to do that in the privacy of one’s home, like picking your knickers out of the crack of your arse, but to do that in a fancy restaurant was just a bit uncouth. It would have been better if he had just blotted at the spilled champagne with his napkin.

There was a brief moment where she wanted to say, “Just let me do it,” but Ron would likely use that as a jumping-off point to start another argument, citing her supposed superiority complex.

With the champagne poured and glass in hand, Ron asked, “So what shall we toast to?”

'To surviving the night?' “Erm...” 'Think, Hermione. You're supposed to be the eloquent one. To love? Yeah, right.' “To us?”

“To us.”

They clinked glasses together and drank, not looking at each other as they sipped. Actually, Hermione sipped while Ron chugged half of his in a couple of quick swallows, looking like he needed the alcohol to brace his nerves.

'Now what?’ Hermione wondered.
“Do you want to order dinner now, or do you want to dance a little first before we eat?” Hermione suggested.

Ron replied with his own question: “You want to dance?”

“Do you?”

It was apparent to both Hermione and Ron that being thrust into a romantic situation was not going to automatically make the tension between them just instantly disappear, especially after Ron’s angry retreat last night.

‘Maybe a little dancing will get us both in the mood for a good time, then we can finally relax,’ she mused.

“Yes, I would love to dance,” Hermione said, and gave Ron a reassuring smile, hoping her attitude would help him to relax. He looked more nervous than she felt.

Ron stood and waited a few moments for his wife to stand, before he finally caught himself and went around the table to help Hermione from her seat. They walked to the dance floor, her hand in his clammy one.

‘Just relax, Hermione,’ she told herself, braced for an evening of squashed toes. ‘Rogina says he’s not that bad of a dancer, and he has been taking lessons too.’

As they stepped onto the dance floor, she waited for Ron to begin leading, signaling which direction he would guide her. To her relief, they started moving together smoothly.

Dancing with Ron, she could begin to compare the differences between the way he moved to the way that Severus felt while she was in his arms. It was a little awkward, getting used to a new partner, when Hermione was accustomed to Severus’ height, body and his particular grace. Ron was not quite as confident and his movements were not quite as fluid, but it was a vast improvement from the last time they had danced together.

The song ended, and all the couples on the floor politely clapped briefly. The singer on the stage
gave a small curtsy before announcing, “This is one of my favorites; I hope you like it too.”

The enchanted globes that hung over the dance floor dimmed, casting a warm golden light. The orchestra struck up a slow tune, as the chanteuse began singing her torch song.

“I saw you use the Floo to see that witch,
You know who.
The witch with the long blond hair and the sparkling blue eyes.
Don't say you didn't, don't tell me no lies.
Have a little truth serum with your morning tea,
If you please.
Two-timin' wizard without a clue that I'm on to you.
You can't stay true.
If I can't divorce you,
At least I can still leave you.
You took my respect, so I'll take your gold,
Cause you've left my heart out in the cold.”

They moved slowly across the floor, bumping into other couples twice during the song. Soft apologies came from Ron and the other wizards.

Ron was certainly taller than Severus by a few good inches, as Hermione stared straight ahead into the middle of Ron's chest. In the dim light, she inspected the weave of his dress robes and the fine threads of russet interspersed through the fabric. By this point, Hermione would have naturally rested her head against Ron's chest, but didn't. Ron's voice rang in her head about how she was just a “lousy lay.”

Pushing those memories aside, she glanced up and saw Ron's face. He was staring straight ahead too, his face inscrutable. His Adam's apple bobbed once as he swallowed, and she wondered if he was nervous.

There seemed to be some great expectation from both of them about this night, as if this one night would make or break the future of their marriage. It would for Hermione, as she had made her decision to become more intimate with Severus based on how well or poorly tonight played out. So far, it was not looking good where her promise to “forsake all others” was concerned.

By the time the song ended and the lights brightened as the band started playing another bouncy swing tune, Hermione was ready to leave the floor. Ron looked down to his wife and tilted his head back towards their table, and Hermione gave a tight smile in agreement.
As they started walking back, weaving between couples who were dancing, Ron said, “Blimey! ‘Mione, come with me.”

Ron changed direction, and they headed toward an area off to the side where a group of wizards and a few witches stood chatting, some holding glasses of wine in their well-manicured hands.

Smiling, Ron slowed down his pace and tucked Hermione's arm in his to gallantly escort her the rest of the way.

They approached an older wizard who was probably in his late-fifties. He was very handsome in a way that most women hoped their husbands would age, with a flash of gray at each temple, and sharp hazel eyes.

“Hello, Ron,” the older wizard greeted him with genuine sincerity. “And who is this stunning creature, if I may have the pleasure of being introduced?” The older wizard grasped Hermione's hand and held it while waiting for her name.

“Bascom, this is my wife, Hermione,” Ron announced proudly, puffing out his chest slightly.

“Hermione. What a lovely and unique name,” Bascom purred and bent over to kiss her hand.

Feeling a little flustered, Hermione could not help but blush a little at the older wizard's attentions.

“Oh! So you're Mr. Nettleton!” Hermione smiled back at the wizard, who still had a very firm grasp of her hand.

“Please,” he mockingly pleaded, “call me Bascom.”

“Bascom.” It was then that Hermione noticed that he still had not let go of her hand, and looked up to find his eyes glued to her cleavage.
Hermione politely and kindly removed her hand from his grasp. Initially charmed by his gracious manners, she suddenly felt like he was a little too friendly for her comfort. She quickly sidled back to Ron's side, and grasped at her husband's arm like a life preserver.

Ron seemed blissfully unaware of Mr. Nettleton's friendly warmth towards his wife. “So are you here alone, or is Mrs. Nettleton with you tonight?” Ron asked.

“Oh, Dagmar couldn't make it. She's taken up the card game Crossroads & Crusades some months back, and now plays it at least twice a week. No, I brought a guest with me tonight, but she has been whisked away to the dance floor by another wizard for the moment.” Bascom turned his attention to Hermione. “Ron, you wouldn't mind if I took your lovely wife for a spin around the floor now, would you?” His eyes never looked to Ron, instead keeping them fixed on Hermione.

“I don't mind if Hermione doesn't,” Ron answered.

For once Hermione hoped that Ron's jealous streak would rear its ugly head and say no. But it looked like it wasn't going to happen. Ron was being an adult and gentleman, much to Hermione's dismay. She wanted a reason to say no to Bascom Nettleton without having to say it herself, and since this was the man who was setting up Ron's first big endorsement deal, Hermione felt she had to be gracious and accept his request to a dance.

“Not at all,” Hermione lied with her best believable smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

Bascom slid next to Hermione and guided her to the dance floor, touching her in a way that she had only allowed Severus or Ron to touch her. His hand on the small of her back was dipping a little too low for her comfort, so she took half a step back and slipped her arm in his to keep his hand out in front where she could watch it for the time being. It would be harder for her to tame such an errant appendage when on the dance floor, but she would cross that bridge when she came to it.

A moderate tempo song was playing, and Bascom quickly stepped in front of Hermione and began leading her about the dance floor in a foxtrot.

“Ron failed to mention what a beautiful a wife he has,” Bascom said with a suggestive smile playing about his lips.

Hermione didn't feel like demurely smiling and twittering at his cloying platitudes, like some
empty-headed witch easily swayed by some flattering words. She felt like parrying his words.

"He never mentions my looks, usually he mentions my brains," she said, laughing. "He considers that my looks and all that goes with them are for him alone to enjoy."

"Yes, but it is my experience that no one wizard could ever fully satisfy most witches, but I've been known to try," Mr. Nettleton countered. Lowering his hand from her waist to her hip, he added, "And I usually succeed."

"Well, it looks like I'm going to have to break your winning streak, Mr. Nettleton—"

"Bascom."

"Mr. Nettleton." Hermione removed his hand from her hip and pushed it back up to her waist. "I don't think it would be prudent to put the moves on a Quidditch player's wife, especially with him not ten feet away. You don't know my husband's temper and jealous streak; I do."

If this wizard didn't have the power to revoke Ron's endorsement contract, Hermione would have been more blunt, informing him that she didn't like his tone or leering at her breasts, but she held her tongue. It wasn't Ron's fault that this guy was a slimy git, but she would certainly tell Ron what he was up to after tonight. She never wanted to be stranded alone with Mr. Nettleton ever again if she could help it. Hermione just hoped that Ron would not do something rash and ruin his endorsement deal.

The song ended, and Hermione quickly thanked Mr. Nettleton for the dance before he had a chance to insist on another one. They made their way back towards Ron. To Hermione's shock, she found Ron and Viktor Krum shaking hands, and smiling at one another like they were old friends. Next to Viktor was a lovely young witch with a fresh face and bedroom eyes.

"Claudia, my dear," Bascom said, returning Hermione back to Ron's side. "I hope you don't mind that I took Mrs. Weasley out for a dance while you were with Viktor."

"Not at all, Bascom. Viktor and I were just talking a bit with Ron here," the young witch with blond hair and slate blue eyes replied. She left Viktor's side and went back to Mr. Nettleton's, fluttering her eyes up at him and delicately grasping at his arm with a certain amount of possessiveness.
Hermione looked Claudia up and down. She barely looked to be twenty. By the way that the elder wizard was smiling down at the blond witch, it was clear that this man was partaking of all of the young witch's charms. This wizard was old enough to be her grandfather, or much older uncle, and Claudia didn't seem to have a problem with that. Suddenly the twenty-year difference between Hermione and Severus seemed insignificant.

“It is good to see you, Her-my-nee,” Viktor said quietly, just loud enough for her to hear.

Turning to look at Viktor properly, she smiled. “It's good to see you too, Viktor.” She prayed Ron would not misinterpret their exchange for anything other than two old friends catching up.

“I was just telling Viktor about my upcoming contract,” Ron chimed in. “He's recommended me a good agent to use, when negotiations begin.”

“Really? Thank you, that's very helpful,” Hermione added.

Viktor waved a dismissive hand. “It is no'sink. Vhat are friends are for?”

Hermione wondered if Viktor included Ron in that last comment, or only recommended his agent because of Hermione alone.

Regarding Viktor, Hermione noted that he was not the same lanky, sallow-skinned boy with sloping shoulders that she once knew. He had grown into a man with a tanned face from many hours spent on a broom, and had filled out with a few years on him. Of course she knew that he had filled out a while ago, as she had bought a Mercury Broom Company Quidditch calendar the year that Viktor was the poster boy, but she secretly kept that calendar at work in a bottom drawer. But it was another thing to see him in person for the first time in years, and see him at his physical peak.

“Since Bascom has taken Her-my-nee out for a spin, vood you mind if I had the pleasure too, Ron?” Viktor asked. “A dance with an old friend?”

Hermione's eyes flickered, allowing her to watch Ron's reaction, wondering if the old jealous Ron she had experienced before would return.

Ron merely smiled with a twinkle in his eye and said, “I'm sure Hermione would love to. You
probably have some catching up to do, so you can steal her for a couple songs.”

There was a moment where Hermione wondered if her mouth was gaping open in shock. ‘Is this the same wizard who had a snit that I was still writing to Viktor in my fifth year?’ Realizing that Viktor now was standing next to her with his arm out to escort her to the floor, Hermione quickly composed herself and gave Ron a smile of gratitude for being gracious.

They reached the floor just as the song ended, so they waited for the next song to begin. The orchestra struck up a tango, and Hermione hoped that Ron would not have a sudden surge of jealousy. Viktor began to lead Hermione about the floor, keeping the distance between them respectable, considering that the dance required full body contact.

“Your English has improved, Viktor,” she complimented him to get the conversation going.

“Thank you. I haff been vorking on it over the years.” There was a pause before he said, “I heard about vhen you got married to Ronald.”

“Really? I would think that with your Quidditch career, you'd be too busy to keep up on me.”

“How could I forget you, Her-my-nee? You haff been one of the few vitches I've met who sees me for who I am, and not a Quidditch star to adore from afar,” he said, spinning Hermione around before pulling her back into an embrace.

“Congratulations on your anniversary. Marriage agrees vith you; you are looking more lovely than ever,” Viktor said with a whisper into her ear.

Hermione felt her cheeks colour and was thankful the dance floor was not too well lit. “Looks can be deceiving, Viktor.”

Viktor's brows furrowed, showing his concern, gazing into Hermione's eyes to gauge her response. “Trouble in paradise?”

“Paradise is not exactly what I would call it.” Hermione looked away, unable to meet his eye.
“Has Ron mistreated you?” There was a brewing storm behind Viktor's eyes.

“No. We just have different expectations, I think. It's been difficult at times, but we are trying to sort out our differences.” Hermione was flattered by Viktor's concern, even though they had fallen out of communication with one another. She would not go into any detail to let Viktor know the true depth of her unhappiness from being married to Ron Weasley.

“Marriage takes a lot of work, which is why I haven't bothered to settle down,” Viktor volunteered. “I was not ready for it.”

The song drew to a close, and the orchestra began playing a slow foxtrot.

“Tell me, why did we ever stop writing to each other?” the dark-haired wizard asked.

“I don't know,” Hermione laughed lightly. “You were traveling quite a bit, and busy with your career. The war came, and between studying for my N.E.W.T.s and staying alive, I guess I got a little busy myself.”

“Yes, but what about after the war?” Viktor looked at Hermione with searching eyes.

“There was a lot of the reconstruction; I was getting married, looking for an apprenticeship, a job, and then by the time everything settled down...” Hermione wondered if Viktor was feeling cast aside, judging by the way he was looking like her. “I'm sorry I stopped writing. But by the time my life normalized, I wasn't sure you wanted to hear from me. You were even more famous, and I didn't want to come off as an old acquaintance who was sending letters so I could brag to my friends that I knew the famous Quidditch star, Viktor Krum.”

“Did you stop writing to me because of Ron? You told me what a jealous streak he had in the past.” Viktor cast his eye over to where Ron, Claudia, and Bascom were still standing and talking. Hermione glanced in the same direction. “He certainly seems to have overcome his jealous streak.”

“Yeah,” Hermione agreed distractedly. “He certainly seems to have, all right.” Suddenly remembering what Viktor asked, she replied, “No, I would have continued writing to you no matter what Ron thought. I just really got caught up in everything that was going on at the time. I'm surprised you remembered me when you saw me tonight.”
“I saw you dancing with Ron on the floor and I instantly recognized you. You were the most beautiful witch at the Yule Ball, and you are the most beautiful witch here tonight.” Viktor spun Hermione under his arm.

Hermione wondered where her old boyfriend was going with his comments. She was about to say that she was married now, but decided to hold her tongue instead of jumping to conclusions, and making a fool of herself by thinking that Viktor wanted more than a rekindling of an old friendship. It was that her heart belonged to another already. Maybe if Viktor had come along instead of Severus, she might be interested, but Hermione's path was one where Viktor no longer prominently figured into it.

“I missed your letters. I found them always delightful to read. I do hope vee can become friends once more, especially if I move to England.”

Hermione gave the tall, dark wizard a warm smile. If anything, it was a smile of relief. She did not have to contemplate the idea of two wizards, apart from her husband, asking her to share their bed. After tonight, she only had to give her answer to one.

“I would like that very much, Viktor.”

“So tell me: what apprenticeship did you study?”

A frown flitted across Hermione's face before she put on a braver one. “It seems by the time the war ended, most of the apprenticeships had been snatched up,” she half-lied. “I'm working for the Department of Standards & Regulations.”

“Sounds important. What do you do?” he asked.

“I test all the Potion ingredients coming into the country, making sure they meet specification, weeding out the imitation and substandard ones, and such,” Hermione informed him, trying to keep the disappointment out of her voice that she wasn't closer to her long-term career goals that she had set for herself years ago.

“Tell me, what are you doing in England?” she asked, hoping to take the spotlight off of her own disappointing career.
“Actually, I'm here under secret negotiations.” Viktor looked about, then whispered, “I saw that kuchka, Skeeter, around. Can you keep a secret?”

Hermione smirked. “Is there a bug in my hair?”

“Huh? No.”


“I'm here to negotiate becoming the new coach for Puddlemere United,” Viktor whispered quietly into Hermione's ear.

“Really? That's wonderful!”

Viktor put a finger up to his lips. “Shhh! Secret.”

Hermione gave a conspiratorial nod and sly smile.

The song ended. Viktor and Hermione walked back to the side of the dance floor where Ron was talking animatedly with Bascom. Hermione caught how Claudia was giving Viktor a sultry look while Bascom was engaged in conversation with Ron.

Viktor gave a curt bow to Claudia and Hermione. “It vas lovely dancing vith both of you ladies, but if you vill excuse me, I really must return to my table.” Extending out his hand, he said, “Bascom, I'll be in touch. Ron, it vas good seeing you again. Catch you at another game soon.”

Ron shook hands with Viktor. The Weasleys watched the Bulgarian walk away to a discreet staircase that led to a series of secluded dining rooms with balconies that Hermione had not noticed before.

“What did Viktor mean by 'catch you at another game soon’?” Hermione asked casually.

“He's been to a couple of my games when we've played abroad. Nothing much other than a quick
handshake at the end of the game to congratulate us.” Ron turned to look at Hermione with a flicker of apprehension in his eye. “I didn't think it was worth mentioning. Never really spoke during those few times.”

Hermione was a little disappointed that her husband had made no mention that he had run across Viktor recently, but she was so thankful that he didn't behave childishly when Viktor asked for her hand to dance. She was willing to let the issue slide unchallenged.

“Shall we go eat now?” Ron asked.

“Yes, that would be lovely. Thank you.”

Once back at their table, Hermione read the menu, noting that each dish sounded better than the next.

‘Fillet mignon of venison presented with a three-rice pilaf, duck liver mousse with apricot essence froth, and ratatouille. Roasted squab perched atop couscous and accompanied with wild highland heather honey and orange glazed carrots. Rabbit braised with sage and pumpkin smoked bacon offered with an assemblage of salt roasted fingerling potatoes, and summer haricot verts à la Provençale.’ They could have ordered an appetizer or some other first course item, but Hermione did not feel like eating so much that she would be left with a stitch in her side when she would dance later on that evening.

As she continued reading, Mrs. Weasley wondered how many different ways they could use synonyms for the word “served” on the menu. Finally, at the bottom, her eyes lit upon what captured her interest the most.

Ron said, “Buffalo prime rib.” A large plate appeared in front of him with a substantial slab of rare meat, a jacket potato and sautéed baby courgettes.

“Cassoulet,” Hermione announced clearly. An oval-shaped fluted ramekin appeared in front of Hermione filled with the hot, bubbling dish. She noticed the breadcrumbs on top.

Hermione smiled to herself as she remembered Severus' remarks that breadcrumbs were unnecessary if a cassoulet was made properly. She wondered what he would say if he knew that an establishment such as the Grand Royal Supper Club used them. An image came to mind of Severus snorting, then remarking that the prestige and price of an establishment was no guarantee to
properly made food. She almost laughed aloud at the conjured thought, but stifled it.

The Weasleys ate in silence, neither feeling inclined towards conversation. That wasn't exactly true. Hermione wanted to talk about Mr. Spawn's penitent behavior earlier that day, but in the past, Ron had defended the younger wizard, noting that Hermione could be rather harsh and demanding of others and suggesting she give Trevor a break for once. To mention Trevor tonight might spark another intense conversation where voices would rise above a civil level in such a setting. There was the recent topic of Viktor, but Hermione was especially reluctant to venture there. Ron had behaved very maturely when interacting with Viktor, and she did not want to cause Ron to become suspicious or jealous by bringing up the topic of Viktor once more. Besides, the subject of Viktor would inevitably lead to the topic of Quidditch. At the moment, only one subject seemed safe enough not to bore Hermione to tears or cause Ron to publicly argue with her.

“So, how is your personal training for the upcoming calendar shoot coming along?” Hermione asked, very much interested in Ron’s progress. She silently hoped Mr. Spawn would not disturb the bain-marie she left to simmer overnight in order to induce the ingredients of Ron's supplement to separate, thus enabling her to identify the components of the solution.

After swallowing a large bite of meat, Ron said, “Bascom and I were just discussing that while you were dancing with Viktor. It seems I'm right on track. The goal of it is to build up muscle, then sculpt away the body fat just before the shoot. The trainer seems to think that if I do more work with weights now, and then cardio later, we'll reach my target goal in time for the November shoot.”

“Ron?” Hermione said with curiosity. “Just who is this trainer you're using? Is this the Cannons’ trainer?” She had met Merton, the Chudley Cannons' team trainer, a few times before, and thought that maybe she could speak with him about this supplement that Ron was taking.

“No, this is the trainer that works for the Mercury Broom Company. Bascom hires him to get his calendar stars into shape. Really knows his stuff, he does,” Ron remarked with admiration before taking another bite of his dinner.

Hermione did not feel like going into another session of Ron going on about his physical workout, so she let the topic die. She could have segued into talk of family, but there was nothing new from her Muggle side. The only matter of interest on Ron's side was Percy's birthday that weekend, but neither of them felt a strong bond with that particular Weasley. She could have brought up the fact that next week was going to be very busy for her, as students returning to Hogwarts would be in Diagon Alley purchasing supplies for their Potions kits, but that was a bit dry and boring even for Hermione. There was nothing of interest to her that she could bring up without making Ron feel intellectually inadequate, so Hermione kept quiet.
If it wasn't for the fact that there was music in the background to fill the silence between them, as well as beautiful décor to admire, and interesting people strolling by or dancing about the floor to catch their visual interest, it would have been just another painfully dull and uncomfortable dinner between Hermione and Ron. As it was, the time sped by a bit faster, but Hermione still noticed the lack of anything much to say on this festive night.

Since there was no conversation to distract Hermione and Ron from eating, they finished their dinners quickly.

Staring at her empty plate just before it literally disappeared from the table, Hermione sighed. The cassoulet had been very good, but it didn't seem quite as good as Severus'. Maybe it was the breadcrumbs.

'Maybe it's because Severus surprised you that night, and made you feel so very special.'

She lightly shook her head, trying not to recall more memories of that particular tall, dark, raven-haired wizard.

Hermione looked up to find Ron regarding her with an uneasy look, probably wondering what the hell they should do now that they had eaten and it was too soon to dance after such a big meal, just like she was wondering at that moment.

Ron's eyes roved about the room for a moment before spying inspiration.

“Care to go for a little walk?” the redheaded wizard suggested.

It wouldn't be very elegant to shrug, as that's how uninspired Hermione felt at the moment, but she decided she should be gracious and accept her husband's invitation. Mrs. Weasley smiled and nodded, waiting for Ron to lead the way.

Strolling along a broad aisle towards a pair of large French doors, Hermione looked up and spied Viktor sitting along the edge of a balcony railing to what must have been a private dining area above the main dining area. In the dim light, she saw that the large mirrors placed along the right side of the restaurant were actually the privacy screens that hid away private dining rooms on a third level. Counting the number of mirrored screens, there must have been five private rooms or one large room. Before she passed under the balcony upon which Viktor watched her, the Bulgarian wizard gave her a small smile.
Hermione and Ron entered a private garden for the restaurant patrons to enjoy. The fresh air felt good, making Hermione realize how warm the room was with all those people inside dancing and enjoying themselves.

Though the moon had not risen yet, the garden flowers caught the light spilling out from the upper balcony where the private dining rooms were, and the summer starlight. Moonflowers, flowering tobacco, and bushes full of blooming gardenia perfumed the garden, their white flowers catching what little light there was. There was a low hedge of white miniature roses guiding evening strollers towards a white columned gazebo covered in *Jasminum polyanthum*. As much as Hermione found the scent of jasmine pleasant, the overwhelming, cloying scent of all the flowers mixed together was a bit much to her, but she did not complain.

Walking hand-in-hand, Hermione let Ron guide her to a railing with granite balusters. In the weak light, she could make out Ron's pale and freckled face gazing down upon her. Unable to stand her husband's scrutiny, Hermione turned her attention back to the garden laid out before them.

“Lovely garden,” Hermione remarked a little nervously.

“How have you been having a good time tonight, Hermione?”

Turning her attention back to her husband, she could see the uncertainty in his face.

“Oh... yes!” 'God, I hope that didn't sound too forced.' “Everything has just been lovely.” ‘You already used that adjective, silly girl.'

How could Hermione tell her husband that despite his attempts to be amicable and the perfect gentleman, the vast improvement in his dancing, his mature behavior when interacting with her old boyfriend, Viktor, and the charming atmosphere, it was not enough. It seemed like icing on a rotten, moldy cake.

Ron leaned closer to her. “Good,” he whispered in reply before bending down to capture Hermione's lips in a kiss.

Hermione craned her neck up to kiss him back fully, trying to put all the passion Severus evoked in her into her kiss. She felt one of Ron's arms snake around her waist, the other to her neck, and he deepened the kiss.
'A perfect romantic setting and it is still not enough. Why do I feel nothing?' Hermione mused to herself. 'Why am I thinking instead of being lost in this kiss? How is it that I can think so clearly now, though I can't when Severus is near me?'

Going through the usual routine, she stroked Ron's tongue with her own with the calm collection she would have used when picking out produce at the farmers’ market, and found it to be a predictable task with no anticipation.

'Should I run my fingers through his hair? Maybe I shouldn't, it would only muss it up, and it does look nice. I can't believe I'm planning on how to continue kissing Ron. Why is it that I can think so clearly, and whenever I'm this close to Severus, my mind shuts down and my body knows what to do?'

Instead of running her fingers through Ron's hair, Hermione stroked his arm with one hand and ran the other along his back.

The stars did not shine and twinkle merrily down from above on the two figures kissing, but flickered in cold and aloof indifference.

They both ended the kiss and pulled away to gaze at each other in the starlight.

'Nothing. I feel absolutely no passion towards him,' Hermione thought while staring up at the man who almost appeared like a stranger to her in the dark and intimate night.

When all was said and done, deep down inside, Hermione had always known it would be like this. All the trappings of dinner and dancing were not going to “magically” reignite the flame between her and Ron, when no flame had existed in the first place.

Ron sighed, and Hermione was not sure if it was one of pleasure, contentment, disappointment, or resignation that an evening of romance was not going to salvage their marriage.

'I wish it was Severus here with me, instead of Ron.'
years ago, Severus and Hermione would never have been able to find any middle ground to find anything even remotely attractive about the other. And now it had come to this. Hermione loved Severus with a sort of soul-possessing compulsion that constantly drove her back to his side, despite the fact that her mind screamed that it was wrong and that she was destroying everything she had held sacred as a girl.

But Hermione was not a girl anymore, and she now saw the world through adult eyes, knowing that fallibility is a flaw that makes even the most powerful witch or wizard human in the end. Was it Hermione's youthful arrogance that had made her shameful of her conviction years ago, trying to convince herself that marrying Ron was the right decision when in reality it was a coward's solution to avoid spinsterhood? Was it that she had finally decided that there was nothing in her heart to keep her faithful to Ron any longer? It was cold and possibly heartless, but Hermione could not look upon Ron with any fondness other than that of an old friend with whom she shared a history.

Hermione had wanted to become lovers with Severus for what seemed like an eternity now, and she had held back on moral principle. And now that every avenue to save her marriage had been exhausted, it shocked Hermione to discover she did not feel guilt knowing that she was not in love with her own husband, but was deeply so with another man.

The muffled melody of the orchestra drifted out to the farthest reaches of the garden. It was a slow song, but to Hermione it seemed like a funeral dirge for her marriage, which seemed to have died with that kiss.

Ron kept hold of Hermione's hand as they began wandering around the rest of the garden, admiring the enchanted topiaries and various gurgling fountains placed around the terrace. Unlike the other couples, the intimate niches and benches did not inspire the Weasleys to kiss. They passed them by without much interest in utilizing them, the sound of the gravel crunching beneath their feet as they slowly ambled along in silence.

After making a complete loop of the grounds, they migrated back inside the restaurant to their table where they found dessert menus ready for them.

Looking at the menu, Hermione was in the mood for a slice of Severus' plum tart tatin or one of his uncomplicated offerings of fruit, dates, and nuts, but it appeared there was nothing as simple as that on the menu.

'Chocolate gateau made with cocoa beans from a remote Colombian mountain, topped with extra heavy sweetened cream, whipped with the feather of an Abraxan, and drizzled with puree of sickle pear mixed with brandy caramel sauce. Ginger and peach Napoleon joined with a rhubarb compote and Madagascar vanilla sauce. Roulade filled with hazelnut butter crème, vanilla custard,
Ron seemed to be debating between the chocolate gateau and the pumpkin tiramisu.

Hermione felt that if she had something as heavy and complex as one of those desserts, she certainly would be too stuffed to dance. Severus certainly knew how to choose a menu, picking light desserts to counter the heaviness of the meal. The night Severus had made her cassoulet, he served up strawberries lightly marinated in an orange Muscat with crème fraîche. It was elegant in its simplicity.

Severus had provided many evenings with dinner, dancing, and wonderful conversation. The only thing lacking was the rich ambiance, but Hermione could not care less that she dined in the middle of a slightly worn-down flat in the middle of someone's bedroom-great room. None of it mattered at all. Sitting across from Ron, Hermione knew now that none of the trappings of a fancy restaurant with full orchestra and everyone dressed for high society could replace the warmth of Severus' presence, his wit, intelligence, hours upon hours of conversation that she did not want to end, and moments of provocative sensuality that made her head spin.

If Hermione had to pick between this night at the Grand Royal Supper Club with Ron, and another evening with Severus, she would choose the latter without hesitation.

At the bottom of the dessert menu, Hermione finally saw something that caught her interest.

“Chocolate ga-too,” Ron said aloud.

“Summer fruits with selection of flavored shortbreads,” Hermione said.

“Why not get something really fancy?” Ron asked, bewildered why his wife would forgo something as elaborate as the four-chocolate truffle pyramid gilded with Egyptian gold.

How could Hermione explain to someone — who never seemed to eat slow enough to enjoy savouring the subtle flavors of a meal — that it wasn't about gorging one's self on the most expensive or the most difficult to create dishes, but that which would balance the meal and please the palate.

“It's what I'm in the mood for right now,” Hermione explained.
“Your loss,” Ron quipped.

Though Ron's remark was not an insult, it rankled Hermione.

After dessert, Hermione suggested more dancing. As they moved to and fro on the dance floor, Hermione looked up and asked, “Is that a new cologne you're wearing?” She had noticed it earlier, but only mentioned it in dire need of a topic of conversation.

“Yeah, do you like it?”

Hermione wasn't sure. Leaning in, she tilted her face up and nuzzled her nose against Ron's neck. Normally when she did this to Severus, it took all of her formidable will not to spend the rest of the night nuzzling his neck, but with Ron, there was no desire to keep her nose there longer than necessary.

'Definitely lemons and citrus, musk... green woody scents, like grass... and the smell of the ocean, aquatic...'

“It's nice,” she admitted. It didn't make her head swim like Severus' cologne did, but it was pleasant.

“It's called Haunt. I got some recently; I was waiting until tonight to try it out for you,” he told her.

“It suits you.” Hermione began to wonder how the same cologne could smell so differently on two different men, but decided that when she saw Severus on Monday, she could ask him then.

The song ended, and the band immediately went into an upbeat swing tune. Ron was better at swing dancing than doing the foxtrot, as there was a lot more leeway with that style and space between the partners. Hermione began enjoying herself, for a short while not trying to push thoughts of Severus out of her head, and was temporarily lost in the moment.

Ron spun her under his arm and said quickly, “Ready for a dip?”
Before Hermione could give any reply, Ron held her tight and dipped her back. Remembering all the lessons she’d had with Severus, Hermione finally let herself trust Ron and did not fight it. Ron did a pretty good job of dipping her and bringing her upright.

“Oh, your comb fell out.” Ron commented, noticing a few of Hermione's curls askew.

They stopped dancing for a moment while they looked down at the floor, searching for the lost comb.

“There it is,” Ron said, and took a step forward and to the side.

Hermione still hadn't spotted the comb, and tried to move out of the way for Ron when she heard and felt the crack of tortoise shell under her shoe. Lifting her foot, Mrs. Weasley saw the shattered comb and crushed roses on the floor.

“Allow me,” Ron said, as he cast a quick *Reparo* on the comb.

The hair accessory was fixed, but the roses could not be salvaged. Flowers are a living thing, and thus unable to be restored by the simple charm.

They decided it was time to stop and have a little refreshment. Sitting at the table, Hermione stared at the mutilated flowers. Somehow the fact that flowers that symbolize love were ruined seemed to be an apt summation of Hermione's assessment of her marriage. To Hermione, it wasn't so much that the roses were destroyed, but that it felt like the final omen of the night.

As they sat back down, Ron poured the bottle of champagne only to notice that it was empty.

“Shall we order more drinks?” Ron asked.

’*Maybe alcohol will make this night a little more fun. Couldn't hurt.*’ “Sure, why not?”

The wine list suddenly reappeared on the table.
“I really don't feel like wine. Do you, Ron?”

“Not really. I was thinking of a glass of Firewhisky.”

Hermione had rarely drank mixed drinks in the wizarding world, as most functions she went to where hard liquor was served usually ended up with Fred or George playing bartender. Some unsuspecting witch or wizard would wind up being turned into a platypus, or suddenly shrunken down to the size of a large brownie while wearing a little girl's blue dress, a pinafore, and a blond wig. They dubbed the latter libation “Drink Me.”

Looking at the back of the wine list, Hermione found the mixed drink section. She didn't want to drink a fruity concoction served with seven layers of fruit on the rim, an enchanted plastic monkey holding a cherry (and which would probably eat it before Hermione got the chance to), a little paper parasol, and topped with whipped cream. Instead, she reviewed the list of wizarding-style martinis. She once had a martini at her parents' home and actually discovered she liked it, but never kept the ingredients for the drink in her own home. Considering her luck when alcohol, desperation, and depression mixed, it was probably for the best. However, tonight was going rather good considering the fact that Hermione had come to terms with the fact that her marriage was now officially over. If she could never be in love with Ron, what was the point in staying married to him?

“I think I'll have the Blue Fairy Martini,” Hermione said. A far from traditional martini glass with silver and gold fairies intertwined around the stem of the glass appeared before her. In the glass was a bluish liquid containing Siberian vodka, a quarter-shot of Fairy Brandy, a misting of vermouth, a splash of blueberry liqueur, and passion fruit juice. It was presented with a bluebell flame sitting atop the surface of the drink that one was supposed to extinguish before the alcohol ignited, resulting in a small explosion.

“Double Firewhisky, neat.” Ron picked up his drink that materialized in front of him, and raised it in a toast. “Slainte mhath.”

She extinguished the flame and raised her glass as well. 'Here's to the death of our marriage.’ “Cheers.”

If the martini had boasted a full shot of Fairy Brandy, Hermione would have never attempted to order it, having sworn off from ever drinking that much of it ever again, but a little dribble of it into her drink probably wouldn't be so bad. Besides, she had rarely felt so relaxed and euphoric as when she was under the spell of that particular libation. As it was, a quarter-shot was enough so that Hermione could feel quite relaxed without fearing she was going to be doing something worthy of plastering on the cover of the Daily Prophet once more.
Just as Hermione was about to take a second sip of her cocktail, she spotted Viktor gazing down at her from his viewpoint on the balcony of his private dining room. He raised a glass in silent salute, and Hermione returned the gesture, feeling a little flirtatious. Ron could have seen her at that moment, and she wouldn't have cared.

With each sip, Hermione felt more relaxed and a little less inhibited. By the time she drained her glass, Hermione was feeling not just confident and carefree, but horny as hell.

'I'll have to investigate the effects of passion fruit juice mixed with Fairy Brandy, and see if that's why I feel so damn turned on,' she thought.

Looking across the table, Hermione stared at her husband.

'He's not bad looking when he cleans up. Some nice clothes, a new haircut, and some manners; he's not that bad, I suppose.'

'Wait, what are you going on about?' Hermione began to internally debate with herself. 'You may be loosened up, but you are certainly not that drunk.'

'Lighten up. You want to go home tonight and not get shagged? Besides, maybe that supplement has done something for his stamina.' Her eyes raked over Ron's form, appreciating the way his robes flattered his now slightly muscular physique. 'Not having a good tumble on your anniversary is like not having sex on your birthday or Christmas morning. Besides, you are married to him. Why not?'

There were a hundred reasons why she should not aim for sex that night, including: any lip service Ron might give to it being good would be a lie and she would know it, she would still probably wind up sexually frustrated after Ron would leave her unsatisfied, and her ego still smarted after Ron's parting remarks the other night.

Her brain continued with its persuasive remarks. 'You can either go home, shag and be only mostly sexually frustrated; or go home, not shag, and you can both be totally frustrated.'

It seemed at the moment that a bad shag was the better of the two choices.
'Well, just don't sit there. Turn on the charm'!

It was bizarre, but Hermione suddenly realized that she had never really openly flirted with Ron. There were moments when they were first dating where there was a stolen glance or secret smile between them, but never anything provocative.

Shifting in her seat, Hermione slipped her foot out of her shoe and reached under the table. At first she found the cold metal leg of the table, but eventually she found Ron's ankle. Watching Ron, she began to graze her toes along the top of his foot and stuck her toe up the cuff of his trousers. Her toes made circles along his ankle.

Ron looked utterly puzzled, wondering what the hell was under the table nudging his foot. He peeked under the table and saw Hermione's foot, and it dawned on him what she was doing. Looking at his wife, he stared at her with bewilderment.

Hermione winked.

"Have you got something in your eye?" Ron asked.

'Oh, bloody hell! How much simpler can I make this?' Hermione wondered.

"Let's dance some more," she suggested with a smile, hoping a few well-placed non-verbal cues would clue Ron in that she was feeling amorous.

Ron escorted her to the floor, and they began to dance. Hermione leaned her head against his chest.

"You know, Hermione," Ron said carefully. "You shouldn't drink Fairy Brandy. You don't seem quite yourself, especially that time a few weeks ago."

Hermione wanted to say, "How the hell would you know what I'm like?" but had to admit that she was acting quite a bit bolder than usual. She merely dismissed Ron's comment by replying, "It's only a quarter-shot, just a smidgen."

She moved her hand up from Ron's shoulder to the back of his neck, and began stroking the skin
there. With Ron's neatly trimmed hair, there was none to play with at the base of his neck like there was with Severus.

The orchestra began playing a tango, and they moved across the floor. She certainly felt more relaxed without being clumsy, but whereas Severus could guide her about the floor with ease, Ron seemed to have trouble with the steps. Halfway though the song, Ron practically gave up.

In order to diffuse a potentially explosive situation if Ron's mood soured, Hermione stood up on her toes and kissed Ron to distract him. Even feeling this aroused, there was no heat between them. Each stroke of her tongue against his was without inspiration and was done out of rote.

Hermione pulled away and saw the distant look in Ron's eye, as if he also recognized the lack of passion between them.

The band transitioned into playing a slow song. Husband and wife moved to and fro, lost in their own thoughts.

“Mr. Weasley?” The host came up to the Weasleys on the dance floor, looking eagerly to the wizard. “Mr. Weasley! I'm sorry to disturb you, but there is an urgent Floo call for you. Come with me, please. In my office,” he directed them.

Hermione and Ron exchanged worried glances, hoping that it was nothing tragic, especially concerning family. The older wizard walked them to a private door and into a well-appointed room.

In the middle of the fireplace hovered a familiar face.

“Rogina!” Ron said with a start, kneeling down in front of the hearth. “What's wrong?”

“Oh, Ron, I am so very sorry, but I didn't know who else to contact. I need you to come over to the pub now. We've had a wizard's brawl here, and both Rufus and Pete got hit with some very nasty curses,” Rogina began to explain. “I need an extra pair of hands to clear out the wizards still hexing each other, and the rest of the customers. Then I need you to close up the pub while I go to St. Mungo's.”

“Are Rufus and Pete all right?” Hermione asked with worry.
“I don't know. That's why I need to get over to St. Mungo's right now. I'm hoping that they have a Pensieve to use so we can figure out what curses they were both hit with. It all happened so fast, I can't recall who got hit with what.” Rogina's face showed her apprehension over her husband’s and Pete's health.

“I know it's your anniversary, and I hate to do this, but Ron, can you come over and help us this once?” Rogina asked, almost pleadingly.

Hermione and Ron exchanged glances. It was obvious that the evening was just dragging on for both of them, trying to find ways to entertain themselves without calling it a night too soon.

Tilting her head to the side and pursing her lips, Hermione could see that Ron felt an obligation to go help his old boss. “Go, Ron. There will be other dinners out and anniversaries. She needs your help.”

Ron nodded his head somberly, not so much in agreement but acknowledging that there was no rekindling of romance between them, and that the night was not all what either had expected it to be.

Turning back to the head hovering in the fireplace, Ron said, “All right. Give me a minute. I'll be right there.”

“Oh, thank you, Ron!” Rogina turned her head and yelled over her shoulder, “Oi! You get away from there.”

The flames went out, leaving the fireplace dark and cold once more.

Ron stood to bid his wife goodbye. “I don't know how long I'll be. Why don't you stay here and enjoy yourself. I'll see you at home later.”

“Should I wait up for you?” She moved her hands up the planes of Ron's chest, eventually latching her hands around his neck, hoping she was giving him a seductively coy look. Hermione was still in the mood for sex, even if it wasn't going to be all that good. Mediocre sex was better than no sex, in her current state of mind.
Looking at her with reservation, Ron replied, “Don't bother.”

Hermione's eyes darted to see how close the host was standing to them before whispering, “It's no bother. I thought that tonight... since it's our anniversary...” She let the sentence trail off, leaving what was unsaid to imply the rest of her suggestion. Hermione raised her eyes to Ron in hope that he might need release as much as she did.

“I wouldn't want to take advantage of you while you’re under the influence of Fairy Brandy,” Ron told her coldly. His eyes narrowed slightly. “Wouldn't want you to think in the morning that I was extracting payment for dinner tonight.”

Hermione's arms slipped away from her husband, and she recoiled from him as if he was made out of ice. “You'd better go. Rogina needs you,” she said, trying to not let her scorn come through in her tone.

Memories of Ron's remarks the previous night came back to haunt her, and Hermione held back the tears brought on by the sting of her husband's rejection.

'At least I know of one man who wants me,' she thought bitterly.

Ron reached up on the mantle and grabbed a footed plique-a-jour bowl holding Floo powder. “The Listing Broom!” he called out and disappeared in a flash of green flames.

Hermione stood there feeling abandoned. She had told him to go, and she knew it was the right thing to do. The fact that she hoped Rogina would get to St. Mungo's quickly for Rufus and Pete did not stop the sinking feeling of rejection she had in her chest.

While walking back to the table alone in order to sit and gather her thoughts, Mrs. Weasley was accosted by a vaguely familiar face.

“Hermione?”

Whipping around to see who called out her name, she saw him.
'Oh God, what is his name? Think!'

It suddenly came to her. “Alan?”

The handsome wizard that Hermione rebuffed the night she went to see "Merlin and Morgana: The Lost Years" approached her, his smile widening with the pleasure that the lovely witch remembered his name.

“I knew I would see you around, but I had no idea I would meet you here.” Alan reached for Hermione's hand and gently grasped it before she had a chance to extend her hand in a more business-like manner. “You are looking quite spectacular. I doubt any witch could even hold a candle to you tonight, even Lady Battenberg.”

Mrs. Weasley doubted that statement, as she had glimpsed Lady Battenberg as she came out of her carriage right behind Hermione and Ron. The strawberry blond witch was regularly in the top three list of the most beautiful and elegant witches in Witch Weekly since she came of age six years ago. Lady Battenberg and Hermione were both the same age, but the former had not attended Hogwarts, instead being taught magic by private tutors to reduce her public exposure to the wizarding and Muggle worlds.

“Are you here tonight with anyone?” Alan asked, his eyes raking along Hermione's body. “Oh, that's right. You left quickly saying you had to go home to your husband. Is he here tonight?” He craned his neck looking around for any wizard who might approach him with an angry look in his eye.

'The Fates really have it in for me tonight. First Rogina's Floo call and now this.'

It wasn't just those two things, but a growing list of a lot of small things. With the exception of Ron's parting remarks, he had created a wonderful evening for Hermione to enjoy, which she didn't. Between the omen with her broken comb, coming across Viktor, having to fend off Bascom Nettleton, and the definitive proof that there was never any passion between her and Ron, it was certainly amounting up to one of the most anti-climactic nights. At this rate, it was going to trump her wedding night in terms of disappointments.

“Actually, you just missed him. He had an emergency that required his immediate attention,” she explained, removing her hand from his grasp and taking a step back to get a little more space between her and Alan.
Alan smirked, as if he had caught her in a lie. “Really, how unfortunate for him that he was unable to stay with his beautiful wife. You don't think he would mind at all – since he's not even here – if I were to ask you for a dance?”

Hermione's mouth opened as she tried to think of a gracious way to politely decline without being rude. One thing she had learned was that the wizarding world was a small world, and everybody knew everyone. It was best to be diplomatic in even the most uneasy situations. Before she could form the words to say that she was actually a bit tired and was thinking about going home, Alan grabbed her hand and tucked it into his arm.

“That's settled,” he stated with a smile that set alarm bells off in Hermione's head, even though she was still riding her Fairy Brandy-induced high.

Hermione looked about, hopeful to see another familiar face who might be able to help her from this situation that seemed to be escaping her control. Unfortunately, Mr. Nettleton was nowhere to be seen, most probably fondling his date in some dark corner.

Alan led Hermione out onto the dance floor and then grabbed her a little too tightly about the waist. As they danced the foxtrot, Hermione tried to get a little distance between their bodies, but Alan kept holding her close to his. It was like dancing with a repulsive eel with the grip of a boa constrictor.

Alan's looks began to appear less than handsome the longer she was in his company. He kept pushing the boundaries of decorum in public by not getting the hint that Hermione was definitely not interested in him. Soon, Hermione did not see a handsome wizard, but a man with lustful cruelty in his eyes.

“May I cut in?” came a familiar thick accent from behind the apprehensive witch.

Hermione turned her head and spotted Viktor standing ramrod straight, slightly towering over Alan and looking as if he would not allow his request to be denied.

The only other face that would be more welcome at that moment would be Severus', but right now she would take a Bulgarian knight in shining armor to save her from Alan's clutches.

“Viktor! I was looking for you when Alan here abducted me,” the brunette witch said lightly, though she meant every word of her so-called jest.
Alan was not about to confront a more imposing wizard in such a situation, and graciously let go of Hermione and bowed to her. “Thank you for the dance, Hermione. Pity your husband wasn't here to cut in instead.”

Hermione's eyes narrowed, but she decided to ignore Alan. She immediately put her hand on Viktor's shoulder and her other hand into his waiting one. They moved back and forth until they danced away from Alan, who stalked off as if he had not lost the battle.

“Oh, thank Merlin you showed up, Viktor,” Hermione sighed with relief and a worried smile.

“You looked like you needed saving. Who was that?” the tall, dark wizard asked.

“I went to the Three Broomsticks after seeing a play once, and he picked up on me there. Ron wasn't with me, and I told him I had to go home to my husband.” Hermione conveniently left out the little detail that she flirted with him a little bit that first night they had met. “Ron got an emergency Floo call and had to go just now. As I came out of the office, that wizard came up to me and thought somehow that I was still interested. It seemed he didn't believe that Ron was with me earlier, or that I'm actually married. He was getting rather fresh, and you couldn't have come along at a better time. I don't know how to thank you.”

“As I haff said before, what are friends for?”

Hermione wanted to rest her head against Viktor's chest as a sign of gratitude, and to express her weariness, but refrained, not wanting to give Viktor the wrong message.

“Perhaps you should go home, if you wish to avoid being accosted by other men. Especially Mr. Nettleton,” he added with a raised brow.

“You noticed that too?”

“How could I not?” Viktor replied with a shrug as he escorted Hermione from the floor. “You could stay and join me in my private dining room. I am here with a few friends.”

“No, I think I will call it a night.” It couldn't have been any later than nine-thirty, far too early to
call it a night if she had been at Severus' place, but the evening had seemed like it had gone on forever.

They reached the top of the stairs and the host gave Viktor Hermione's cloak, which he helped put on her.

“Let me walk you out to your carriage,” Viktor offered.

“That would be lovely.”

“So tell me. What was this emergency that called Ron away?” the Bulgarian Seeker asked.

“How about I write to you and tell you everything that happened?” she offered in return.

Viktor smiled. “Yes, that would be a good reason for you to write to me.”

They exited through the door and walked along the awning-covered walk to the carriages.

Suddenly there was a flash of a camera's light bulb to their right.

“How are you leaving the Grand Royal Supper Club with your old lover, Viktor Krum? Did you and your husband have a fight tonight?” Rita Skeeter asked, firing one question after another.

Hermione merely smiled, knowing that if she rolled her eyes or glared, that a photo would be taken of her doing just that, and it would wind up being plastered in the middle of some scandalous gossip column accusing her of leaving Ron for Viktor.

“Let me handle this,” Krum said *sotto voce*.

Once they reached Skeeter, Krum and Mrs. Weasley stopped.
“Actually, Rita, Ron vas called away on an emergency, and I vas escorting Mrs. Veasley to her carriage. I have guests inside that are waiting for me. I vill keep this short, so listen closely.” Viktor leaned in, and Rita looked on eagerly. “Print exactly vat I haff said and I vill guarantee you an exclusive first interview with me ven I make a very important announcement later this year. Understood?” He gave her a rather pointed look.

Hermione could have used her own threat of revealing to the Ministry that Rita Skeeter was an unregistered Animagus, but that détente tactic had worn thin over the years. To date, Skeeter had kept her nose out of the Weasley family's business, but Hermione and Ron's appearance that night had seemed rather promising for some fresh yellow journalism.

Skeeter nodded and winked, non-verbally agreeing to the terms.

The carriage arrived, and Viktor provided his hand to support Hermione as she entered into the coach.

Leaning out of the window, Hermione smiled down at Viktor. “Thank you once again.” She kept it short and vague, knowing that Rita was eavesdropping.

“You haff a good night, and tell Ron to owl me for the name of my agent,” Viktor said, waving to Hermione as the carriage began to trundle away.

“I will,” she replied before sticking her head back in the coach, wondering how bumpy the landing would be when they arrived in Diagon Alley.

The gryffons trotted slowly as they pulled away from the restaurant, and then began to gain speed. As their feet left the ground, the gryffons and carriage became invisible once more.

The moon had still not risen yet, and so Hermione had nothing but the lights from country villages lighting her a real path home.

Hermione had the solitude and quiet to properly reflect on the night. ‘I should have slept with Severus weeks ago. Why I waited is beyond me now.’

She knew why she had waited. If she hadn't, she knew she would have wondered, “What if, what if,” time and time again, making her eventually regret not waiting in the first place. Now she knew
for certain that if she was ever going to experience anything even remotely fervid and thrilling, she
would have to seek it outside of her marriage. Hermione could not face growing old and living an
exceptionally long life if it was to be as dull and flavorless as the plain porridge Ron had taken to
eating for his breakfasts lately. She wanted to die having something to remember that might still
make her cheeks burn with remembrance in her advanced years.

Hermione was still a bit indignant over the way Ron had dismissed her sexual advances. It seemed
that for all of Ron's proclamation that he wanted to romance her properly, he was just going
through the motions during the night. Deep down inside, she knew he felt as unenthusiastic as she
did as they danced, dined, and kissed. And now she was going home to an empty bed on her
anniversary with no prospect of any sex. It had been weeks since Hermione and Ron coupled last,
but to Hermione it seemed longer.

As the brightness of the city lights began to light the night sky, Hermione glanced out the coach
windows. They were approaching London and soon the night would come to an end, culminating
in Hermione slipping on a comfortable cotton nightgown and not into Ron's arms.

The descent was a bit steeper, due to the fact that they were flying over rooftops before the carriage
managed to squeeze into a small open square along Diagon Alley, using the same magic the
Knight Bus used to finagle into tight spaces.

There was no one to help Hermione down from the carriage, so she clutched onto the hand rail as
she stepped onto the cobblestones right in front of her block of flats. No sooner had the coach door
behind her shut than the gryffons leapt back into the air, presumably going back to their livery or
mews.

Looking up at the building, she still couldn't believe the night was already over. It was only ten
o'clock, and her coach had turned back into a pumpkin far too early.

'I wish Severus could have seen me tonight.' She sighed. Hermione truly did not want to go home
just yet. 'Severus wouldn't have refused me, unlike Ron.'

Instead of heading into her block of flats, Hermione turned and began walking along a familiar
path.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The day couldn't get much worse than it already had been. Severus paced within his flat, feeling
trapped, incensed at the indignity of another surprise inspection.
He was so very close to a solution for making the temporary hair dye rinse out completely with one washing, instead of the four additional shampooings it took to rid his hair of the film that was left behind. Just when inspiration hit, Dheef had come running into his office ranting about Aurors on their way, and that Marf was slowing them up until Master Severus and Master Draco could get back home safely.

Draco, who worked in the office across from Severus', heard the commotion and joined Severus in a flight down, the Potions master appearing to be like his derogatory nickname, “the bat.” They flew down the stairs, two and three at a time, their feet barely touching the steps as they went, leaping over banisters to hasten their descent. Were there witnesses, the pair would have been observed as nothing more than a flurry of cloak and wind.

There were several twisting narrow passageways between Lovely Lavender headquarters and the Red Ginseng. They took the one least likely to be traveled by Aurors.

They had just made it into their flat as the Aurors entered the building. To Severus' benefit, Marf had made sure all Potions books had been taken back to his office at his real work. Additionally, Kingsley was in charge of the inspection, directing the junior Aurors, some of whom were on their first such “raid.” The tall black Auror was surprised to find Draco and Severus at home in the middle of the work day, but as they supposedly served as gigolos, this was where they conducted their business.

As an Auror, fresh from training, fumbled around in Severus' cupboards, accidentally breaking a large jar of tomatoes Severus had canned a few weeks ago, Severus had to stand by and watch, unable to do anything. The rookie Auror did not bother apologizing for his clumsiness, giving Severus a look that said that he was lucky that he didn't smash open every jar in order to search for illicit goods. Severus regarded the young Auror, and wondered if he had failed him at Potions a long time ago, while he still taught at Hogwarts.

Finally, after his kitchen, bathroom, and wardrobe had been overturned and checked, everyone left. Kingsley gave Severus a look of quick apology before leaving to go upstairs to inspect Blaise Zabini's flat.

Severus would have gone back to work, but Marf had appeared to tell him that the building was being watched.

So he was stuck there with nothing to do. He didn't dare have Marf bring a Potions book back home for fear that an Auror would suddenly appear at his door without warning, Apparating right to the spot. Draco joined him for dinner, but during most of the meal, they kept to themselves. The younger wizard had stopped asking Severus when he was going to talk to Hermione about Potions ingredients. Both were rather sullen over the inspection, lost in their own thoughts involving
freedom and warmer climes. Most of all, Severus was distracted while trying to avoid the mental image of Hermione wrapped in Weasley's arms, dancing the night away and gaily laughing at her husband's insipid jokes.

Severus was ready to just give up and go to bed, hoping the coast was clear come morning time, when he heard a knock.

*Knock-knock. Knock-knock.*

At first he thought it was going to be a late night surprise inspection by an Auror, hoping the ex-Death Eater had got cozy thinking he was safe enough to bring his dark items out from hiding, but Aurors didn't knock so lightly upon his door.

“Hermione?” he whispered to himself.

He was sure it couldn't be, as she was supposed to be at the Grand Royal Supper Club with that brainless berk she had married; however, that was her signature knock. His stomach tightened with apprehension. Severus grabbed the first half-mask he could find and put it on before opening the door.

He gazed at her, unable to move. Before him stood a temptress, enchantress, sylph, siren, and seductress all rolled into one; she was his naiad, his obsession. Hermione was a vision in ruby red with her hair pulled up to cascade down the back of her head, looking like some goddess on a Grecian urn.

Without invitation, Hermione stepped into Severus' flat, and turned to see him still standing at the door staring at her.

'*If I'm dreaming, may I never wake,*' Severus prayed as he shut the door.

Before Severus could ask why she was here and not out to dinner for her anniversary, Hermione said, “I had to see you.”

If Severus was in control of his faculties, he would have offered to take her cloak. As it was, he was still too stunned by Hermione's sudden appearance to do much of anything. She looked even more lovely than his biggest dreams and wildest hopes. Never did he imagine her to look so
breathtaking. She was already beautiful in his eyes, but now she looked like perfection.

Hermione was hoping Severus would speak, but he did nothing of the kind. In the silence that filled the air, she hoped that she would not be the one to carry the conversation as to her sudden appearance.

He finally found his voice and asked, “Why?”

It wasn't very eloquent, but he supposed that it was better than standing there like some damned fool gaping at her. At least if he could get Hermione talking, that would buy him some time to get his brain functioning again.

“I was at dinner tonight with my husband,” Hermione began, casting her eyes down. “Everything was perfect.”

Severus felt his heart begin to drop through his stomach in fear that Hermione would stop seeing him and go back to her husband.

She continued. “But despite it all, it wasn't perfect to me.”

Severus felt his heart lighten at these words. He began slowly walking towards Hermione, unaware that his legs were carrying him forward.

“We danced.” She paused. “We dined. Their cassoulet wasn't as good as yours. They used breadcrumbs.”

The nervous witch laughed lightly, but the raven-hared wizard could not laugh with her, too entranced by what Hermione was trying to say, his eyes drawn towards the few tendrils grazing the nape of her neck.

“We strolled out into this beautiful garden. It was so lovely.” Hermione closed her eyes and swallowed as if she was taking a bitter pill. “Ron and I kissed,” she whispered. She could almost feel the tears forming behind her eyes. “There was nothing.”
Severus almost let out a sigh of relief, but didn't, wanting to catch every word of which Hermione would say next.

“No passion, no fire. I have to admit to myself there was never any in the first place. I don't love him.” Hermione opened her eyes and saw that Severus was standing right in front of her by this point. ‘I love you.’

Hermione took a steadying breath before forging ahead. “And now I need to know: is it that I have no passion in me at all...” She reached up and undid the clasp to her cloak, letting it drop to the floor to reveal her red dress underneath. “... or is it that I only feel passion with you?”

Severus gazed into Hermione's eyes, unable to look away. Somewhere in the depth of her eyes, he could see one more question begging to be asked.

“Will you kiss me? I need to know,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion and necessity.

His hands reached up and cupped her face. His eyes traveled over the tiny beauty mark she had near the tip of her chin, the slope of her nose, the shape of her eyes, the color of her cheek, drinking in every little detail he could, even the pattern in the irises of her eyes. He had wanted to kiss her for so long, and here she was asking him, but he did not know why he was holding back, any more than he could explain why she fascinated him.
“Please, kiss me,” she begged. “Kiss me... Severus.”

She called him by his name. The game was up. Hermione had finally acknowledged his true nature, and he was ready to let himself be seen for who he really was. Severus pulled off his mask and let it drop to the floor.

Hermione was able to see Severus fully for the first time in ages, and right now he looked strikingly handsome to her. Yes, it was love and lust coloring her perspective and no one else she knew would ever call him attractive, but that's what he was to her now, at this moment. How a face she had once found repulsive was now so beautiful in her eyes was a matter to think upon at another time.

She saw his eyes dart to her lips; her own eyes were automatically drawn to Severus', which were slightly parted.

In the moment before they kissed, Hermione found that she did not have the strength to keep her eyes open, so she let them fall shut, waiting for the moment when it would no longer be Severus’ warm breath grazing her lips. The anticipation drew the moment out for her. She knew at that moment she had never wanted a kiss from Ron as badly as she did from Severus.

To him, she looked like an angel awaiting her fall from grace with a mortal's touch. Severus dipped his head, brushing his lips against Hermione so softly he wasn't sure if she would have felt it until he was rewarded with an audible sigh escaping from her. Urged on, he kissed her firmly.
Never had Hermione ever been so lost in the moment. All sense of time halted, gravity ceased to exist as she floated away in his arms, and the universe shrunk down to just the sensation of his body pressed close to hers.

It was everything Hermione had ever hoped for in a kiss and beyond anything she could ever comprehend before that moment. ‘Ron knows nothing of passion if a kiss is supposed to be this wondrous. This is what a kiss is supposed to be like.’ The sensation of his lips upon hers made all her cognitive functions almost completely stop, her body now ruling the domain of her limbs and mouth.

Severus pressed his lips harder to Hermione's, and was thrilled when she parted her mouth and her tongue stroked his lips, seeking entrance into his mouth. She tasted like manna, and her eager kisses seemed to feed his hungry soul, whetting his appetite to consume all of her.

Hermione's stomach twisted and turned, her heart pounded heavily in her chest, and she felt as if she could not breathe, lost in the delirious drowning sensation of Severus drinking her in. Her hands, which had found their way to his chest, moved up and wound their way into his locks. She grabbed fistfuls of hair in order to bring him closer to her, pressing her mouth harder to his. She kissed him feverishly and with abandon, demanding as much as he was taking from her. Thoughts that she had never kissed Ron back like this began seeping into Hermione's mind.

Pulling her closer was impossible, as Severus already had a death grip on her back and waist. If it was not for the fact that she was pressing herself just as urgently against him as he was against her, he would have thought he was crushing her. His hungry hands began roaming her hips and her back, finally sweeping a hand down and cupping her bottom.

Hermione gasped, and almost broke contact of their lips from the sensation of it.

The world could be ending, crashing down around them, and neither would have heard a thing except for the roar of each other's breath and the sound of their own blood pounding in their ears.

She began to whimper, a pleading whinge in the back of her throat with each sweep of Severus' tongue over her own. He tasted like something equally sweet and savory to her, nothing like Ron.

Driven by the sounds he elicited from her, Severus wanted to be inside of Hermione more than his own basic desire to breathe. His only need for the moment was to be buried deep inside of Hermione, and to hear her cries, calling out his name.
He began maneuvering Hermione towards his bed. Their feet stumbled, trying not to step on each other's toes or the hem of Hermione's dress, searching for a position where they would not have to release their grasp of one another and yet move towards someplace more comfortable to continue their current activities.

Hermione's back wound up being pressed against one of the bed posts, and she pulled Severus against her with all her might, her arms straining from the urge to bring him even closer.

Severus leaned in, pinning her against the wood and brought one hand down, trying to find the bottom of her dress. His other hand found Hermione's hair and began working on releasing her curls from their confinement. All the while, his eyes were closed as his mouth lapped at Hermione's tongue and devoured her lips.

Raking her nails up against his hairline, Hermione was rewarded with a deep growl from the back of his throat, and she began scratching all her nails all over his scalp, anything to have him continue making that noise. She felt his hand go lower, and instinctively, her leg began to slip up the outside of his, hooking around the back of his calf, gradually rising it until her calf was nestled along the back of his thigh just under his buttock, then gave a slight jerk to urge him to nestle his hips closer to hers. Her other foot wobbled in its heel, trying to maintain balance while in the middle of this acrobatic snogging.

Severus found the bottom of her dress. Reaching behind him, he stroke his hand up her calf, circled her knee a few times, which earned him a few more muffled enthusiastic moans, and up her thigh, relishing the feel of her silk stockings against his hands. Pressing his pelvis forward, he found the cradle of her hips and began to rock gently into her, keeping her pressed against the bedpost.

It was the combination of his hand on her thigh and the pressure of his erection against her that make Hermione tear her mouth again from his to gasp and groan loudly.

The sounds she was making were feeding Severus’ libido to a point where he was completely drunk on the moment. He moved his mouth lower to begin feasting on her neck, making Hermione moan and wail, making incoherent half words, mostly urging him on.

‘I'll show Ron. I'll have sex tonight whether he's with me or not,' Hermione thought bitterly, wanting to hurt Ron for spurning her. 'I'll fuck a real man, and then I can honestly tell Ron what a lousy lay he is.' She began tightening her leg muscles matching the rhythm of Severus' slow thrusts against her, grinding himself against their layers of clothes. She couldn't wait to have her bare feet digging into his hips.
Severus' hand found Hermione's bottom again, this time under her dress, and grabbed greedily at the flesh, kneading and palming it.

Something in the back of Hermione's brain began to speak up, distracting her from fully enjoying the moment. 'You shouldn't be doing this to spite Ron. Don't do this out of hate.'

More than anything, Hermione wanted her brain to shut up so she could enjoy the moment instead of thinking about doing the right thing. She had been doing the right thing for years, and now she just wanted a proper shag.

'The Fairy Brandy made you come here,' another part of her mind insisted.

Now the seeds of doubt had been sown, and those doubts kept on getting louder the longer she kissed Severus. She had wanted to kiss Severus for so long, but part of her knew that the only reason she came here to his flat tonight was to get laid and get a little vengeance in against her husband. Would it have been like this had she waited until Monday night, she did not know. But now she was beginning to suspect it really was the Fairy Brandy and her desire to hurt Ron that drove her here, instead of coming to Severus with a clear mind and a clear conscience.

'Don't ruin the first time you're with Severus by shagging him out of vengeance.'

Lost in the scent and taste of her skin, Severus didn't hear Hermione say, “No.” He was inching his hand towards her warm center, intent on sliding his fingers along her folds hidden under her silk knickers.

“No, Severus, I can't. Please stop.”

Her plea for him to stop finally reached his brain, and he pulled his mouth away from her collarbone to look at her through lust-hazed eyes. Her hair was down around her shoulders in a cascade of curls that would put Cliodna to shame.

“Can't what?” he asked, his breath coming in short pants. He didn't know to what she was referring, her statement a non sequitur to him.

“I can't do this.” She looked at him with apologetic eyes, hoping he could understand. “I...” Words failed her.
How could she explain that she has wanted Severus for so long, but at this very moment, could not do what she had wanted to do; that malevolence and vindictiveness drove her into his arms tonight, and not the love she felt for him? Hermione knew that if Ron hadn’t been so cold in his rejection of her, that she would not be where she was with Severus looking at her with growing confusion and hurt darkening his features.

“Not tonight.” That was the only coherent thing Hermione could say in a half-sob before wrenching herself from his arms and dashing out the door without her cloak.

On her way out of the building and back towards her home, Hermione did not notice the person hidden in the shadows, who had watched her arrive composed and depart in tears.

Confused as to what just happened, Severus sank to his knees. His fists clenched at empty air where Hermione was in his arms but moments before, and whispered, “My God, what have I done?”

Chapter End Notes

~o0o~ END of ACT I ~o0o~

Chapter 47 A/N: The curtain falls and the lights come up. The audience goes out to the lobby to sip champagne during intermission, and you flirt with the tall, dark stranger standing on the other side of the room. I highly recommend it, it's quite fun!

Actually, it's not so much end of Act I as end of Season I since this is more like a five season serialized story.

AquiliaSevera has done a lovely (and intense) illustration for me of Severus and Hermione just before their first kiss:

AquiliaSevera's DeviantArt page: http://www.deviantart.com/deviation/26788529/

Please be sure to leave a nice review for her hard work. THANK YOU, dear!!!
A Peryton is a winged deer which casts the shadow of a man.

Crossroads & Crusades is card game that I imagine is a cross between bridge and the board game Risk, using a pre-modern variation of Tarot cards and game pieces requiring skill in Divination (bullshitting) and strategy. Both bridge and Risk can be highly addictive, as I know a few people who play both games, so a game combining both might be as well.

If you haven't made the connection yet as to who Bascom Nettleton is married too, take a guess. Still lost? Go to chapter twenty-two to refresh your memory.

Kuchka means “cunt” in Bulgarian. Thank you to karmen_91 for giving me the proper swear word to use in that context.

If you didn't catch the “Alice In Wonderland” reference, the bottle marked “Drink Me” shrank Alice.

Cliodna is the Irish/Scottish Celtic goddess of beauty. She is a Tuatha sea and Otherworld Goddess who often took the form of a sea bird and, as such, symbolized the Celtic afterlife. http://www.paralumun.com/celticgoddess.htm

Don't worry, the story is now going to really pick up. This is not the end, but the transition into the second act of this multi-act story. Actually, think of them more than seasons than acts. The story is set up, and next we will see what happens now that Severus is unmasked. Also, we’ll see what happens with all the dozen or so plot threads I have set up including: Will Hermione feel used when Severus lets her know that he needs her for the ingredients? Who is Lavender shagging? Is Ron cheating on Hermione? Will Moody discover Severus’ and Draco's day jobs? What is with the lemons from the cemetery? Will Draco and Severus escape, or be sent to Azkaban to rot? Will Hermione take the apprenticeship or the managerial position at Fred & George’s new shop, or stay in her current job? Will Severus keep shagging other witches? Will Hermione or Ginny get pregnant? Will Hermione leave with Severus, Draco and Ginny? Will Hermione leave that sorry excuse of a husband? Will God strike Molly down for being an interfering pain-in-the-ass? As I’ve said many times before, patience. All in good time.

I want to thank all the betas who have helped me with this story so far: Horserider, Siren, JuneW, and GinnyW. I'd also like to thank okonchristy (cocoachristy) and GinnyW for being my sounding boards, as it helps to chat about certain plot points before committing them to computer. But most of all, thanks to all of you who have taken time to review, some of your reviews really make the effort worthwhile and make my little heart go pitter-pat.

B/N: Well, my heart’s going pitter-pat now! Poor Snape…unmasked and thoroughly snogged, yet still standing there in rejection! I think right about now, Hermione needs a good spanking…course, I think that *all* the time, so you might not want to take that particular advice…;) ~Horserider
“Truth and Consequences”

Chapter Summary

Hermione goes to see Severus at his request.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Minor character death. Slightly NSFW art work included at end of chapter. Just a bare back.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Forty-Eight
“Truth and Consequences”

Disclaimer: Rowling owns all concepts and characters. No profit is being made from this fanfic.

Severus sat amid the ruins of his flat. About him lay debris, a result of the fit of fury he had thrown shortly after Hermione ran away from him. The settee was overturned, pillows ripped, his bed curtains partially torn off their hangers, papers and notes were shredded, and bedclothes rent. His chess table was completely destroyed after he had picked it up and violently swung it at the wall, placing a large hole in his wall. Eventually, he had begun to smash it against the stone fireplace. The magic coursing through his hands, amplified by his rage, exploded the turned oak table leg, sending splinters like projectiles across the room.

When there was nothing left to destroy in the room, he had summoned all the bottles of alcohol in his flat and began drinking himself blind. Minerva and Albus made an appearance shortly after his binge began. Somewhere around three in the morning, his hallucinations of his old friends had devolved into nothing more than an irritating buzzing noise in his ears and indiscriminate hazy blobs.

It was now daybreak. Severus sat on the floor, propped up against the side of his bed, staring at the vivid red cloak in the middle of the floor. Hermione had left it in her haste to flee from him. He was tempted to throw it into the fire, but could not find the strength to touch it, wanting to leave it
exactly where it lay; it had become a small memorial to the moment where his hope for freedom (and love) had died.

He was too drunk to muster the energy to drag himself to the toilet to relieve his bladder, so he started filling empty bottles that surrounded him. The despondent wizard was drunk, but not so drunk he'd urinate upon himself.

It was shortly before Draco knocked on his door that he finally passed out.

Draco rapped on the door to Severus' flat, wondering if the Potions master was all right. With the regularity of a clock, Severus always knocked on Draco's door at six-thirty sharp every Friday morning on their way to their parole meeting with Kingsley at the Ministry. At six-forty, the blond wizard ventured up one flight to see what was holding him up.

After knocking on the door, Draco listened to see whether Severus would call out that he would be right there, or bid him to enter. When no reply or sound came, Draco opened the door to Severus' flat.

“What the hell...”

Draco stood there flabbergasted by the damage done to the place. His eyes alighted on the drunken figure of the Potions master slumped over. Gingerly, he stepped around bits and pieces of Severus' rampage and bent down, sitting on one heel to survey the pathetic state of his friend.

“Gah!” Draco exclaimed with revulsion once he realized that was not lager in the bottle of Scotch by Severus' leg.

With a flick and jab of his wand, Draco vanished all the bottles, partially filled, emptied, and refilled.

Shaking his head, Draco muttered, “Poor sodding bastard.”

He had wondered how Severus would handle Hermione spending a romantic evening with her husband, the ruddy tosser. It seemed the older wizard was pretty lovesick, becoming as despondent as he had been upon discovering that Ginny had married Potter years before.
Standing, Draco was about to cast a few spells to fix up the mess that Severus was lying in when a strong hand grasped his wand hand with a vise-like grip.

“Leave it,” Severus slurred. The older wizard hadn't even lifted his head from his chest.

“I see the dead have risen. Better get your arse moving, or we'll be late,” Draco said sternly, hoping his tone would bring about Severus from this pity-induced drunken state. Snape had begun to bear a startling resemblance to an Inferius.

Severus' hand reached under the bed and found an unopened bottle of gin. Lifting it up, he offered, “Gin?”

“It's almost seven in the morning.”

“Scotch?” Severus looked about for a bottle of Scotch, but noticed that all the bottles he had left lying about were missing.

“Dammit, Severus!” Draco huffed.

The blond wizard stormed into the bathroom, rummaged around for a while, and came back with a couple vials in his hand.

Without preamble, Draco knelt down, tipped Severus’ head back, and pried his mouth open. Severus was too drunk to fight or notice what the other wizard was doing. When the first vial, containing a Sobering Potion, was tipped into his slack mouth, the raven-haired wizard began to choke and splutter.

“What the...”

Draco yanked Severus by the hair and forced a vial of Hangover Relief Potion down his throat before the still inebriated wizard could have a chance to protest, or the Sobriety Potion could fully take effect.
Severus fell over sideways, choking and coughing on the dregs of the two potions sliding down his throat, ruining his perfectly good drunken mood. He lifted his head and glared murderously at Draco with contempt.

“Why the hell did you do that?” he hissed at the younger wizard.

“Because you're going to have to deal with the fact that the witch you love is married to another wizard, you twit! I've had to deal with that fact with Ginny for years; you can deal with that fact with Hermione.” Draco stood up and threw a towel at Severus. “For God's sake. Clean yourself up and get ready. We'll be late if you don't get your moping arse up off the floor. And next time you decide to get that piss-drunk, don't do it the night before a parole meeting.”

Draco stormed out of Severus' flat in disgust. He certainly wasn't going to tell Severus about Ginny's letter, and the way her brother had gazed adoringly at Hermione before departing for dinner.

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Hermione felt like death warmed over. She had not slept. The memories of Severus' kiss burned brightly in her mind, playing over and over again, which made her cringe upon recalling Severus' pained face as she told him to stop.

'Some enchanted evening I had!’ she thought sarcastically.

But it wasn't perfect. It was disastrous. Hermione was in love with a man that slept with other witches for money, was married to a wizard she didn't love, and had screwed up her chance at what was the one bright spot in her bleak life.

In her fist, she still clutched the letter that she found waiting attached to an owl's leg for her upon returning home last night. Hermione surmised that he must have written it immediately after she fled from his flat.

Smoothing it out, she read it for the umpteenth time.
Come Friday night at six o'clock.

I will tell you everything, and answer all your questions.

There was no salutation, nor any closing signature. She had cast the Charm to identify the author, and the spell revealed it to be Severus Snape. He had not bothered putting a spell on the letter to conceal his identity.

Hermione shook her head and sighed. 'I have to tell Severus why I was there. I have to be honest with him and let him know how much I care for him. I have to let him know why I left him last night. He'll understand. I should have told him last night, but...'

She knew why she couldn't say then what she needed to say. Hermione was aware that other witches, over the years, had probably visited Severus out of revenge against their husbands, and she did not want Severus to feel cheap and used... like a gigolo. But that was exactly what Severus was, only Hermione felt that what had developed between them had become something deep and meaningful, despite the tawdriness of his occupation. Besides, she really wanted her first time making love with Severus to be something beautiful, not tainted by something as ugly as malice and revenge.

Looking out of the kitchen window, and the bright morning sun that cheerily mocked her shamed and sullen soul, Hermione decided that she could sleep later. Maybe when her mind wasn't preoccupied with how to apologize to Severus, and after she had asked for his forgiveness, she would be able to have some restful sleep.

After showering out all the gel and potions she had used on her hair the night before, she pulled it back into a tight, neat bun. A look in her wardrobe told her that she needed to do laundry again. She dressed in a pair of jeans and a simple top, hoping that Madam Dushka would not take her to task for her casual attire.

'I can always just keep my lab cloak on all day, and she'll never know the difference,' Hermione reasoned away.
Just as she finished dressing, Ron awoke.

She had said nothing much upon his return the night before, except to tell Ron that Viktor walked her out to the carriage, in case the *Daily Prophet* gossip column reported anything other than the truth. After giving Hermione a quick report on Rufus’ and Pete’s recoveries at St. Mungo’s, he excused himself and went to bed, ignoring his wife’s tear-streaked face and chalking it up to his rejection of her.

“Morning,” he mumbled groggily.

“Morning,” she replied, uncertain what else to say.

Ron looked away, casting his eyes to Hermione's undisturbed pillow, then back up to see her exhausted face. “Listen, I'm sorry...” He trailed off, not explaining what he was sorry about. Starting on a different tangent, he said, “I have a business dinner tonight. Some matters that I need to take care of. I won't be around for dinner tonight. I'll probably be back late. All right?”

Hermione nodded her head. She could have replied that she had her own “business dinner” to attend to tonight, though she doubted that Severus was going to cook for her this time.

“I'm going to go into work early. Make up for leaving early yesterday,” she explained for no reason in particular. Ron nodded in understanding of more than just her words. “I guess I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Ron said quietly. “Have a good day at work.”

Hermione looked at him in mild surprise, and gave him a weak smile. “Thanks. Have a good day at practice.”

Ron nodded his head and watched Hermione leave the room.

Unwilling to make her usual morning walk through Diagon Alley, Hermione decided to Floo
directly from her fireplace to the Ministry.

Stepping out of the fireplace, Hermione's heart stopped momentarily. There, in the middle of the atrium approaching the stairway, was a pair of cloaked figures: one in a gray cloak, the other in black with a familiar stride.

A thousand things went through Hermione's mind simultaneously. 'Go to him and explain everything to him now! No, wait until you have figured out what to say before speaking to him, or you'll make it worse! Go to him now! Hide! Don't let anyone see you with him!'

Frozen by indecision, Hermione did nothing, but listened to Severus' and Malfoy's voices carry across the marble floor, both seemingly unaware that there was a witch who was privy to their conversation.

"Will you finally reveal yourself now that it's over?" the gray cloaked figure asked. Hermione was stunned by how close Draco's vocal mannerisms matched Lucius'.

"It is done," the black cloaked figure said somberly.

"What? Great! Has she agreed to help us?"

"That is a matter to be discussed tonight..."

The sound of their voices faded so that she could no longer hear any distinct words, just the low hum of Severus' silken voice and Malfoy's distinct nasal drawl as they climbed the stairs.

Hermione's mind whirred with the multitude of interpretations of their discussion. She knew she was the topic of their discussion, and wondered what sort of help Severus would ask of her.

Her mind weakened by fatigue and emotional distress, the exhausted witch could not make the connection between bits of information and conjecture floating around in her disorganized mind.

Reaching her office, she unlocked the door and sat down.
“Tea. I need a really strong cup to get me through this day.”

When Hermione was exhausted and feeling as if she barely had the strength to go on existing, as long as she had a cup of tea, she found she could do anything. Tea was an emotional cure-all for her when it seemed her heart or her head was at some great crossroads, or carried some burden that was beyond what any mortal, Muggle or witch, could bear.

Once her tea was finished, Hermione still could not manifest any coherent thoughts in her head. She knew that if this had been wartime, she could go a good couple of days, riding high on adrenaline and fear, before she would succumb to exhaustion; however, the war was over, her life was not at risk, and sadly she was not nineteen anymore.

Her head held high, she marched off to the lab and began working on the teetering stack of boxed ingredients that had come in during the night. Thankful that it was mindless work, Hermione gave up trying to think until after she took a lunchtime nap.

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Draco sat there too shocked to do anything other than stare blankly at some hideous, handmade charmed paperweight Kingsley's son made for him at the Wee-Wizards Nursery School's annual craft fair.

“I wish I could say that Miss Parkinson died peacefully or without pain, but I would be lying,” Shacklebolt said, as consolingly as he could considering the news he had just delivered.

Severus, knowing the young wizard would want to ask questions, asked for him while his friend was getting over the shock: “Do you have the wizard who killed her in custody?”

The Auror nodded his head. “Yes; evidently she had a stalker that frequented the place where she worked. He was one of her... customers.” Kingsley had the decency to avert his eyes in disgust and shame, taking on the attitude that he could have done something if he had known of the situation beforehand. “One of our Aurors came upon the scene and cast a Stunning Spell on him. We have the Auror's memories in a Pensieve right now to review the exact curse used. We have a pretty good idea of what curse it was by the effects alone, but we want to make sure before we bring him to trial.”

“Who killed her?” Draco ask, his voice a monotonous rasp, devoid of emotion.
“Considering the fact that you two were classmates, I know you feel some loyalty to Miss Parkinson—” Kingsley said, but was interrupted.

“You know NOTHING of what Pansy meant to me. She was once my fiancée. And though I never wanted to marry her, I still felt some obligation to protect her from this sort of situation, by the hands of some sick fuck who thought he'd screw and kill a former Death Eater for kicks!” Draco raged.

The blond wizard stood and violently kicked at the wall, then turned around, placing his back to the wall and kicking it once more with all his might. This time he broke the plaster and laths, putting a sizable hole in Kingsley's office wall.

“FUCK!” Draco screamed.

Severus said nothing. The panic in his own chest, that erupted right after he sent the owl off to Hermione with a short message, was threatening to crest and crash down over him again. If Draco knew that Hermione had come to his flat last night, only to flee shortly after he unmasked himself and kissed her, he was not sure what young Malfoy would do. Severus was fast with a wand, but after being up all night drinking, he was not sure he could win in a duel with Draco if it came down to it. All he could do was hope that Draco would no longer press him on the issue, and that he could come up with a viable alternative if Hermione would not agree to help them. He would know where his hopes lay by the end of the night... hopefully.

“I'm truly sorry, Draco. The Auror on the scene tried to save Miss Parkinson's life, but it was too late.” Kingsley heaved a heavy sigh. “Listen, if something comes up where I can help you in any way, please, just ask.”

Severus nodded and considered Kingsley's words carefully. If Hermione would not help, then maybe his old friend would.

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“You want the good news or the bad news first?”

Feeling like his head had been put through a wringer, his eyes made of lead, and the insides of the lids coated with sandpaper, Severus didn't care. It was always better to hear the bad news first, to his way of thinking. He shrugged at Lavender.

“Good news first, then. The Ministry has finally approved for the Floo connection in Macnair's old
“About damn time,” the wizard snapped.

“Yes, I know,” she agreed. “It would have been more convenient if we’d had the Floo connection up yesterday, but I think they wanted to make sure you, Draco, and Blaise are being good little wizards. And a surprise inspection was supposed to catch you if you were indeed breaking any part of the decree. Now that the Ministry is satisfied that you are law abiding ex-Death Eaters, they have no reason to deny a Floo connection near your flat.”

“And the bad news?” Severus prompted his employer.

“I have a new third client for you,” Lavender said rather grimly.

“And how is this bad?”

“You won't like who it is,” she replied, hiding her face behind her hands as she began to massage her temples.

“Who?” Severus was in no mood for guessing games, briefly wondering if it was one of his former colleagues from Hogwarts. He didn't even want to contemplate the idea of facing Sprout.

“Molly Weasley.”

There was a deafening silence that stretched on for what like seemed forever before Severus bellowed, “WHAT?!”

“It's not like I had a choice!” Miss Brown yelled back, equally upset with the situation. “I came across her while I was out, and she cornered me. She said she knew I had a little side business that offered a service that she was interested in.”

“I positively refuse to fuck that woman! Fire me, send me off to Azkaban, but I will not shag her!” Severus roared.
“She doesn't want a fuck, she wants a sympathetic ear!” Lavender yelled back.

“Go send her to Draco.” Severus realized the immediate mistake of that statement. Draco would poison the witch's tea, and laugh with maniacal glee as she died a slow and painful death over weeks or months. “Or to Blaise. Why me?!?”

“Because you're the only one under booked. Besides, she'll feel more comfortable with someone a little... erm... older.” Lavender tried to say it diplomatically, but the fact was that Severus was closer in age to Molly than Draco or Blaise.

“Why didn't you just say that your stable of boys is all booked up?” he asked, wondering why Miss Brown hadn't thought of some intelligent and believable lie on the spot. She was good at that sort of thing.

“I tried that. She said she knew lots of people at the Ministry who might take an interest in my business. She has no idea that I have ex-Death Eaters in my employ, but can you imagine the sort of noise that woman could make in the right circles? And then all those husbands wondering if their wives have been coming around? It could be disastrous!”

“So what? Lend a sympathetic ear?” Severus asked with a sneer.

“Basically, yes.” Lavender slumped down in her chair and folded her arms across her chest, looking like some petulant child in a grown woman's body. “Trust me, I have no interest in taking her Galleons, but it's a complex situation in which I must play along.”

Severus just wanted to find the deepest, darkest hole on earth, climb into it, and never emerge. Well, anyplace but a cell in Azkaban. Yesterday had been bad enough, but to discover that he would have to entertain in his flat Molly Weasley, someone who had become the surrogate mother to the entire Order during the war, was too much. He just prayed Molly would not ask him to take things beyond a platonic level. Severus did not want to betray Arthur in any way.

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No sooner had Hermione closed her eyes than she had discovered it was a half-hour later. The charmed pot of ink rang and danced about her desk like an alarm clock; she had charmed it to wake her at five-thirty. Earlier, she had decided to skip lunch and get in an hour-long nap on the couch she had in her tiny office. Well, the couch was buried under the stacks and stacks of papers, books, journals, inter-departmental memos, and scrolls. The desk was comfortable enough for one's head, if one was tired enough.
After ending the charm, Hermione lifted her head from her desk and rubbed her eyes, feeling more tired than before her nap. The lunch hour nap revived her enough to finish the day, but this nap seemed to make her exhaustion feel more acute in her tired eyes and aching body.

Hermione dreaded seeing Severus, yet could not wait to have the chance to explain her actions last night, and say that she was sorry that she hurt him. In her fatigue-addled mind, she had even temporarily forgotten Severus' conversation with Malfoy in the atrium that morning.

A trip to the toilet confirmed her suspicions that she looked like hell. Hermione's hair, which she had pulled into a tight bun at the base of her skull, had come loose. It was now hanging askew with wild wisps of hair coming out from her head like bits of twisted wire. Add some gray hairs and crow's feet, and she could imagine exactly what she would look like in twenty years. The red mark on the side of her face where her face had pressed against her desk blotter, and the imprint of a quill's rachis and blade along her cheek, didn't help. Tired, she was so tired. She brushed her hair and re-pinned her bun into place, but the damage was done. Nothing short of a shower and a good night's sleep would improve her looks.

Resigned, Hermione left the loo and grabbed her cloak before going over to Severus' flat.

On her walk over, Hermione tried to rehearse what she would say, but could not find the words with any more ease than she did the night before. Somehow, claiming she was drunk and stupid, then begging for Severus to forgive her seemed the best option. Later she could tell him about her reservations last night and why she had left, but for now she had to make him understand that she wanted him. If the moment was right, perhaps even tell him she loved him.

Standing at the door, she felt her stomach twist and knot upon itself. Hermione had not eaten all day, and she felt nauseous from nerves.

Knock-knock. Knock-knock.

The door flew open and there stood Severus, unmasked, with his mouth set in a grim line. There was no smile or warmth radiating from him like all the other times when Hermione had come to his door. His eyes stared at her like cold, black ice.

'Shit, I've really fucked up,' Hermione fretted to herself.
“Enter,” Severus said with the same low and dangerous voice he used when he was about to dress down rambunctious third years.

Severus' schadenfreude festered inside of him, gratified to see that she looked as miserable as he had felt after the way she left him the previous night.

Hermione walked through the door. Severus seemed imposing and intimidating in his posture and attitude. A small sliver of fear shot through her.

He pointed at the settee and ordered her: “Sit.”

‘I've hurt him.’ She knew this by the glacial look of detachment he was giving her. The night before, there was a burning passion behind his eyes she had never thought any man capable of feeling for her, consuming her with his heat. Now he was as cold as sleet, chilling her to the bone.

Not wanting to sit, she spun around and said, “Severus, let me explain.”

He did not want to listen to her anymore. Listening to her had been what got his heart in this predicament to begin with, and now his freedom was hanging by a thread. Now it was time to appeal to her noble Gryffindor sensibilities and just come to the heart of the matter.

“No, Mrs. Weasley, it is time for me to talk and for you to listen.” He watched her recoil from the use of her formal name. “You are aware of the Death Eater Decree, and how Mr. Malfoy and I have been unjustly placed under its enforcement. I need your help in order to escape England, and this state of perpetual semi-imprisonment,” he began. “You… I need you to acquire some Potions ingredients so that a batch of Polyjuice Potion can be brewed, and Mr. Malfoy and I can assume the identities of others, and leave the country. I should have come right out and asked you the night I became aware of your position at the Department of Standards & Regulations, and now I regret that I did not do that instead of going through the motions of this....farce,” Severus spat out bitterly, waving his hand about with impatience, looking at her askance.

Hermione's heart sank, and she felt as if she had just been hit in the stomach. “Farce? You mean to tell me...” She swallowed the bile rising in her throat, not wanting to contemplate that Severus had been acting the whole time in order to ask her for some ingredients. “You just wanted me for that?” she asked incredulously. She could feel the tears beginning to form behind her eyes, and did not care that Severus would see them.
He could see her pain, and he felt satisfaction that he had struck at her heart. He hoped it hurt as much as when she had torn out his heart the night before. “I never wanted to have you come into my flat in the first place. Miss Brown had to bribe me with rather significant sums of money in order to let you through my door, and now I'm beginning to regret ever letting you in.”

’He’s the same cruel bastard after all these years. It was all just an act.’ She could feel the world falling out from under her feet. The man she once thought of as handsome was disintegrating before her eyes, morphing into the same cruel, hooked-nosed fiend who had made her cry the night before her wedding.

Hermione fled to the other side of the room and leaned against the wall, seeking some sort of support to keep her from stumbling over from the shock.

Severus advanced on her, caging her in, his palms pressed to the wall on either side of her head.

“You lied,” Hermione sobbed, unwilling to believe this was happening, shaking her head back and forth. “You said you cared for me. How could you use me? Toy with my heart like that?”

“I should be the one asking you how you could toy with mine, Mrs. Weasley. You claimed to have felt some great affection for me. And I never lied,” he hissed menacingly in her face. “However, last night you said, even after all your claims and gestures, that you could not be with me in the end – not ever. Is that what you wanted to do? Break me? To haunt my thoughts day and night, to make my world revolve around when I would see you next? To insinuate yourself into my life, only to reject me when you found you could not want me or this face?” Severus began snarling, lashing out at her. “But in the end, it seems that for all your platitudes about friendship and caring, when it comes down to it, you could never care for me. So spare me your hypocritical tears, and tell me now if you can help me escape.”

Hermione stood there listening to all that he said, understanding dawning on her that Severus was lashing out for what he interpreted as complete rejection last night, just as she had been lashing out at Ron by going to Severus' flat the night before.

“I do care for you, Severus,” she whispered, her throat constricted. “I need you.” Her eyes shone bright with tears, her cheeks were wet and ruddy. “I came to you last night after Ron rejected me and I wanted to hurt him so much. I left here last night because the first time we make love, I didn't want it to be out of revenge or spite,” she began wailing, trying to get the words out before Severus threw her out of his flat, and she would never see him again. “I wanted our first time together to be because I care so very deeply for you. If I don't have you, I feel that my heart will atrophy and die without you.” She began to sob aloud now that she had confessed everything.
Severus stood there unable to say a word. He finally understood. Last night she did not say “not ever;” she had said, “not tonight.” His face fell, as he realized that he had possibly ruined Hermione's trust in him and his freedom from his own anger, because his wounded heart had gotten the best of him. He looked at her, his eyes seeking clemency for his premature condemnation of her.

“I... I...” How could he say he was sorry? ‘Sorry’ could not even begin to redress how he had sought to destroy her for her actions the night before.

Hermione watched as the seething rancor drained from his face and was replaced by pure, unadulterated remorse, the sort of contrition that makes one's heart go out to another in compassion and understanding.

Hermione wanted to make him understand that she could forgive him, just as she wanted Severus to forgive her. They were both guilty, both seeking absolution from hasty words and misunderstanding.

The time for words had passed. Hermione leaned forward and kissed Severus.

His arms pulled back in surrender, shocked that Hermione was pressing her lips to his. Severus had been heartless, and now she was kissing him eagerly, winding her hands up his shoulders and around his neck. He melted against her urgent lips. Wrapping one arm about her waist, he pulled her closer and kissed her back.

Tongue met tongue, neither one quite sure who parted their lips first. Hands grabbed and mouths devoured. And through their kisses Hermione sobbed in relief, their kisses salty from her tears, contrasting with the sweetness of their mouths.

“Oh God, Severus,” Hermione panted when their mouths broke apart to begin kissing each other's faces in haste, pressing lips to cheek, eyelid, nose, chin, jaw, forehead, and temple. “I've wanted you so much.” She gave a great sob and clasped her hands on either side of his face to see him. “I don't know why I've waited so long.”

His face, tired and haggard from fatigue, brightened briefly with a crooked smile before he kissed her greedily once more.

Severus felt like a fool, but he didn't care. What mattered most at the moment was that Hermione
did not reject him, and had not run away from him because she could not stand to see him without his mask; she only saw the man she once knew during the war. Hermione wanted him, and his heart sang from the simple joy of being wanted. Enfolding Hermione within his arms, he curled his arms about her and held her possessively.

As her tears subsided, Hermione's passion returned five-fold. She could not have enough of what she had denied herself for so long, what she had dreamt about and fantasized for hours on end, over the past weeks. Her breath came in short pants as she thrust her tongue deeply into Severus' mouth, wanting to taste every corner of it, learn the feel of his teeth, and memorize the taste of him once more. With each lap of her tongue along his, she sighed a little louder each time, her voice progressively becoming a chant of moans.

Reveling in Hermione's voracious concupiscence, Severus let a low growl rumble through his chest, which seemed to drive Hermione's desire to a new level.

Trailing her mouth along the underside of his jaw, delighting in the rasp of his growth of hair against her lips, a counterpoint to the softness of his lips, Hermione found Severus' Adam's apple and began to suck on it, as his hand played with her hair still knotted in a bun.

Severus felt like he was the one being seduced for once, and if it wasn't for the fact that he wanted Hermione as bad as she had wanted him, he would have let her do just that. Eagerly, Severus' hands reached for the waistband of her jeans and began pulling out the hem of her blouse.

Hermione, sensing what he was doing, moved her own hands from Severus' hair down to the buttons of his shirt, blindly trying to find his buttons, as both their breaths came in short gasps. She removed her mouth from the task of licking Severus' neck to find that first button, and once it was found she went back to work at kissing his mouth and undressing him.

Her shirt was in the way of continuing his path of kisses, so Severus grabbed the hem of
Hermione's blouse and lifted. Their bodily contact was briefly broken as the garment was being removed. With her arms above her head, and her arms still trapped in the fabric of her blouse, Hermione tried to lean forward and begin kissing him again, but could not. Severus was gazing hungrily at her, pinning her arms – still trapped in her blouse – above her head, her cleavage more pronounced in her simple flesh-colored cotton brassiere.

He liked the idea of having Hermione trapped in place, and subjected to the same torturous teasing she had subjected him to over the past several weeks, especially after that time she had had him begging her twice for some relief.

Gazing at her nipples, disturbing the smooth lay of the fabric covering her breasts, he let his eyes wander over her body, noting the way her ribs were more pronounced as she arched her back, and the line of her neck.

With one hand, he kept her wrists pinned to the wall above her head, while his other hand reached out and tentatively stroked her rib cage under her breasts.

Hermione took a great wheezing breath and threw her head back, lightly knocking it against the wall. His touch was electric, and the fact she was in a position that immobilized her – as if she was his captured prey – heightened the eroticism of the moment. Images of that first fantasy of her and Severus came back to her: chained spread-eagle and naked while Severus took her roughly from behind. It was enough that Severus was undressing and teasing her, but the added imagery of her fantasy made a tightening sensation in her lower belly come to life, like a pulse that throbbed in time with her heartbeat.

Severus liked to watch her squirm, aching for his touch. Skating his hands along her stomach and then around to her back, he heard her whimper.

“Severus, please.”

That alone broke his concentration. He leaned forward, pressing into Hermione into the wall and finished yanking her blouse off. One hand began groping at her breast, the other held tight onto her hair and jaw, angling her head so that he could delve his tongue into her mouth as deeply as he could.

Hermione felt like she was being subjugated by Severus, and she wanted to completely surrender to him. Her hands wound down his back to his buttocks, and she urged his hips forward to press into her. She wrapped one leg around Severus’ leg and began rubbing it up and down his thigh.
As Severus' mouth began trailing back down her neck to her shoulder, Hermione's hands squeezed his arse through his trousers before she moved them up to caress his back, then hooked them around his shoulder to pull him tightly against her.

Wanting to get into a much more comfortable position to continue this, Severus urged Hermione to wrap her other leg around him. He placed his hands under Hermione's bottom and lifted her up. She instinctively wrapped her legs around his waist, hooking her ankles behind his back.

With his mouth latched to the top of her shoulder, Severus turned around and opened his eyes so that he could get them both to the bed without stumbling. Hermione was busy licking and kissing his neck as they finally reached the bed. Once there, Hermione unlatched her legs, but before she could gain her footing, Severus threw her down playfully.

Hermione squeaked and laughed as she landed on the bed, bouncing a couple times before she came to rest. Propping herself up on her elbows, she gazed up at Severus. He was smiling, almost laughing. His eyes spoke of a rapacious lust within them that almost made Hermione shiver in anticipation.

Twisting her arms back behind her back, Hermione undid the clasp of her brassiere. She leaned back and slowly pulled one strap down, then the other. Severus stood above her, his knees pressed against the edge of the bed, as he began unbuttoning his shirt the rest of the way. Their eyes never broke contact.

As he slid his shirt off, Hermione drank in the sight of him. Slender, muscular, he had pale skin contrasting with the black hairs of his chest and the soft down that swirled around his navel, disappearing beneath the waistband of his trousers. Some base biological need within her twinged with desire to mate with him.

Hermione slid her bra off, exposing her breasts. Suddenly she felt the need to cross her arms and cover herself, or at least draw the curtains to make it less bright in there. If it wasn't for the fact that Severus was looking at her with such wanton abandon, she would have asked that he darken the room for her. She knew she didn't have perfect breasts, but she hoped that he wouldn't find fault with them. She drew her hands across her chest, if only to partially hide them.

Severus watched her face change from one of sexual confidence to uncertainty. “Let me see you,” he requested gently.
Hermione pulled her hands away, letting them rest limply beside her, and gazed back up at Severus questioningly.

“Beautiful,” he whispered reverently.

She turned her head to the side, looking away from Severus as tears pricked behind her eyes. What had she expected him to say? She wasn't sure, but recollections of Ron making left-handed remarks about her areolas came to mind.

Severus crawled up onto the bed next to her and cupped her face. “What's wrong?”

She pulled her face to look away from his as a few tears fell down her cheeks to the side of her head, pooling in her ears. “I hate my breasts. I just didn't...” She smiled weakly and shook her head.

His hand came up and cupped one gently, the other trailing fingers along the underside of one breast.

Hermione closed her eyes and sighed.

“I think they are lovely. Why would you hate something so perfect?”

Hermione gave a short laugh. “My areolas are too big?”

“Says who?”

She gave Severus a pointed look as to who exactly would say something like that.

He growled internally, damning that boy for making Hermione hate herself, and causing her to question all that was sexual about herself.

Placing light kisses on her, trailing his mouth down from her collarbone to the top of her breasts, he breathed against her skin. “They are perfect. I have seen enough of them to judge the matter.”
His finger began tracing little circles around one areola, and watched with fascination as the skin began to pucker and tighten. Hermione closed her eyes and sighed, one hand stroking Severus' hair. The flat rosy pink skin became a textured surface of gyri and fissures surrounding a rosy red erect nipple.

“See,” he said, rubbing his nose along the puckered flesh, “beautiful.”

Hermione watched, hypnotized as Severus rolled over, partially on top of her, and began suckling at her breast. As his mouth engulfed her nipple and tugged on it lightly, Hermione felt the throbbing between her legs return.

“Oh, that feels so good,” she sighed, noting how for once it was a very pleasurable experience to have her breasts played with, instead of staring up at the ceiling in boredom wondering when Ron would be done.

Severus' other hand began to play with her other breast, and Hermione squirmed beneath him, wanting to be rid of her jeans and feel his flesh rubbing against the inside of her thigh.

He had kissed and suckled many a breast, but what Severus could not get his fill of were Hermione's kisses. He had not kissed another witch on the mouth for years. As a rule he did not kiss any of his clients, as it was too intimate an act. Fuck them he could, but kissing was just too personal for him. He moved up the bed so that he could feast on her sweet mouth. He loved the way her lips contorted and reacted to each of his actions, the way her lips nipped and sucked at his own lower lip and her tongue probed his mouth. With each thrust and swipe of Hermione's tongue, he felt as if she was penetrating him. She was taking some sacred and reserved part of him, and he was sharing a part of himself with her by allowing her to probe his mouth, laying bare some inner secret within himself for her to consume and swallow.

Wanting to be more aggressive, Hermione rolled over, pushing Severus onto his back so he lay there like a man on a cross, his arms out to the side. She rubbed her breasts against his chest, thrilled from the feeling of his chest hairs tickling her breasts and stomach. Stroking his face, she began nuzzling her nose against his neck, licking and biting down his jaw, neck and finally to his chest. She rubbed her face against the hair there, playing with it and noting its slight coarseness. Her hand traveled further down to his stomach and discovered the hair there was much softer. She kissed and pressed her cheek against the hair, noting its soft down-like quality. Experimentally, she licked the area around his navel and heard him gasp sharply.

This was unlike any seduction he had ever done before. Hermione was an equal participant in this, not some witch lying on her back waiting for him to do all the work or to instruct her how to please
her future husband. She was taking the initiative, seeking to please him, bringing him as much pleasure as he wanted to bestow upon her. And when she licked his navel, a jolt of pleasure went the very short distance to his groin. He was already hard, but this seemed to magnify the sensation.

Encouraged by his reaction, Hermione probed his navel with her tongue, laving it gently, swirling her tongue around and dipping it in.

Severus’ hands went to her head to release her still tightly confined tresses. He began searching for the pins while she continued to lick his navel. Once the last pin was gone, he pulled her hair free, running his fingers through it. With each stroke of his hand, it seemed to increase in volume.

Hermione sat up and looked at him. Her hair cascaded around her shoulders in a wild riot of waves and curls, the tips of some tendrils brushing along the tops of her breasts.

When she smiled at him, Severus felt his heart ache, as if it was too full or incapable of holding all the emotions within him at the moment. Her hands went to the buttons of his trousers and she began to undress him once again.

He lifted his hips as she slid his trousers and pants off. When they both realized he still had his boots on, he toed them off quickly; and Hermione finished undressing him, chucking his trousers a few feet away from the bed.

Severus lay there nude and open to Hermione's scrutiny. He, himself, wondered if he lived up to her expectations.

She smiled beatifically and breathed, “Magnificent.”

Her eyes alighted on Severus' erection and noticed it was not as long as she had thought it was, based on how he had rubbed himself against her, but it was certainly thicker than she expected. He was still bigger and longer than Ron, but she was glad he wasn't overly endowed.

Her hand stroked up his thigh and reached his hip. Severus rocked his pelvis, urging Hermione to touch him. Her palm grazed his length. His breath came out in a hiss as his eyes shut tight, and he turned his head to the side.

Tired of feeling her jeans constrict her movements and digging into her waist, Hermione jumped
Severus gave her a questioning look, wondering why she had stopped touching him, until he realized she was taking off the rest of her clothes.

She stood there at the edge of the bed, letting him drink in the sight of her. Severus' mind worked to preserve this moment, his first vision of Hermione's body emancipated from clothes.

Hermione knelt on the bed. Severus reached out and grabbed her, pulling her over him and onto her back. She squealed with surprise at the swiftness of Severus' movements. He pinned her to the bed with his weight, and they both rejoiced in the sensation of skin on skin along the full lengths of their bodies. Hermione could feel his erection pressing hot and hard into her hip as he brought his mouth to hers again.

As much as she loved all this kissing and foreplay, Hermione's body was desperate to feel Severus inside of her. “Severus,” she pleaded in a whisper, “please, I need you.” She latched one ankle around his calf and urged him to settle between her legs.

Propped up on his elbows above her, Severus stroked her face. “Hermione...” There was so much he wanted to say, but he was struck dumb by the intensity of the moment. For a man who prided himself on his eloquence, words now failed him.

Hermione reached her hands up over her head and intertwined her fingers with Severus'. He released one hand and stroked Hermione's wetness before proceeding. She was wet, and her lips were plump, engorged with blood. Severus rubbed the head of his cock near her entrance, making slow circles around and around.

The witch closed her eyes, unable to keep them open as she began to keen and wail. It was just like the dream she’d had, only better: the throbbing between her legs was now a relentless pulsing ache that bordered on painful. She drew her knees back, opening herself for her lover.

Severus positioned himself and slid into her. Both gasped in shock of the sensation, Hermione from the feeling of being expanded and filled, Severus from being engulfed in snug, hot flesh that grabbed at him. He withdrew and plunged in again, throwing his head back, the sheer tightness of her threatening to make this a quick interlude. Hermione screamed from the sheer pleasure of it, and Severus screwed his face up tight. After a few more cautious thrusts, when Severus became certain that he would not prematurely end their coupling, Severus found a rhythm that he could keep up for a while.

It had been so long for Hermione, it felt like she was losing her virginity again, except without the pain, blood and awkwardness. The invasion of Severus into her was welcomed and appreciated.
The friction of his moving in and out of her was so satisfying, she cried aloud with each thrust. Hermione wanted to yell how good it felt, how much she wanted him, that she was all his to take, but all that escaped were incoherent mumblings in between each wailing moan.

Finally sure he wasn't about to come if he opened his eyes and saw Hermione writhing beneath him, Severus sat back on his heels, moving back and forth as he slid in and out of her. He grabbed her knees for support and to guide her body.

“God, you're fucking incredible,” he sighed. It was trite, but it was exactly what he thought at the moment as he gazed down upon her, her breasts swaying and jiggling with each thrust, her face flush, eyes dilated and drowsy with lust, mouth open, lips swollen from kissing, and legs opened to welcome him.

Hermione finally opened her eyes and saw Severus above her; she observed the muscles of his chest and arms flex, and his stomach tighten as he moved. He was like some dark angel making love to her: his pale skin, black hair, sharp features that bordered between cruel and beautiful.

Severus tilted her pelvis to allow a different angle of penetration before moving his thumb down to her clitoris to begin stroking it.

Hermione's voice was beginning to get hoarse with all the screaming she had been doing, but it reached a higher pitch when he began stroking her there. She arched her back and bucked her hips, trying to grind herself into him.

“Deeper,” Hermione begged. She wasn't sure if she wanted Severus to go deeper, but she usually asked Ron to go deeper when she wanted more of whatever he was doing to her.

Severus smiled and hitched her knees over his elbows, then drove home.

Hermione's eyes flew open and she grunted in pain, “Too deep.” She wanted to curl up on her side, now feeling like Severus' cock was going to come up through her belly button.

Seeing her in momentary pain, Severus slowed down and made his strokes shallower. Coming back down to press his chest against hers, still moving in and out of her, he mumbled, “Sorry,” while pressing kisses to her brow.
“It’s okay,” she replied quickly before kissing him back.

Her hands roamed his back, finding his scar and mole, mapping the muscles as they flexed and moved. She dug her heels into his hips, moving her thighs in time to his strokes.

Soon it was there on the edge. She could feel it approaching. Closing her eyes, Hermione concentrated on the orgasm she could feel building inside of her. This is what she had wanted for so long, to come while feeling herself get pounded into the mattress, to feel herself clench and tighten around something so long and thick inside of her. The heat in her belly was raging now, and her head thrashed from side to side, but she could not come. It was there hovering just beyond her reach.

“Almost there,” she whinged with a heaving breath.

Severus was almost there, as well. He wanted to wait until Hermione came before he allowed himself to come. He wanted her to scream his name, and thrash and undulate in the frenzy of an orgasm that he would give to her. He knew Weasley had never given her that pleasure, and he wanted to be the first.

Bending his head down, he began sucking on one breast, alternating between his teeth and lips worrying at her nipple.

The sensation of Severus' mouth there sent a jolt down to her belly straight through her core, and Hermione was certain she would come now.

“Almost,” she moaned.

Severus moved his hand back down to her clit, stroking it in time to his thrusts.

Hermione grew agitated that she could not peak. She wanted to so badly, but it was not happening. She was standing at the precipice, and she could not find her way over the edge. Worry and doubt that she could never come during sex crept into her mind.

She started to cry, “I can't come! Oh God! I can't, I can't.”
Severus stopped and rested on top of Hermione, trying to soothe her. “Shhhh, it's all right.”

“No, it's not,” she sniffed, looking up at Severus' face so etched with concern. “Ron was right, I am a lousy lay. I can't come.”

He knew exactly what was happening, and why Hermione was not orgasming. Severus had dealt with a couple of witches whose husbands never bothered to satisfy them; the only way they knew how to orgasm was through masturbation. Hermione had confessed that Ron had never made her come, so that meant that she only had orgasmed through touching herself.

“Yes, you can,” Severus told his lover, smoothing her furrowed brow with a calming hand. “You're just not used to orgasming during sex. We just have to train your body to relax and come during sex.” Now he wished he had held back on his impulses and engaged in more foreplay before mounting her. Still, all that foreplay might not guarantee an orgasm during intercourse for her anyway.

Wiping away her tears, Hermione asked, “How do we do that?”

Severus pulled out of her and sat back on his heels, his cock bobbing in the air. “Like this,” he said, and slowly stroked Hermione's outer labia with his fingers.

Noting how she was becoming a little drier, he stopped and reached into his bedside table drawer and pulled out a small vial. “Here, drink this.”

“What is it?”

“A natural lubrication potion. Drink this, and you will be plenty wet for what we will be doing,” he said with a knowing smirk.

Looking at the vial with circumspection, she asked, “Will this interfere with being on contraceptive potions?”

“No,” he told her. “I've made sure of that.”
She drank it down in one gulp. It tasted a little oily and a little sweet. As it went down her esophagus, Hermione could feel an icy heat slide down through the center of her body, that was equally pleasant and unsettling, as she hadn’t known what to expect when she took it. When it reached what felt like her uterus, there was a pleasant tingling sensation followed by a small gush of fluids which Severus began spreading about her lips with his long, slender fingers.

“How does it feel?” he asked, having had only a few witches to ask for feedback.

Hermione laid back, marveling at the warm glow in her lower abdomen and how it began to gradually fade, but how her body kept producing a small trickle of clear, viscous fluid. “It feels kind of nice. Just feeling all this wetness is turning me on even more,” she confessed, and arched her back as Severus dipped a finger between her folds. She hissed, “Yes,” and spread her legs wide for him.

Gazing down, Severus finally looked at her and admired the shape and color of her sex. The hue of her curls so dark, they almost appeared black; the way her swollen reddish-pink clitoris glistened as his thumb circled it, the way her inner and outer labia wrapped itself around his long fingers. Slipping two fingers into her, he found her g-spot and began to stroke it while the palm of his other hand pressed down on her lower abdomen, just above her pubic bone to increase the pressure of his finger to her sacred spot. His thumb played with the small cluster of sensitive nerves as his fingers began to slide in and out, slightly curving them with each pass.

Hermione's body remembered this, but Severus was stroking that elusive spot inside of her that she had never been able to find with her own fingers. The fire in her belly roared back to life and quickly grew. Severus kept a slow pace, guided by Hermione's moans, picking up the pace as her breaths became shorter. With a few more strokes, Hermione's body crested, and she gave a hoarse cry. Severus knew she was coming, as he felt her muscles quiver and grasp at his fingers. He kept stroking as he positioned himself over Hermione again, marveling at how her face twisted with the beautiful agony of pleasure. Just as she started to come down off of her climax, Severus removed his fingers and slid into her.

Her eyes flew open as her orgasm returned, and felt intensified. She opened her throat and bellowed Severus’ name in a deep and throaty voice, unlike she had ever used. Bucking wildly beneath him, Hermione clawed at his back, anything to keep him moving in and out of her, to keep this burning sensation going and making her feel electrified throughout her whole body. She could feel herself tightening around Severus as her orgasm continued to become more focused, and it felt like nothing she ever imagined. Her toes curled, and she prayed her foot would not cramp to ruin this glorious sensation that seemed to go on for more than just a brief spurt.

As Severus thrust into her, he felt his own climax approach. He let himself finally fall over that edge, joining Hermione in that wondrous free fall. Severus grunted, and let her name escape his lips. Her name came out as a plea as he felt himself empty into her as she began to come down
from her own petit mort. She watched Severus' face change from fury to surrender, his cock pulsing against her slightly tender walls with each spurt.

Hermione encouraged Severus to collapse on top of her. They were both exhausted, sweaty, and gasping for breath. Hermione could feel Severus' heart pounding through his chest, hammering at her breast. She loved the idea that she could make his heart beat like that. Her own heart was thumping loudly and painfully.

Severus didn't know where he found the strength, as it seemed what little he had possessed left him after his orgasm, but he lifted his head and began placing tender kisses all over Hermione's face. Never had he felt so satisfied after an orgasm; it was as if he had poured his own soul into the act itself. There was a sensation of completeness and contented satisfaction to the act that stirred the love he felt for Hermione to new levels. He wondered if this was what others meant by "making love," for it felt as if his feelings for Hermione had been cemented with this carnal conjoining.

Reaching her eyes, he felt tears streaming down her face. Hermione was crying, but was simultaneously laughing.

“Oh God, Severus,” she said in relief, as her crying became intensified. She wanted to tell Severus how much she loved him, but didn't think that such a declaration after the most incredible orgasm of her life would be taken with any seriousness.

His brow furrowed, worried that she was beginning to regret this. Though she smiled at him with warmth, her tears confused him. “Did I hurt you?”

“No,” she laughed again, shaking her head

“Then why…”

Hermione kissed him, holding him tightly before releasing his mouth. “Because I'm so happy,” she confessed.

Her tears of joy humbled him, that he could bring her this much happiness. Severus smiled, almost chuckling at the absurdity of it all. He had made others laugh and consoled their crying, but never both at the same time.
Suddenly, Severus felt very drowsy. He noticed Hermione stifle a yawn.

“Did you sleep last night?” he asks, brushing a stray sweaty tendril of hair off her forehead.

She shook her head. “You?”

Squinting his eyes shut, he didn't want to think about last night. He had felt so rejected, angry, and forsaken, that last night seemed like one long nightmare of his tortured soul.

“I’ll get you those ingredients,” Hermione said out of the blue.

Severus looked at her, suddenly realizing that he had made love to her without even getting her answer beforehand. All those plans he had made in his head has flown out the window in the moment of passion between them.

Hermione simply said, “Sleep.” She stroked his forehead with her thumb and pressed it against the spot between his brows.

For Severus, it was like she had cast a Sleeping Charm on him, for he could not keep his eyes open from that gentle pressure on his brow. It was so soothing.

He rolled off Hermione and she curled up next to him, snuggling her head upon his shoulder and chest, one hand lazily playing with the hairs of his chest and stomach.

Neither spoke, as they drifted off to sleep in each other's arms, drunk and soporific on feelings of love and contentment.
Chapter 48 A/N: Perselus has drawn a lovely illustration to go with this end of this chapter. It is mostly work safe, with just a bit of bare back with Hermione and Severus sleeping under the covers. You can view it here on Perselus' DeviantArt page: http://perselus.deviantart.com/art/And-finally-3-27907364
I have always wanted to use one of my favorite exchanges from a movie and was finally able to use it somewhat unaltered. The original exchange is from the movie, “Mr. Mom” and is one of my favorite scenes of all time, it's just too damn funny.

Michael Keaton: “You wanna a beer?”

Martin Mull: “It's seven in the morning!”

Keaton: (Waits a beat and says deadpan) “Scotch?”

So... they FINALLY shagged. Happy now? Not perfect, but pretty good for them both.
Hermione and Severus talk of ingredients and apprenticeships, followed by her helping him with a little Potions testing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Forty-Nine
“In the Name of the Subtle Science and Delicate Art”

Disclaimer:
Betz once loudly proclaimed
“These characters aren't mine, I disclaim!”
The lawyers sat back
Amused at the hack
And figured insanity was to blame

Instead of suing her ass
They left alone, the perverted lass
As long as she disclaimed
In a way that was lame
That she didn't own Potter, alas!

She was warm, comfortable, and feeling quite content. Hermione did not want to wake, but the cramping of her bladder roused her from that elusive state of peace that had escaped her for many weeks.

As her eyes opened, Mrs. Weasley was momentarily disoriented, wondering why she was cuddled up so close to her husband until she noticed her surroundings. She glanced at the wizard whom she had clung to in her sleep.

'Severus.'
Carefully propping herself up on one elbow so as not to wake him, she surveyed her lover as he slept. His eyes were closed, his mouth relaxed and slightly parted, and his face aglow in the golden light of the setting sun streaming through the window. Hermione marveled at the man she had once considered unattractive, but who now to her held an indescribable pulchritude that defied convention in her mind. She could have laid there next to him and studied his face and his form, and reflected back on their love-making until he woke, but she had other pressing matters.

With stealthy quiet, Hermione crept off to the toilet.

'I'm going to get a bladder infection. I just know it.' The few times she had neglected use the loo shortly after sex had resulted in a urinary tract infection that came like clockwork three days later. 'I should swing by the apothecary to pick something up before it becomes a problem.'

Hermione knew why she hadn't left Severus' bed after they finished: she had not wanted the sacred tenderness of the moment ruined by slipping out of his arms to take care of her bodily functions; that, and she had been so tired she had forgotten. After sex with Ron, she couldn't wait to escape to finish satisfying her own needs. There was no call for that with Severus.

Washing up, Hermione looked down at the spot on the cold tile floor where Severus had held her. Her heart swelled with something akin to the amorous adoration women feel when they know they are not only cherished, but protected by the one who loves them.

Did Severus love her? Hermione did not know. If he didn't, then why had he attacked her so venomously after his perceived rejection from her? The way he had yelled at her that she had basically rent his heart in two – though not in those exact words – made the witch wonder if it was a bruised ego or a bruised heart that was behind his verbal attack. Though an ego would not drive a man to make love to me in such a consuming manner,‘ she told herself.

Severus had taken final possession of Hermione's soul during their joining, making her ponder if this was what it was like to be in love with the person you were shagging. It frightened her that she could evoke such wrath in the wizard, but made her realize her responsibility where Severus' heart was concerned.

What frightened her even more was the fact that she had no remorse over finally sleeping with Severus. All these weeks of battling with her consciousness, and now she had not an ounce of regret or shame niggling at her conscience after the act. Though she was glad to have waited until her anniversary to continue with a clear conscience, part of her wondered why she hadn't just ended the façade sooner and avoided weeks of emotional turmoil. Was this a sign that she was sliding down the slippery slope of moral ambiguity? Or that her marriage to Ron no longer mattered at all?
Perhaps both.

Sliding back into bed, she studied Severus some more. As they slept, they had somehow slipped under the covers, and Hermione regarded the uncovered portion of Severus' stomach and chest. There was a significant scar a couple inches under his left nipple, and a smaller one on the right side just below his collarbone. Hermione wanted to stroke the black hair dusted across his chest, but she refrained, not wanting to wake him. The Dark Mark on his arm stood out sharply, as black as ink on pale parchment. She decided she would not purposefully touch it unless she was invited to do so. It was that Mark that had brought Severus to his current predicament.

Suddenly she remembered her promise to him; he had asked and she had agreed, out of her love for him. Hermione would get him the ingredients for Polyjuice Potion. It was ironic that she had stolen from his stores to make a batch during her second year, and now he was asking her to obtain ingredients all these years later. Severus had said he wanted to be free of his semi-internment, and Hermione had wanted him to be free, though now she realized that to give him his freedom would equate to her losing him.

Did she really expect that an affair with Severus would last all eternity? In the intensity of the moment, it seemed that this was what was meant to be between them, a fusion of all the intangible qualities that constitute the whole of one's soul. That other persons had ever experienced this sort of absolute passion – and it was passion with all the suffering, lust, ardor, and enthusiasm that one could experience – made Hermione keenly aware of just how her own relationship with Ron lacked in so many more ways. She knew, of course, that there could be something more, but now she had experienced it and could compare her husband with her lover and know with whom her heart truly lay. Hermione had promised to give Severus the ingredients, sealing the fate of their future and the end of their time together.

Hermione did not want him to go, but she did not want him to stay if he was miserable. She wondered if Severus would have information in order for her to find some way to exonerate him, thus giving him the option to stay if he was no longer persecuted under the Death Eater Decree. Surely, if he was no longer forced to stay here and was given all the privileges back of a full wizard, he might stay. But if she had been similarly oppressed under false accusations, how likely was it that she would want to stay? She would like to leave as soon as possible too, if she were in a comparable situation.

Severus stirred and rolled over onto his side. As his arm reached out and touched Hermione, he woke with a start. His eyes flew open and focused on Hermione before he closed his eyes and relaxed with a sigh, resting his head back on his pillow. The last time he had woken up with a woman in his bed, he was married to her; nowadays, he certainly didn't let his clients stay in his bed while he slept.

He opened his eyes once more to see Hermione gazing intently at him, a slight smile playing upon
her lips. Her eyes were still puffy from crying with dark circles from exhaustion, and her hair was a wild tangled mass. Objectively speaking, she was not exactly the most beautiful witch, but to Severus, she looked spectacular. There was a bright gleam in her eye, and her cheeks had a rosy hue that was attributable only to him. He had made the glow within her radiate and shine.

He smiled back at her, which only made her smile broaden. Reaching up, he placed his hand around her neck and pulled her into a kiss. Severus had missed kissing, but it was an act in which he had no one he wanted to bother sharing such an intimate part of himself. There was something to be said about the exchange of souls in a kiss, and though he was not one to put much weight into the folly of sentimentality or silly folklore, he had held that same belief in his own heart. And now he wanted to kiss her more. There was no more waiting; Hermione had made a decision and chosen him.

Letting him pull her to him, Hermione molded her body against his, still thrilled by the new sensation of his bare skin against hers. Her foot began rubbing up and down his calf, and her hand went to his chest. Languid kisses – that were more exploratory than a desire to quench some ardent fire – seemed to last for hours, but ended too soon – neither had to wait but a second until the other kissed back, unwilling to stop the exchange.

Hermione felt adventurous. Severus brought out a level of sexual confidence in her that she never knew she had. Well, that time they wound up dry-humping in the kitchen, then later on the settee, had given her a pretty good idea, but now was the time when there was no holding back. Pushing at his shoulder to lie back onto the bed, she trailed her mouth down Severus' jaw, feeling the rasp of his whiskers against her tongue. Farther down his neck, she could detect where the stubble ended and his soft skin began. She brushed her cheek against the hair of his chest, appreciating the softness of the black down.

Severus laid back and fully enjoyed Hermione's attentions. There was nothing sophisticated or suave in the way she delivered her ministrations, but the sheer honesty of her intentions made his head swim in a delirious cocktail of love-induced hormones. He was being seduced, made to feel as if he was the only wizard in the world – a dramatic change from his usual evening job.

“I wish you didn't have to go,” Hermione murmured, before kissing her way along his shoulder and arm, before licking at the skin at the crook of his elbow.

He heard her swallow thickly. Severus didn't want to go either, now that he had discovered that elusive ingredient of his own life, but he knew he could never be happy if he stayed in England just to be with Hermione. In time, he might even grow to resent her, if he decided to stick around. Here, he didn’t even have a half-life for himself, and certainly no respectable life to offer her.

“You understand why I must,” he simply said.
There was a pause before Hermione buried her face in his hand, kissing his palm to distract herself from the fact she was now crying again. She could not trust her own voice, so she whispered, “Yes.”

“If there was some way...” Severus stopped himself from saying if there was some way he could stay in England to be with Hermione, he might consider it. He and Draco had, during their four years of incarceration, examined and attempted to exploit every angle, chance, opportunity, opening, venture and gamble that could make them exempt from the decree. When their plea was rejected by the Wizengamot for review, they were left but with one avenue: escape, and only one method at that. “Trust me when I say that there is nothing that can make me stay in England..."

“As long I bear this...”

Severus sat up and turned his left forearm for Hermione's scrutiny, showing her the blacked scar of the Dark Mark, like a brand, that was forever singed into the skin. When Voldemort fell the second and final time, he had ensured that none of his followers could ever deny being one of his servants, unlike after the first time.

“... I can never be free.”

Hermione sat up herself across from Severus on the bed. “Didn't Albus leave some sort of Pensieve or last testament or will to clear you from being lumped in with all the other Death Eaters?”

“You would think so, but the old fool never did, probably thinking he would live to see the end of the war. I never expected to see the end of it, but here we are.” Severus slumped forward and rested his forehead on the flat of his knuckles.

Crawling the short distance, Hermione placed her arms around him and began placing small pecks on his temple and crown. “I'm sorry. I know that sounds trite, but I truly am.” She stroked his hair, hoping it soothed Severus instead of irritating him.

Her gentle hand and light presses of her lips might seem like pity, but he knew it wasn't. It was consoling and the gesture calmed his troubled mind. Leaning into her touch, he reclined back against her until Hermione's back was pressed against the headboard and Severus was leaning against her, one arm thrown across her stomach and hip, his cheek pressed against her ribs. In the silence, she continued to stroke his brow, and he let his eyes close.
The quietude was broken when Hermione casually mentioned in a lighter tone, “Did Lavender really have to bribe you with money before you would see me?”

Severus internally cringed at the reminder of his vicious verbal attack earlier, and the mention of that little fact. “I'm sorry I said that.”

“But is it true?”

He puzzled over whether to tell Hermione the truth or diplomatically lie. This was no time for lies, as he had told her enough half-truths over the weeks to cover the whole truth. “Yes, though at the time I had no idea the sort of witch you had developed into.” Severus looked up to gauge Hermione's reaction, and was relieved she was smiling at him.

“I can't say I reacted any better when I figured out who you really were either. Shocked would be putting it mildly,” she confessed frankly.

“I guessed as much that night you flinched from my touch.”

Sighing deeply, she went back to stroking Severus' hair absentmindedly. “I suppose you could say I had trouble reconciling Calleo with Severus Snape.”

A comfortable silence lingered between them once more. Hermione kept playing with his hair, noting the weight and silkiness, while Severus nuzzled his cheek a little lower on her stomach.

“Is there another way?” Hermione asked. “Some other way than Polyjuice Potion?” She was aware of the restrictions on the ingredients, and now understood why Moody had Fudge pass them into law when the Death Eater Decree had come out.

“Trust me when I say that if I knew another way, I would have tried it.” He tried not to sound bitter, but failed.

Hermione began running through a list of ways she would try to escape the country if Voldemort had won. She had the list down pat in her head from years ago and began listing them off. “What about an airplane, or a ferry over to France?”
“You've taken care of that,” he merely noted, not explaining any further.

Hermione sheepishly replied, “Oh,” realizing the implication of his remark.

During the war, when it seemed like it was possible they just might win, Albus asked for a plan to be in place once Voldemort fell. One of the contingencies he asked for was to make sure the Death Eaters could not leave England in order to regroup in another country, like Albania or some other far-off locale. Hermione had come up with the idea to have Aurors put magical detectors into every airport with international destinations, and every port with a ferry that sailed to foreign lands. Every Muggle means in which to leave England was covered, even the trains through the Chunnel and private boats across the Channel. Even traveling into Scotland required a special dispensation by the Ministry, and those given out were few and far between. It was Hermione's thoroughness that had forced Severus into asking her for those particular Polyjuice Potion ingredients.

“Is that why Lavender sent me to you?” Hermione asked. “So that once you found out where I worked, you could ask me?”

“Something like that.” Severus really did not want to begin volunteering information regarding some aspects of their original arrangement, either with Hermione or Lavender.

“So why didn't you ask me for Polyjuice ingredients once you found out where I worked, instead of waiting all this time?”

Time passed as he wondered exactly how to answer that without sounding like the devious wizard he thought he was, or the lovesick man he had become during the whole phenomenon.

“After you found out who I was, you were shocked. Imagine how even more shocked and horrified you would have been to learn who I was after just a few weeks of seeing me?” he asked rhetorically.

“Point taken.” Her mind filled with visions of herself screaming and running out of his flat mortified beyond anything she had ever experienced.

“And just how exactly did you put the pieces together?” Severus inquired.
“I suppose all the clues were staring at me in the face, but I didn't want to see them. It took overhearing Moody and Kingsley to put it all together.”

Severus rose up off Hermione and looked her squarely in the eye, his gaze earnest and serious. “What do you mean, ‘overheard Moody and Kingsley?’”

Hermione related a condensed version of the event at Harry’s birthday party, culminating in Moody saying that anyone who would employ Snape and Malfoy was not above his suspicion.

Severus suddenly remembered how he had snidely commented that this information wasn’t something that one overheard at a social function. Flopping onto his back, he began laughing at the absurdity of it all.

Finally coming down off his moment of madness, Severus looked up to see Hermione looking at him quizzically, then relayed his own little ironic tale.

Hermione had a little chuckle over it before suddenly announcing, “I'm positively famished. I know you didn't plan on cooking, but is there anything to nibble on?”

Feeling a bit peckish himself, Severus rose from the bed and held out a hand, inviting Hermione to join him. Severus stood without a bit of self-consciousness over the state of his undress, or dishabille, as the case may be. Hermione rose from the bed as well, intertwining her fingers with his as they made their way to the kitchen, feeling slightly awkward at being completely nude.

Mrs. Weasley never walked around her own flat naked. She’d tried it once, but Ron's horrified reaction made her self-conscious about her body, so it never crossed her mind to do anything of the sort ever again. Now that she thought about it, she supposed it was her fear that someone might come over via Floo at the wrong moment that stopped her, that and the way Ron either leered at her or ignored her when she was undressed that stopped her from walking around au naturel.

An investigation of the larder revealed a small selection of cheeses, which Hermione put to good use laying over some day-old bread and setting it to bake in the oven, insisting she could help out in the kitchen once in a while.

Severus declined her offer to share and started making his own sandwich. While he sliced up some roast beef and added the little bit of cheddar that Hermione did not use up, he said, “Thank you.”
“For what?”

“For warning Miss Brown, who in turn warned Draco and me about upcoming surprise inspections,” Severus explained. “As a matter of fact, yesterday was our first surprise inspection. We barely made it back before the Aurors showed up. I do hope that the Auror who was watching the building last night did not see you come or go.”

Hermione's knees felt a little weak, and she promptly sat down at the small table set with one chair. 'Oh God, please. I pray it wasn't Harry who was watching last night,' she hoped, remembering Ginny making mention of her husband working late. She could just imagine Ron’s reaction to a report of Hermione going in and out of a known bordello the night of their anniversary.

Sitting down across from her, his own sandwich in hand while Hermione's cheese on toast was still in the oven, Severus noticed her go a little pale. “Are you all right?”

Hermione wondered if she should lie. She had always been honest with Severus, sharing a level of confidence with him she had never given anyone before, but she wondered if it was prudent to share this particular concern. 'Well, if it was Harry, he would have approached me at work today, dragged me off to a pub, and demanded to know what I was doing going into Severus' flat last night. It couldn't have been Harry then.' “I just hope whoever was watching didn't recognize me, that's all.”

“I wouldn't be surprised if the building will be periodically watched from now on. I suggest that when you come and go, you use the Floo in the second floor flat,” Severus advised her.

“You have a Floo? I thought you couldn't have one under the decree?”

“I can't, but that doesn't stop Draco and me from having access to one in the building in Macnair’s old flat, and earlier today the Ministry approved to have it reconnected to the Floo Network. I think that is why they had a surprise inspection the other day. Now Draco and I can get to work without being followed.”

“So you do brew potions for Lavender,” Hermione incorrectly surmised.

“No, I consult on potions for Miss Brown. She and her labour force of house-elves brew them. I only research, give direction, and counsel on the potions Miss Brown is developing,” Severus corrected her.
“Oh, thank God!” Hermione declared with a relieved sigh. “I was hoping with all the potions we had discussed over my visits that you weren't doing anything that would violate the decree and land you in Azkaban.”

It touched Severus that Hermione cared so much for him that he should stay safe.

“So the natural lubrication potion I took earlier, that cologne, Haunt, those are all your creations?”

“Yes.”

“So why do you work as a gigolo in this... this...” Hermione was growing more and more incensed, flustered to find the right word to express her indignation that Severus should work as some male prostitute when he was doing perfectly good work as a Potions master “.... this... SERAGLIO!”

“I'd hardly call this a Turkish harem,” he jested lightly.

“That's beside the point. If Voldemort had won, I would find it very debasing to have to whore myself out to any wizard that came along!”

Severus did not take to her turn of the phrase, but that was exactly what he had been doing. But how was a wizard supposed to tell his lover that men don't necessarily mind having lots of sex with anonymous women, while raking in large sums of money in the process?

“It's not debasing if I get to pick and choose, rejecting any witch I don’t want from entering my bed,” he said firmly.

“So you enjoy it?” Hermione asked, trying not to sound shrewish. ‘Of course he liked it. What man wouldn't enjoy lots of beautiful women paying him to have sex with them.’ She could feel the burning hot jealousy churn in her stomach, ruining her appetite.

He did not want to get into an argument over an issue they had already addressed, and Hermione admitted she could eventually deal with. Still, Hermione was not a client; she was his lover, his love. “At first, of course I did. It had been a long time since I had any, but in time, I have grown bored with it all,” he snapped at her.
Hermione looked at him with an odd look in her eye and he suddenly realized the gravity of his faux pas. Instead of replying, she just stood up and retrieved her cheese on toast from the oven, having no interest in eating it now.

Once she had set her snack on a plate, Severus went up behind her, pressing his body lightly against hers, his hands placed on the counter, trapping her where she stood. “That’s not what I meant,” he murmured into her hair, hoping she understood exactly what he meant. “What I meant to say was until you came along...” How could he say this without professing his love, though he supposed he had come damn near close to it earlier when he screamed at her. “It is a job that I must do in order to make the Ministry think I am working at a... profession – that they are willing to turn a blind eye to – that supports the manner in which I live. By day I consult for Miss Brown secretly, by night I entertain witches who need a little companionship. You, however, are not a client anymore, nor an obligation to perpetuate this façade. I choose to see you; I long to have you in my company and in my bed.”

There. That was enough to tell her without flat-out saying, ‘I love you.’

Hermione turned around and threw her arms around his neck, pressing her wet face into his bare chest. “Oh, Severus. I’m sorry. I’m being silly, and I’m still tired, so I’m not thinking clearly. I’m behaving like some stupid, jealous cow.” She knew Severus slept with other witches, but it still didn’t stop the fact she wanted him all for herself.

Severus debated whether to tell her that since she had re-entered his life, he had gone from three shags a week down to one, but he thought otherwise. If his lover was jealous over an unknown number of witches, she would still be jealous of just one client who frequented his bed. He pulled her closer, and with one hand, grabbed her snack. Encouraging her to sit and eat, he sat back down himself to finish his sandwich.

Hermione wanted to know how long Severus had been working for Lavender, but figured that was a question for another time. Now she needed to know which ingredients Severus wanted and how she could help him. “So, Polyjuice Potion... that’s really the only way?” Severus nodded gravely and took a swig of lemonade. “How exactly do I figure into your plan?”

Severus sat back and regarded Hermione sitting across from him, nude, perched on the edge of her seat while daintily grazing on her snack. “Since you work in the Department of S&R, you test small amounts of Potion ingredients that come in through Ministry customs every day. I figured, of the restricted ingredients that come through, you could just happen to take a small extra sample for testing and smuggle it out.”
“You really think it would be that easy?” Hermione replied with a question.

“I worked in that position for some months prior to my Potions apprenticeship,” he informed her, with an arch of his brow to let Hermione know empathetically that he knew of what she was complaining about all these weeks about the mindlessness of the job. “I know exactly how easy it will be now that Marge is no longer working there. Since you are senior to Mr. Spawn, and you always show up before him and leave long after he has already left for the day, you’ll have complete privacy in the lab in which to garner an extra sample. For recording purposes, you could claim that due to a quick bout of stomach flu, or some other viable excuse, you had to walk away from the testing procedure, thus ruining an extra sample. In order to cover your tracks, and so you can't be traced to those specific ingredients only, you'll have to fake a few more ruined ingredient tests.”

“I think I can do that,” Hermione agreed, deep in thought. “But if you can't brew the Polyjuice Potion, I guess that means I'll have to do it.”

“No, Ginny will be doing it.” He kept his eyes fixed on the pattern in the china when he said, “You'll be staying behind after I'm gone. I don't want you to do any more than you have to, as the Aurors will be trying to figure out how Draco and I left the country. If or when they figure out it's Polyjuice Potion, you might be questioned.”

Hermione's stomach sank. She had forgotten Ginny's promise that if Malfoy ever found a way out of the country, that she would go with him gladly and willingly. Now, Hermione desperately hoped Harry never discovered any connection between her and Severus, for he would figure out she was instrumental in Ginny leaving him. Harry may be brash, impetuous, and quick to rush to judgment, but he could be extremely perceptive and insightful at times. She did not want to be the sword that cut the Gordian knot of Ginny and Harry's marriage, but if her redheaded friend was only biding her time before she could leave Harry, then Hermione knew that she herself was only an instrument on the inevitable course of events.

“Ginny will be going too, won't she?” Hermione inquired rhetorically.

“Yes, she will,” Severus agreed. “I tried to convince Draco that she should come at another time after the uproar of our disappearance has settled down, but neither of them would hear of it.”

'It is true then. Ginny and Severus are friends.' It was one thing to contemplate, but to hear Ginny's name roll off Severus tongue without resorting to her formal title only cemented the idea in her mind. It was a hard concept to wrap her mind around, but it still seemed like some far-fetched notion.
“Where will you go once you leave England?”

Severus had not quite figured out if he should tell her or not. Maybe in time, before he left, he might tell her, but knowledge could be pried from one unsuspectingly. Knowing the fact that Ginny would be leaving Potter, it might be best to say as little as possible to Hermione, or Potter might offer Hermione a friendly cup of tea with an intentional dribble of Veritaserum. “We'll be seeking sanctuary.”

“Greece?”

“Perhaps,” he answered vaguely.

Hermione wanted to know, but knew the danger of divulging too much, too soon.

“Do you need me to get all the ingredients, or only the restricted ones?” she asked.

Severus gently shook his head. “Just the restricted ones. Ginny will purchase the non-restricted ingredients from different apothecaries, so no one would think twice to notice a witch buying lace-wing flies or leeches at another. It's the Boomslang skin, Bicorn horn, and fluxweed picked during a full moon that we need.”

“Well, the Boomslang skin shipments have started coming in. I tested the first shipment of the season today. They usually come about once a week from the current supplier. Powdered Bicorn horn comes in at least once a month from a couple of suppliers.”

“Where are the shipments coming in from for the Bicorn?” Severus asked.

“Turkey, China, India, and we just started getting shipments from the steppes of Russia, near the Ukrainian border.”

Severus nodded, and placed his curled-up hand against his lower lip. After a moment of contemplation, he said, “Try and get the Turkish Bicorn horn if you can. Sometimes I've found Bicorn horn from those other places is not quite as potent.”
“Actually, the stuff coming in from Russia has a higher potency than the Turkish. Since we started receiving shipments from Russia two years ago, my tests have shown a more evenly ground powder than the Turkish,” Hermione informed him with confidence in her knowledge of suppliers.

“I’ve never tried the Russian Bicorn horn. When I was in the department a long time ago, there was very little being shipped out of Russia for trade.”

“Since the fall of Communism, the quality of a lot of the stuff coming out of there is quite good. There is always the witch or wizard who tries to make a quick Galleon by selling imitation ingredients, or cutting them down with common things like flour or cinnamon or dirt,” Hermione said, as Snape nodded his head in agreement, remembering coming across those same problems himself. “I mean, there was this one supplier from Greece, the Damocles Brothers.”

“No! Not them,” interrupted Snape. “They were trying to pass off safflower as native saffron when I worked there.”

Hermione groaned and laughed, leaning forward to rest her elbows on the table. “They recently tried passing off enlarged eagle feathers as roc feathers.”

Severus' mouth hung open in disbelief for a brief second. “No!”

Hermione nodded and laughed once more. “We finally got them banned from importing anything for the next five years.”

He smiled and sat back in his chair, glad that Hermione was the one to catch them. “It's about time. I think those wizards have tried to falsify just about every ingredient over the years. When I was teaching at Hogwarts, they sent me these letters about direct shipping to Hogwarts and bypassing Ministry red tape, but I knew better. They knew their stuff wouldn't hold up to Ministry standards.”

They sat there looking at each other, finding comfort in the bonding of a common experience beyond the walls of Severus’ flat that did not involve the Order or Hogwarts.

Thinking this might be a good way to bring the subject up, Severus began, “Since we are talking about Potions and ingredients, there will be a position for a new Potions apprentice with the new Potions master who will be taking my place after I'm gone.”
Hermione began to choke on her food. After swallowing what she had in her mouth, she washed it down quickly with some lemonade. “You mean... I'm going to get an apprenticeship?” she asked with surprise and disbelief. “Potions apprenticeship?”

Severus nodded, feeling a warm glow inside himself at the way her face lit up with the news. “Yes, I prepared a few things for my departure. Albert Dobmeir will be taking over my position at Lavender's company as the new Potions master. I made the acceptance of you as his apprentice part of his contract. As soon as I leave, you'll have a new job, and with pay.”

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Severus helped her to not only get a Potions apprenticeship, but one with pay. In her excitement, she leapt up and ran around the small table. Throwing herself into Severus' lap, Hermione hugging him and began peppering his face with kisses in appreciation of his efforts.

“Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you,” she squealed, placing a kiss on his face in between each thanks.

Humming in appreciation of her gratitude, Severus' hands began to roam Hermione's hips and bottom, stroking the flesh as her kisses slowed down to become less rushed and more intimate. His hand reached up and cupped one breast. Her fingers slipped through his hair and began playing the back of his neck.

Severus began to stiffen again, and soon his arousal was nudging at Hermione's bottom. Feeling him harden against her skin, Hermione stood up and straddled Severus' lap, only to discover her feet didn't quite reach the floor when sitting astride in the kitchen chair.

“Maybe we can go back out to the other room?” Hermione suggested, trying not to feel awkward at her own sensuous enthusiasm.

Severus lightly tapped her hip to encourage her to get up before he could. They walked back to the main room without saying a word. Hermione headed to the bed, but Severus stopped and pulled her hand in another direction, leaning his head towards the settee.

“Can we open up a window? It's a bit stuffy in here,” Hermione commented as Severus sat down, beckoning her to straddle him.

Severus summoned his wand and opened the window. There was a beautiful view of the setting
sun over the London skyline. In addition to the cool summer breeze that drifted in was the sound of some man grunting like a pig, alternating with some sort of weird whooping noise.

“What the...?” Hermione broke off her comment, listening to the odd noises of someone having sex from someplace near by, like another floor. She started to laugh, as the noises were just plain ridiculous. “Who sounds like that during sex?” she asked with a giggle.

“You'd be surprised at the sounds some people make during sex,” muttered Severus darkly.

“Like...?” Hermione prompted him, wanting at least a little information.

“Try the sound of a rabbit being slaughtered,” he replied before doing a rather good imitation of Mrs. Nettleton during an orgasm. Hermione laughed, clutching at her sides. “You know, laughter is not conducive to sex,” Severus remarked dryly, looking down at his deflating erection.

Before Hermione could say she would stop laughing and preserve the situation, the man off in the distance gave a great howl, as if he was doing a perfect imitation of a werewolf. Severus and Hermione looked at each other and burst into laughter.

“It sounds like someone is shagging a were-pig/monkey/wolf,” Hermione snorted, unable to catch her breath, Severus joining in on the mirth.

When they caught their breaths, they were sitting next to each other, smiling at each other. Hermione couldn't remember the last time she laughed with Ron or had so much fun in or out of bed.

As Hermione leaned across the settee to kiss Severus, he thought to send a note to Blaise later telling him the next time he has a client that noisy to close the window or ask his client to put up a Silencing Charm so as not to broadcast their activities to the rest of the neighborhood.

With his hand at her hip, Severus nudged Hermione to go back to straddling him as he originally planned. He had dreamt of having Hermione just like this; just then, a thought occurred to him.

He pulled his mouth away from Hermione reluctantly, and asked, “Would you care to help me with a Potions experiment?” He arched a brow in a suggestive manner.
She sat back on his thighs and gave a look that bordered on playful indifference and earnest curiosity. “What did you have in mind?”

Without a word said, Severus flicked his wand, and an unmarked vial flew out of his bedside drawer and straight into his hand. “I have here what could be one of the most successful potions The Lovely Lavender Company would ever make.”

“What is it?” Now she looked at the vial, her interest definitely piqued.

“Remember that little talk we had about brewing large quantities of a potion and you suggested those brewing kettles?” She nodded. “Well, we haven’t gone into production, as the kettle is being installed next week, but once it is, we’ll be brewing about four hundred gallons of this stuff a week, and charging it at a price of what the market will bear.”

Hermione was practically bouncing up and down on his lap, squirming with brimming inquisitiveness. “Come on, tell me!” she begged.

Severus rather liked the way her breasts jiggled when she was excited like this. “It’s a male performance enhancement potion. It allows a wizard to keep on going as long as he wants, instead of being forced to stop after one orgasm to rest.”

“You mean,” Hermione said, leaning forward on his lap and eyeing the Potion with keen interest, “if you drink this, you can keep going and going?” As tired as she was, Hermione was definitely interested in more sex with Severus that night, as much as she could get.

“Well, the thing is, I have six different levels of strength. Miss Brown originally brewed a potion that stewed for forty-eight hours, but the effect was minor. A seventy-two hour batch proved to be too strong, as I was barely able to move the next day, having strained myself too much.”

Hermione was suddenly overtaken with a wave of jealousy knowing he had to have tested this Potion out on other witches to know the effectiveness of each batch. She swallowed her jealousy, trying to push it out of her mind, knowing that it would only ruin the moment if she fixated on it.

“And so you are trying various strengths to find the right level?”
“Yes. I'm trying batches brewed at fifty, fifty-four, fifty-eight, sixty-two, sixty-six, and seventy hours. Six different batches. And I would like to begin trying these different potency gradients with you. Care to help a Potions master with a little experiment?”

Hermione leaned forward again, and rubbed her nose against the tip of his and whispered, “I would love to help my lover in his quest for knowledge, in the name of the subtle science and delicate art that it is.”

He didn't know why, but there was a level of eroticism that he could mix sexual pleasure with research at the same time with Hermione. His thumb on the cork, he popped it off and downed the potion quickly.

The result was instantaneous. Hermione felt Severus spring to life between her thighs. His head was now eagerly nudging at her opening. The sensation of him there, between her labia, aroused her such that she could feel the effects of the natural lubrication potion kick in once more.

“How long does the lubrication potion last?” she asked with a sigh as she reached down and began stroking Severus while rubbing the tip of his cock against her clitoris.

Palming a breast while craning his neck forward to begin licking one nipple, he answered, “Three hours.”

Hermione glanced at the clock on the mantle and figured she took the lubrication potion well over an hour ago.

“And how long do you think your potion would last?” she asked, her breath hitching in the middle of her sentence as Severus bit lightly down on one nipple while bringing the other one to a rigid peak with his fingers.

“Could be one hour, could be three. That's why we're testing it out,” he mumbled around her rosy flesh.

“Good,” she sighed just before removing her hand and impaling herself upon him.

They both threw their heads back and groaned aloud in unison. Severus' hands slipped from her breasts to her hips and began to guide her up and down. He planted his feet on the floor for
traction, occasionally lifting his hips up off the couch to slam up into Hermione when she was about to lower herself down again.

Hermione's hands grasped at the back of the settee for balance. Her breasts swung freely in Severus' face, occasionally bumping against his face while matching the rhythm of her movements up and down, to and fro and a combination of them. His hands stroked her thighs, up her ribs, to her breasts to sweep back down to her hips. He finally reached around, and grabbed her buttocks to spread her open so that he could drive himself deeper into her, as well as hold Hermione still as she thrust up quickly from underneath. She wailed loudly, as she felt that she might just about orgasm, but before she could reach that precipice again, Severus slowed down and encouraged Hermione to move back up and down once more.

Sitting on his lap, Hermione began to rotate her hips around clockwise then anticlockwise, enjoying the feel of Severus' cock rubbing every corner of her canal, rubbing at that elusive spot when she twisted her hips just so. Hermione began experimenting in different motions in a way she never felt comfortable with Ron. Rocking her hips back and forth while still firmly pressed against Severus' hips, watching his reaction as he shut his eyes and groaned sweetly about how good it felt just like that. Soon Hermione's knees began to get a bit sore from the repetitive motion on the unforgiving settee, and she requested a different position.

Obliging, Severus lifted her up and swung her around, placing her arse on the edge of the settee. He attempted to do this without slipping out of her, and almost accomplished it, but not quite.

Hermione decided that there was something rather wanton about spreading her legs wide open and lazily stroking her labia not only for her pleasure, but for Severus' viewing enjoyment while he positioned himself just before sliding back into her.

As much as she loved the friction of Severus moving in and out of her, the settee left much to be desired in the way of comfort when she was on the bottom. For some reason in her fantasy, it was much more agreeable with her back and neck. Perhaps it was just the mental image of her getting fucked on such a refined piece of furniture that was more erotic than the way her neck protested over the hard back. After a few changes in position, Hermione got fed up and Transfigured the couch into something much larger and softer, with plump cushions to place under her hips, and large well-padded rolled arms.

Severus, relieved that Hermione was finally satisfied with the furniture, grabbed her, flipped her over and positioned her on her hands and knees with her hands braced on the couch’s arm. Teasing her with the tip of his cock, he enjoyed the sight of Hermione's back arching to invite him to enter her once more. The way her tangled hair spilled down her back, resting between her shoulder blades and spilling over the sides, the way her back flared out from her waist, the curve of her hips to her rounded bottom… she was as beautiful to gaze upon from the back as from the front.
“Please stop teasing and take me again,” Hermione pleaded sweetly.

He obliged by slamming into her roughly, which made Hermione arch her back even more, tossing her hair about. As the backs of her thighs slapped against the front of his, Severus placed one hand on her hip to guide their pace; the other hand moved to play with her hair, stroking it, playing with it.

Hermione could not get enough of this. She knew she was probably going to be sore as hell and walking funny, but this was everything sex should have been but wasn't until this day. She wanted to make up for lost time, for all those years with Ron when sex was more like a dry chore, instead of the hungry feast of two lovers devouring each other gluttonously until sated with exhaustion. She picked up that pace, pushing back faster and harder against Severus' thrusts.

Severus leaned forward and reached around to stroke Hermione's clitoris, kissing her shoulder and back with light nips of his teeth. His other hand moved up from her hip to her breasts and cupped the left one, still guiding their pace with his arms. She was supporting his weight on her back, and she loved the feel of him pressing his whole body against hers; she never wanted to leave this position ever.

“I'm so close,” Hermione breathed.

Severus stopped and pulled himself out. His lover began to protest about his withdrawal from her, until he wet two fingers and began to stroke her. Hermione leaned forward on the couch and sighed, feeling his fingers explore before sliding into her.

“Now, some women actually feel greater pleasure when their G-spot is stroked in this position than on their back,” he informed her in a rather clinical voice, as if explaining the benefits of collecting roots of a potion during a new moon.

As his finger stroked the place he was searching for, Hermione sucked in her breath. It was not only better, but more intense. “Keep doing that,” she whinged.

“So does that mean it is more pleasurable than on your back?” Severus asked in a bored tone, keeping the rhythm slow and even.

Thoughts that he was a sadistic bastard by distracting her with pointless questions at the wrong
moment flashed through her mind. Fortunately for him, she was unable to give him the proper retort at the moment, as she was mewling and doing her best to concentrate on the orgasm that was quickly approaching, building within her quicker than she ever expected.

Her voice in a rising pitch, the only thing she could choke out was, “A little faster.”

Severus took his thumb and roughly rubbed her clitoris as he stroked her a little faster and was rewarded with a harsh cry, muffled by Hermione placing her face into a pillow and bucking wildly against his hand. Just as Hermione protested once more at the removal of her source of pleasure, Severus slid his cock back into her and began fucking with a force and speed where it felt like her bones were being shaken loose with the force of his thrusts.

Hermione's orgasm returned and she shut her eyes tight, riding it out for as long as her body would feel this paralyzing indulgence. Severus knew he would come again and again as long as the potion lasted, so he allowed himself to come. With a groan, he placed his forehead in the middle of Hermione's back and held tight as his body shuddered from the intensity of his orgasm. He knelt behind Hermione stock-still, unable to do anything except feel himself empty into her.

Suddenly, Hermione had the rather urgent need to use the bathroom and she tightened her muscles, which resulted in Severus gasping harshly. It felt like his brain was going to explode. Hermione tightening around him intensified the sensation of his orgasm, and he whimpered incoherently. No witch had ever done that to him while in the middle of an orgasm, and while it increased the pleasure, it was almost too much.

When his orgasm subsided, Severus weakly collapsed onto the couch, gasping roughly. Hermione made a quick apology and trotted off to the bathroom.

Upon returning, she curled up next to him, and apologized. “Sorry, but I suddenly had the urge to go to the loo.”

One dark eye opened, much to the protest of its tired owner, and regarded her. “You really know how to kill a bloke.” But as soon as the words left his mouth, Severus felt the potion working as his strength returned as well as his erection.

“What do you mean?” Hermione caught sight of “little” Severus standing at attention once more. “That was quick. Is that you naturally or the potion?”
“Both.” Severus rolled on top of Hermione, feeling the base instinct to bury himself into her once more. “Just when I came, you tightened around me. That was overpowering, to say the least.”

Hermione moved her legs to allow Severus to settle between her legs once more, and felt him nudge himself back into her again. This time the movements were small and languid. They continued talking while making love at this leisurely pace.

“You mean like this?” Hermione tightened her pelvis muscles once more, watching as Severus closed his eyes in enjoyment.

“Exactly. But when you did that as I came, it was far more intense.”

“Really? I'll have to remember that little trick.” she replied with a mischievous smile upon her lips.

“What? And use it on your husband?” Severus had just broken one of his cardinal rules of mentioning the other wizard during sex, but he had been breaking a lot of rules with Hermione.

Hermione turned her face away from Severus, suddenly remembering she was married. “No,” she said thickly. She turned her face back to look up at Severus who was resting on his elbows, gazing down at her, his black hair hanging down and swaying gently with each movement of his hips. “Just you, Severus.” A tear formed in the corner of her eye and she hoped he wouldn't see it. She had cried enough, and she was happy now. There should only be laughter and happiness now, not tears.

The lone tear did not escape his attention. He bent down and kissed Hermione tenderly, suddenly feeling a swelling of more indecipherable emotions within his chest.

They made love over the next few hours, taking breaks periodically. One was for Hermione's soreness, which was solved with a special ointment which took the rawness away; another was for more liquid refreshment as they were both becoming quite thirsty with all their strenuous activity. Finally, after christening the couch and bed a few more times, they both lay spent and sweaty on the bed.

“I think I'm bowlegged,” Hermione groaned lethargically.

“And I think I could sleep for a week,” Severus chimed in.
“What strength potion was that? How many hours did it brew?”

“Seventy hours.”

“That was the strongest dose of the six?”

Severus grunted that her guess was correct.

Hermione looked at the clock. “It lasted two and a half hours. Definitely will make a fortune with this potion.” A big silly grin plastered on her face, Hermione turned her head to look at Severus, who equally regarded her with a lazy smile on his lips.

“Let’s hope so,” he breathed, closing his eyes, feeling sleep threatening to over take him for the second time that evening. “You're getting five percent of the royalties.”

Two large brown eyes were suddenly staring at the ceiling overhead, looking very alert. “What do you mean, I'm getting five percent of the royalties?”

Rolling onto his side, he threw a possessive arm over Hermione's stomach. “You helped me come up with that brewer's kettle idea. If it wasn't for that, we couldn't afford to brew a potion that needs to simmer for so long. It wouldn't be cost-effective otherwise,” he mumbled sleepily.

“Um… what sort of profits are you looking at, Severus?”

“Fifty percent.”

Hermione could tell he was drifting off and asked quickly, “How much do you think that will be sold?”

“Mmmmm... The kettle holds two hundred gallons, so that's four hundred Galleons a week, one ounce per vial, four Galleons a vial.” Severus hummed, feeling himself drop off and unable to think any longer.
'Four hundred gallons, multiplied by one hundred twenty-eight ounces in a gallon, that's... 51,200 vials a week. Multiply that by two Galleons per vial for profit, that's 102,400 Galleons a week, and five percent of that would be...' Hermione bolted upright in bed. 'That can't be right.'

Rising from the bed quietly, so as not to disturb Severus who had rolled onto his back and was snoring very lightly, Hermione began to look for parchment to do the numbers by hand. When she realized that there was no paper, ink, or quill handy – short of rummaging around in areas she had not been invited to, Hermione threw on Severus' shirt to cover herself and went into the kitchen.

Whispering quietly, she called out, “Marf?”

The little house-elf popped up next to Hermione with a beaming smile, which bordered on maniacal. “Yes, Miss! Oh, I is so happy you returned! Master Severus will no longer destroy his home again like after you left last night.” He began shaking his head as large tears began to fall. “So angry, so hurt, so sad, so drunk. But now you is back, I'm sure he is happy now! I even clean your cloak you left last night.”

Hermione had no idea that Severus had destroyed his flat last night, and now felt doubly worse for leaving him then, but things had been resolved and she could worry about it another time.

“Um, yes. Can you get me some parchment, quill, and ink, Marf?” she asked politely.

Marf glared at her sternly. “You is not leaving my master again, with only a note? I do not like having to fix holes in walls. Poor Master destroyed his favorite chess table. Marf could not fix that. Bad Marf!” The house-elf began hurting himself as punishment and Hermione stopped the creature.

“No, Marf. I'm not leaving. I just need to figure out some numbers on paper, that's all,” she explained.

Marf quickly returned with the requested items. As Hermione sat down to begin the calculations, Marf beamed brightly at her. “Does Miss want anything else to eat? Are you thirsty?”

Hermione was still a bit parched after all that screaming, moaning, and shrieking, and asked for a glass of lemonade and a small sandwich of whatever was available to eat.
As she wrote the numbers on the paper, dividing and multiplying, she was afraid her original calculations were correct.

“Holy shit!” Hermione whispered to herself.

She stared at the number unable to comprehend how it could be correct, but knowing the number was. Still, 5,120 Galleons a week for her share was an astronomical figure; that was over a quarter million Galleons a year. Her meager five percent royalty would far outstrip anything Ron could earn, even as one of the most well-paid Quidditch stars in the world and with the broom company endorsement. It bordered on obscene.

Dazed, Hermione walked back to the bed and laid down beside Severus, who rolled back onto his side and grabbed her like a giant doll to cuddle in his sleep. And did all potions reap this sort of profit or was it just this one?

Just as she forced her mind to settle down and she started to drift off to sleep, the were-pig/monkey/wolf started up again. The sound drifted through the still open window, and Hermione broke into a fit of giggles that woke Severus up.

“Will somebody please shove a sock into that man's mouth, or at least cast a Silencing Spell? I wish Blaise would do something to shut him up.” Severus grumbled into Hermione’s hair.

Hermione, who was laughing, suddenly stopped laughing and asked, “Blaise? As in Blaise Zabini?” Severus grunted an affirmative. “How do you know it's him?”

“Because he lives one floor up.”

Hermione laid there for a moment processing the image: Blaise Zabini working as a gigolo – which she assumed since both Malfoy and Severus were gigolos also. It was odd enough comprehending Severus and Malfoy in that profession, but Zabini? And with another wizard?

“How do you know it’s not Blaise making that noise? How do you know it’s another wizard?” she asked, not knowing what to expect for an answer.
“You live below someone for over three years, you know certain habits, and howling like some deranged animal is not one of them. It must be some client of his, and they haven't thrown up a Silencing Charm. The wizard must get off on being loud and letting everyone hear it,” Severus replied with mild disgust that he had to suffer the whims of another's fetish.

The wizard above them came to orgasm, keening and shouting hoarsely, “Taking it like a dirty bitch,” followed by a repetitive series of “Oh yeah!” and culminating in another howl signaling his climax.

“Poor Zabini must be deaf by now,” Hermione said, in between snorting and laughing into her pillow. “I had no idea Zabini was gay.”

“He's not. He plays both sides of the Quidditch pitch,” Severus informed her with indifference.

Hermione stopped and looked curiously at her lover.

Severus, who still had his eyes closed, said, “No, I do not sleep with other wizards.”

“But, I...” *How did he know I was just thinking that?* “I didn't say anything.”

“No, but I could sense that the question was on your mind. On to more pleasant subjects.” Though Severus was not homophobic, like most other strictly heterosexual men, he did not like to dwell on that particular subject any longer than necessary. “So when will the next shipment of Bicorn horn be arriving?”

Finally remembering when the last shipment was due in, Hermione answered, “There should be one by the end of the month.”

“With the Boomslang coming in once a week, and Bicorn horn coming in by the end of the month, all we need now is the fluxweed picked during a full moon,” Severus said plainly. “When is the next shipment of that coming in? Shouldn't be too long as that stuff grows like a weed.”

Hermione's stomach suddenly felt queasy. Groaning, she closed her eyes and buried her face into her pillow.
“Hermione?” Severus nudged her gently. “What are you not telling me?”

“The fluxweed,” she mumbled into her pillow.

“What about it?” The tension was clearly evident in his voice, wondering if the Fates had another trick up their sleeve to muck up his life with. Things were going easy now, of course something had to happen to screw it all up.

Lifting her head from the pillow, she said, “I can't believe I forgot about the fluxweed, well, not forgot but...” She trailed off, almost sheepish in her remorse for not getting to the point right away. “You know how almost all fluxweed is grown in the United States, as it is native to the eastern area of the country?”

“Yes,” he replied tentatively, wondering what bad news Hermione was about to deliver.

“Well, it seems that where most of the growing grounds are, they have been experiencing their wettest year on record. A lot of the fields where they grow have been washed out; or what little harvest there is, is just pure slime, rotting from all the rain. We’ve only received two shipments this year, and they were small ones at that. There is a shortage. It's in all the ingredient trade papers. I'm surprised you didn't read about it.”

Severus had been reading about the rains on the east coast of the United States affecting growing conditions of certain potion ingredients, but it had escaped his attention that it would apply to fluxweed too, since that was not an ingredient The Lovely Lavender Company has use for in any of its products. He was too exhausted to groan or sigh or be frustrated at every obstacle in the road towards his freedom, so he just lay there staring at the ceiling.

Hermione sensed his distress and rubbed his shoulder, hoping it would show a bit of support and solidarity. “There is a full moon coming up on September tenth. They suspect that if things go well, there might be a shipment in from North Carolina or Virginia by the end of September after drying and processing it. They've replanted the fields and are hoping for a crop. It'll be a small crop, but considering the prices are going up, they will be charging a small fortune for it. So I can only pull out what is absolutely necessary.” This didn't seem to console Severus much, so she continued telling him as much as she knew about future shipments coming in. “And then there is also talk of a few growers in Georgia who planted some too, to make up for the shortage, and they should have a crop in by Halloween.”

“When is the last full moon of the season?” Severus asked gravely.
“November ninth.” Hermione watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed.

If no fluxweed arrived before the end of the season, Severus knew he would have to wait until next year for shipments to resume in the summer. If it was a perennial plant, this would not be an issue, but as fluxweed was an annual, one could only grow and harvest as the seasons allowed. 'Another year. So close, and now foiled by Mother Nature and her temperament.'

“When did the last shipment come in?” Severus asked.

“Mid-July.” Hermione's heart sank as she realized that if Severus had just asked her sooner for the ingredients, she could have gotten some fluxweed from that shipment. With the Boomslang shipment arriving this past week, Ginny could have begun brewing the Polyjuice Potion that day. Now Severus' departure would be delayed by at least another month. And as much as Hermione wanted Severus to be free, she did not want him to leave her so soon after they had finally cast all their pretenses aside.

Severus cursed at himself for his delay in confessing his original needs with Hermione; however, without the delay, he would not have grown to know Hermione, nor be lying next to her after making love as he was at that moment. So he would merely stay another month longer than expected. Since Hermione's arrival back into his life, his caged life had become quite a bit more tolerable, so there was some compensation for the delay.

“I will get you that fluxweed picked during a full moon. Lie, beg, steal, or smuggle it into the country, I will get it for you, Severus,” she told him with earnest sincerity.

Cupping her cheek, he regarded her face set with that deterministic look. Severus could not put name to the feelings swelling inside of his chest. It was not merely love, but something unnamable as it was equally intangible. He felt cared for in a way that he had rarely experienced in his life. It was not merely a reciprocal act for his usefulness to another, but the sheer altruistic kindness that Hermione radiated that awed him.

Uncomfortable with these unfamiliar feelings, Severus rose from the bed and suggested a shower; something to do other than lie in bed and contemplate his growing feelings for Hermione seemed preferable at the moment.

They spoke little as Hermione soaped his back and Severus washed her hair. Both of their minds were preoccupied with thoughts about fluxweed, freedom, the Death Eater Decree, and the fact that
whatever they might share would be brief, ending when Severus left England, most probably never to return.

Hermione felt weary to the bone as she sat down on the bed. It was late. Without a word, Hermione began picking up her clothes that were strewn about the floor, placing them on the bed before getting dressed.

“Stay.” Severus placed his hand atop Hermione’s as she reached for her knickers. He noticed that he’d left a small love bite on the top of her shoulder, and used his wand to remove it. It seemed leaving his mark upon Hermione was another rule he had broken, as he made a point of never leaving evidence on other witches, especially married ones.

With her back towards him as she sat on the edge, she turned and glanced over her shoulder at her lover. Sitting there atop the bed was Severus, his skin freshly washed and dried, hair still damp with drops of moisture collecting at the end of clumped tendrils. She wanted nothing more than to just crawl under the covers with him and sleep in his bed all night, never to emerge for the rest of her life, living the rest of her days in this flat by his side, making love, talking, and laughing. But Severus’ flat was merely a temporary sanctuary from the real world for her, and she knew she had to leave this enchanted place where time sped by too fast for her liking, and go back home to her husband and her other life.

“I can't stay,” she choked out. “I wish I could.” There was a Floo connection two floors down. All she had to do was Floo Ron and say she was staying the night at her parents’. Her mother almost never Flooed Hermione at the flat, or she could owl Ron. However, she knew she had to go home; it was the right thing to do. Guilt pushed her to begin putting her clothes back on.

Severus knew she had to go, but he had to ask. Now that he had Hermione in his bed, he did not want her to leave it. The only witch he had ever asked to stay, and she could not.

“Come tomorrow morning.” It wasn't a command, nor a plea, but sounded as a suggestion. Severus did not want to be the one who needed her emotionally more than she needed him.

Hermione shook her head. “I can't. I have to go to the farmers’ market, and then I have Ron's game tomorrow. After the game is Percy's birthday party at the Burrow.” She did not see Severus momentarily cringe at the mention of the Burrow. Twisting at the waist to look back at Severus again, she asked, “Sunday?”

If it wasn't for the fact that he was at his bare minimum number of clients, he would ask Miss Brown to cancel his Sunday night client. As it was, he could not get rid of any more, not without
replacing them with new ones. Mrs. Peterson hasn't asked Severus for a shag in quite a long while, and hopefully she would not be asking for one Sunday night.

“Come Sunday morning, that way we have all day together,” Severus recommended, the hint of excitement creeping into his voice. “I'll cook an early supper, and Draco and Ginny can come and dine with us. We can discuss the plan over a leg of lamb and some good Cabernet Sauvignon. Tell your husbands you're going out shopping or something; that way Ginny can spend the day with Draco, as well.”

There was an eagerness in his eyes Hermione did not think possible. To her it sounded perfect. “And then after dinner we can dance a little?”

His face shrouded itself with a veil of grimness. “I can't have you stay Sunday night. I have... company.”

“Oh.” Hermione ducked her head down. So much for her sanctuary from the real world. Now she was faced with the fact that Severus truly was not hers alone, not even for the whole day. She wanted to know, and she knew she would regret asking, but could not help herself. “Will you be sleeping with her?” The bitterness in her voice could not be masked by her offhanded tone that bordered on cavalier.

“Probably not. It depends on if she asks, which she usually doesn't.” Jealousy was a petty emotion Severus did not tolerate in others, even though Hermione's was almost endearing, as a sign that she cared so much. Still, it was something that could become a problem if not addressed immediately. “I only sleep with one client regularly, and I suspect she is growing bored with me. You are the only woman I have ever asked to stay the night; you are the only one I have kissed. You are not a client. Remember that in the end I chose you and did not invite the others to more nights here, or remove my mask for them. Do not ask about the others anymore. I do not ask you if you will be sleeping with your husband this weekend. This is what I must do to survive and keep the Ministry from destroying me.” His small warning came out more like a chastisement, and with the mention of her husband, Severus felt his own surge of jealousy rise.

Shame filled Hermione that she was already acting so possessively. She knew what he did, and they had gone over this issue before. It still did not stop the stinging lump of hot jealousy from residing in her gut.

“I'm sorry,” she whispered. “I just don't know how to deal with something like this. It's all very strange and foreign to me. Forgive me.”
Severus' hand settled on her shoulder, and without looking back at him, she squeezed it as an acceptance of his forgiveness.

Dressed and ready to go, Hermione looked at her reflection in the mirror one last time to make sure she looked presentable before coming home, in case Ron had already finished with his business dinner. Severus, who donned his dressing gown, walked Hermione to his door.

“Sunday.” Severus smoothed back an errant wisp of hair near her face.

“Yes, and I can help you cook supper, if you'll let me help in the kitchen this time,” she said with unveiled eagerness.

“And test another batch of the male enhancement potion,” he added, which made Hermione smile with a small laugh.

“And definitely test another batch of that potion of yours. And maybe dance the tango?” Hermione trailed a finger up to his chest and played with a few of the hairs on it, keeping her eyes down.

“And dance a little. And talk of apprenticeships and escapes and ingredients.”

“Oh, hell!” Hermione frowned and gently thumped her head against Severus' chest. “I forgot I had a potion simmering at work to separate it, trying to figure what was in it. Now it's probably all burnt and ruined. I have to go back to work and turn the fire off. Damn!”

Severus leaned back and tipped Hermione's face up. “What potion was this?”

“Ron has been taking this potion his personal trainer has given him to help him gain muscle, so he can be all muscular for some calendar photography shoot later this year,” Hermione explained, feeling rather exasperated with herself that she could had forgotten about the potion like that, all due to the fact she didn't sleep last night. “It's making him a bit aggressive and he doesn't know what's in it. So I nicked a vial of it, and was going to try and separate it to figure out what was in it.”

Humming momentarily to himself, Severus finally said, “Bring a couple samples here. I'll help you figure out what's in it, as potion analysis is definitely something you'll learn during your apprenticeship. You'll be doing the work, but I can guide you.”
Hermione was suddenly thrilled that not only would she be doing something that she would have to master during her apprenticeship, but she would be doing it with Severus. She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly.

She pulled back and was beaming brightly at him. “I can't wait. Sunday morning. How does ten o'clock sound?”

“Fine.” There was nothing left to discuss, and the evening had finally come to an end. Severus kissed Hermione one last time for the night before stepping back and bowing to kiss her hand. “Until then.” It was over the top and suddenly romantic, but he knew Hermione would be delighted by the gesture.

She giggled like a schoolgirl and felt as if she had been swept off her feet by the whole course of events. Love is a heady sensation that can make even the most sensible person act like a romantic fool.

Opening the door, Hermione was just about to step out into the hallway when she heard someone descending the stairs from above. Stepping back inside and quickly pulling the door closed, Severus and Hermione peered through the crack in the door, both curious as to who had been up in Blaise's flat making all that noise.

From their vantage point, they could both see part of the stairs and the landing to the left of Severus' door. The tall figure stopped at the base of the stairs to tuck in his shirt, a satisfied smirk still firmly placed on his mouth. The red hair was a giveaway that the wizard was a Weasley, but Hermione felt her knees give way when she recognized her own husband on the other side of the door.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 49 A/N: A huge round of thanks to my wonderful betas who do such a fabulous job of fixing all my errors (listed in reverse alphabetical order): JuneW, Horserider, GinnyW.


Fluxweed (Isanthus brachiatus) is an annual, native to the eastern half of the United States, mostly along the eastern seaboard. In several states it is considered an endangered native plant, including Connecticut, and it is not grown commercially by the nursery trade.
“Waiting For the Gods of Weather to Smile”

Chapter Summary

Hermione deals with her changed life the morning after.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fifty

“Waiting For the Gods of Weather to Smile”

Disclaimer: All characters, concepts, and locations are owned or inspired J.K. Rowling. I'm just borrowing them for a bit before returning them to their rightful owner. I just hope Miss Jo doesn't ask why she can't wipe that smile off of Snape's face.

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While staring at Ron's pillow, Hermione had a hard time remembering how she had made it to bed the night before. It took her a moment of hard concentration before she could remember the events that took place after having spied Ron leaving Blaise Zabini's place – after what they surmised had been a wonderful shag from all the animalistic yowling that she and Severus had overheard.

Severus had caught her before she hit the floor as her legs gave away. The rest of the night, she watched herself go through the motions as if she was observing as an outsider would, while she felt completely disconnected from reality.

'Ron is shagging another wizard.'

Hermione had had her suspicions that Ron may have been fooling around, but never would she have guessed it was with another man. Part of Hermione's mind kept trying to tell her that she was having an affair with another man too, but that only seemed to make the situation worse in her mind.

Severus gently walked a shell-shocked Hermione over to the Transfigured comfy couch and
brought her tea. He would have offered her something stronger, but what he hadn’t drunk the night before had been banished by Draco that morning. Her hands shook worse than the first night she had come to visit Severus with her moral quandary of whether to tell or not tell Harry about Ginny's infidelities.

‘Ron is shagging another wizard.’

That phrase kept repeating in her mind over and over. Hermione might have even said it aloud. If she did, Severus never made comment of it. After a few cups of calming tea, and a chance to gather her wits and regain her legs, Hermione left. As he walked her down the two flights of stairs to the Floo point, his arm wrapped firmly around her waist in case her legs went out on her again, Hermione had suddenly realized Severus had somehow placed two vials of a sleeping draught into her hand earlier. She vaguely recalled his instructions that this would help her to sleep peacefully.

Severus was the one that called out the Floo destination for the Ministry, gently reminding her that she had a flame burning under a failed experiment simmering away that needed to be extinguished. Hermione nodded dumbly, acknowledging that she heard and understood what he was saying, but the glassy and far-off look in her eyes made Severus mention accompanying her to the Ministry to make sure she got there all right and home safely. It was then that she came around to her senses and insisted Severus stay behind, and that she would be fine. There was a tender and sympathetic kiss from him before he sent her off.

The Ministry was dark, lit by only a few candles and braziers. Her heels clicked and clacked, ominously echoing down the government-issued beige-gray tile floor and grayish-beige walls. Sure enough, Hermione reached the lab and found that the sample of Ron's supplement was nearly evaporated, and in a few more hours would have begun to smoke. Her mind still whirling from the shock of learning that Ron was screwing around with another man, she extinguished the flame and left, then locked up out of habit.

The walk back to the Floo point in the Ministry's atrium was completely unmemorable. She couldn't recall the trip via Floo back to her own flat. What she did remember was stepping out of her fireplace to see Ron lying there on the couch stretched out, reading a magazine.

“There you are. I was beginning to worry about where you were. It's late.” Ron rose from the couch to greet her.

It took all of Hermione's will not to cringe from his touch. She wanted to yell at him, call him a traitor, a liar, a snake, a wanker, a bloody whore, a sadistic bastard, and a slew of other names. Instead she held her tongue, biting down on it until she could taste blood. How she managed not to look at him with abject hatred and loathing, she didn't know, as those emotions were certainly roiling within her as he went over to give her a hug, welcoming her back.
Remembering that Severus had used the truth to cover the truth, she said blankly, “I forgot I left a potion simmering at work. I just remembered and went back to turn the flame off.”

Ron made some comment, which she did not hear since all sound had become strangely muffled, as the shock she was experiencing was setting in. Hermione didn't know what Ron was saying, but he was standing by the doorway, holding out his hand inviting her to come to bed. The idea of sleeping in the same bed as that man, who had been doing who-knows-what with Blaise Zabini not hours ago, made her stomach churn.

“I'm just going to sit on the couch for a moment before coming to bed,” she announced blandly.

'Ron is shagging another wizard.'

Another woman Hermione could deal with, even stomach, but another man?

Staring at the cold fireplace, Hermione wondered if she was so inadequate in bed that she drove Ron to seek another wizard for his sexual needs. Was he bi? Or was he gay, just pretending to prefer witches? Just thinking about it on top of the shock she was still feeling made her mind reel. Shock, compounded with the exhaustion of not sleeping the night before, overwhelmed her as she felt the room begin to spin.

Sleep. Hermione just wanted to sleep and forget everything that had occurred within the past hour. A part of her wished she had agreed to stay the night with Severus so that she would not have witnessed what she had, and she would have remained blissfully ignorant of the fact that her husband was shagging another man.

Sitting on the couch, she downed the contents of one vial and black dreamlessness overtook her.

Ron's pillow had not moved as she laid there gazing at the warp and weft of cotton threads, finally recalling last night's events. It still didn't explain why she was in her nightgown and in her bed.

There was movement on her peripheral vision that caught her attention. Rolling onto her back, she discovered a piece of paper hovering over her head, fluttering about, trying to get her attention. She snatched it out of the air and read it.
Hey, sleepy head! You fell asleep on the couch last night, so I carried you back to bed. Whatever was in that potion you took was powerful stuff, you didn't stir once.

You seemed pretty tired last night anyway, so I let you sleep in. Don't forget after the game we have Percy's birthday party to go to. Did you get him anything? I know we didn't get around to discussing a gift, but you're good at picking out those sorts of things, so anything you buy should be fine.

I'm expecting an owl from Viktor regarding his agent. I left early this morning for a workout before the game, so there might be an owl waiting for you when you get up.

See you at the game.

Ron

The tears finally came. Hermione wailed, balled, and screamed, punching her pillow and kicking her feet against the bed, feeling both betrayed and humiliated. All the indifference that Hermione had been feeling towards her husband metamorphosed into unadulterated rage. She knew it was hypocritical of her to hate Ron for cheating on her, as she was guilty of the same transgression, but it didn't stop her from feeling the way she did. What was insulting to her was that Ron was with another wizard, a SLYTHERIN and DEATH EATER, of all people. Hermione was equally guilty of those accounts too, having fallen in love with the quintessential Slytherin and a reformed Death Eater; however, for all of Ron's “Slytherins are all a bunch of untrustworthy Dark wizards” rhetoric and macho posturing, it seems he was the biggest hypocrite and liar in her eyes.

Hermione knew she could never confront Ron about her discovery, as that would shed light on how and when she discovered her husband's secret, namely Zabini. If that was the first time Ron had gone there, that would certainly place her at the Red Ginseng on that night. There were several things she wanted to know, but would probably never learn unless Ron flat out confessed: Does he shag wizards other than Zabini? Other witches, too? How long has this been going on? Before they were married? Ron had said she was his first. Was Hermione his first lover, or first witch?
She didn't know how long she lay there, crying and howling, and feeling as if what little dignity she had left in her life had been shredded and destroyed. Everything that had anchored Hermione's life had been taken away, and she felt cast adrift, a victim to the tides of circumstance. Her high morals regarding love and marriage had been compromised with the realization that she had never truly loved Ron like she should, and was willingly sleeping with Severus with no remorse. The esteem of those she knew and thought she had trusted had been shaken to the core, especially concerning those that she considered the remaining leaders of the Order. The only things that kept Hermione from being swept into a maelstrom of confusion and deep depression were her love of Severus and the promise of a Potions apprenticeship.

Hermione knew she could not lie in bed all day, skipping Ron's game and Percy's party, as Ron would know something was wrong. Confronted on the matter of if she was all right, Hermione wasn't sure she could hold together without screaming at the prat she was married to that she knew everything and had never been so insulted, mortified, and disgusted in her life. She had nothing against gay people or what they did in the privacy of their own homes, it was just the thought of Ron shoving his cock up some other wizard's arse, or letting some wizard do that to him, that made her stomach roil. He was her husband. She didn't even want to imagine Ron kissing another wizard.

As she hauled herself out of bed – noting how very sore she was in certain places from all that overexertion the previous night – and into the kitchen, it finally struck Hermione that if Ron saw Blaise Zabini, that would mean that Lavender had to have a hand in setting him up with the gigolo one floor up from Severus' flat. Hermione knew she had no right to ask about what Ron was doing with Zabini, any more than Ron asking about what Hermione was up to with Severus if he ever found out about her own visits to the Red Ginseng. Lavender was in a business that required discretion, so Hermione knew it would be pointless to grill her about how long Ron had been visiting Zabini, or any other wizards in her employ. Part of Hermione wanted to throttle the well-coiffed blond witch, wrapping her hands around her neck while she squeezed and shook Lavender violently, but she also knew it was Lavender's doing that paired her up with Severus and bringing her the greatest joy in what seemed like years, and the best sex she had ever had.

If she had to pick the choice of living her life with a faithful husband, a loveless marriage, and bad sex for the rest of her life, or living with the knowledge Ron fucked around on her with other men, while she was experiencing passionate love and mind blowing sex with Severus, she would have to concede she'd rather have the latter. Hermione had been withering away under the pressures of a dull and listless life. These past weeks with Severus had brought a fire back into her soul she thought had been extinguished under relentless mediocrity.

Two owls sitting upon the kitchen windowsill kept Hermione from sinking into another bout of mind-numbing introspection and endless postulation. The larger of the two owls muscled its way past the smaller one, who Hermione recognized as her parents’ owl, Maxwell.

“All right, all right,” she conceded, taking the letter from the larger owl. “I'll get to you both. Don't worry, I have plenty of owl treats for you both.” She threw an owl treat to Maxwell in consolation for being bullied by the larger bird. Pigwidgeon began to chirp madly, demanding he get an owl
treat, as well. “You too, Pig.” The tiny owl was mollified as it dove into the tray she set out for the trio of birds.

After retrieving the second letter, Hermione made some tea to steady her nerves before having the fortitude to bother with Owl Post. Finally settled down with some tea, Hermione opened the letter from her parents first. Two tickets fell out of the folded-up letter and into her lap. She set the tickets aside while she read.

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Hello Hermione,

Your father and I had tickets to see “Of Mice and Men” tonight at the Savoy, but our neighbor, Mrs. Jenkins, broke her leg in the front yard early this morning. Your father took her to hospital, and we’ll be taking care of her tonight until her daughter can come down from Carlisle tomorrow morning and help her out.

So we have two tickets that we thought we’d offer to you and Ron first. I’ve enclosed them with the letter I sent with you. If you can't accept them, just send them back with Maxwell, and I'll give them to Mr. and Mrs. Robinson down the street.

All our love,

Mum & Dad

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Hermione felt so sorry for poor Mrs. Jenkins. The elderly widow had no one living at home anymore to help her, so she was lucky that Hermione's parents could help her until her daughter arrived to help. Going into her private stash of stationery she kept hidden from Ron so he wouldn't pilfer it while answering his fan mail, which fortunately was being delivered to the Chudley Cannons club headquarters instead of their home now, she grabbed a sheaf of parchment. She penned a quick reply that she couldn't accept the tickets for tonight due to a prior Weasley family obligation, but thanked them and hoped that next time she could use the tickets. After folding the tickets up inside the letter, she gave it to Maxwell, who took off quickly, understanding the timeliness of his errand.
The letter delivered by the larger owl was from Viktor. It contained information about Viktor's agent, fees, and contact information, as well as advice on how to best deal with the wizard. At the end of the letter was a short missive to say hello to Hermione for him. Hermione groaned and lightly thumped her head on the kitchen table, suddenly remembering she had promised to write Viktor a letter. Hermione knew there was no time now to compose a letter to her old friend and decided to bring ink, quill and parchment with her to the game. Besides, she didn't think she could stomach the sight of her husband at the moment, and figured keeping her nose down might be a good way to keep from having to look upon him.

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'I really wish Hermione would gain a few pounds,' Severus groaned internally, noting the rather bruised sensation along both hip bones. He made a promise that unless she put some weight on, shagging her in a missionary position with her legs down was not an option. Banging hip bones was high on his priority list of things to avoid.

As he practically hobbled to the bathroom to relieve himself, Severus definitely knew that the seventy-hour brewed batch of the male enhancement potion was only meant for those who were very young, and very physically fit. When he saw Hermione on Sunday, he would try the fifty-hour version, or Draco would have to use a Mobilicorpus to get him to work Monday morning.

Fortunately, Marf did not have the day off this time. Severus could have the house-elf fix breakfast while he slumped over his tea, debating if he should take an Invigoration Draught, or crawl back into bed and sleep away the rest of the morning, which was almost gone anyway.

Though his body was tired, his mind was not. After giving the weekly shopping list to Marf, Severus finished his breakfast while feeling excitement pulsing through his tired veins. His freedom was now going to be a reality instead of some convoluted strategy with indeterminate factors. Most everything was set with nothing too ambiguous left to plan. The only hitch was the fluxweed. He remembered Albert Dobmeir's offer to help him in any way, but he was hesitant to use Albert unless there were no more fluxweed shipments for the rest of the year, and there was no guarantee that the elder Potions master had any in his stores. There was one avenue he could explore, but he would have to word his letter carefully to Katherine Bigelow.

Then, there was Hermione's apprenticeship as well. Severus was very pleased at how events had turned out, and that she would have something to look forward to instead of a lifetime stuck in the Department of S&R. The way her face lit up, and the way she expressed her gratitude, was a greater reward than he could have imagined. It was not only the right thing to do, but it made him feel good inside, something he hadn't felt in a long time. And the best part was that he did not have to use her apprenticeship as bribery to make her agree to give him the restricted Polyjuice Potion ingredients.

Suddenly anxious, Severus decided that it was best if he went into work and kept busy instead of sitting around his flat all day thinking and rethinking about his upcoming escape. He could have
thought about his time with Hermione, and the many different ways he'd had her time and time again, but that would only arouse him and he wasn't feeling like a wank this morning, as his balls were still aching.

It was nice to Floo directly to Lovely Lavender's headquarters instead of having to avoid people on the street. With none of the office house-elves, Miss Brown, or Draco around, the office was quieter than usual. Most of the house-elves were still busy on the production floor making cauldrons full of beauty products, but as the only one in the offices, Severus enjoyed guaranteed peace and lack of interruptions.

There was the temporary hair dye problem he still had to finish solving, as he had been interrupted Thursday, and Friday he’d been too tired to do anything but drink tea, nap, and mope all day. But first, he pulled out the letter from Katherine Bigelow.

He’d had the occasional owl from her since her relocation to Spain, her letters filled with a few questions about local Spanish customs, and ideas for a few exports to Britain, since she still had so many distribution contacts there. The past three letters expressed concern about making enough money the first year. Expenses were far more than what she had anticipated, as the Spanish Ministry of Magic seemed keen on coming up with a few extra fees that, in very plain terms, amounted to extortion. Katherine was seeking counsel from Sebastian Delgado, Severus’ alias, for some plants she could grow in Spain that were in short supply in apothecaries, as she too had been reading the trades on the devastating rains in the eastern United States.

Severus didn't know why he hadn’t thought of it last night, but counseling Katherine to grow fluxweed was certainly a viable option once the initial panic of the situation wore off. He had not been thinking very clearly last night, as the male enhancement potion had placed his brains squarely between his legs, in addition to the post-shag exhaustion.

Though fluxweed is an annual, he knew that due to the southern latitude of Spain, she would be able to get three good months of growth in before harvest, the growing season even going well into December. The only thing was, could Katherine even obtain the seeds to grow any?

After a quick check with the latest Potion ingredient trade papers, Severus wrote a letter to Katherine recommending plants to grow with a quick harvest schedule that were currently scarce or would be in the near future, including fluxweed on the list. Fluxweed could probably, in ideal growing conditions, provide the first crop in a little over two months. He also recommended sending an Owl to one of the major apothecaries in Diagon Alley for their latest price list to see what was out of stock and what was fetching a rather high price. He also recommended growing wild ginseng, as large specimens fetched astronomical prices, but that would require leaving the plants undisturbed for the next ten years before harvesting.
The next few hours were spent retracing his steps to the point of epiphany – to resolve the filmy issue from the temporary hair dye – before he’d been so rudely interrupted with the surprise inspection.

As Severus stood and scanned his library for a particular book, his eye caught sight of, *A Potions Apprentice's Guide to Master-level Techniques*. Picking it up, he passed a reverent hand over the cover, remembering when he purchased it just before he had begun his own apprenticeship. Instead of putting it back, he set it aside and began pulling out other books Hermione might find useful in preparation of her apprenticeship.

’*I could give her a head start on her apprenticeship, since it's only a matter of waiting until I can leave before she can begin under Dobmeir,*’ Severus thought sensibly.

He started pulling down several advanced-level reference books, including, *Catalysts and Their Combinations, Basic Bases and Simple Solutions*, and *Potion Analysis and Retrograde Potions Theory*. Over his many hours of conversation with Hermione, he knew there was little about ingredients she had left to learn, having worked in her job long enough to have nearly the same level of expertise as a Potions master. It was Potions theory and brewing, Herbology experience of tending a Potions master's garden, anatomy, code of ethics, and five languages she still had to master.

When he had set aside a sizable stack of primers essential to the master-level of Potions work, he went back to his task of improving the temporary hair dye. It wasn't so much concern over loaning some of his precious books that made him periodically stop working to regard the teetering tower of tomes, but something akin to nurturing and the anticipation of Hermione's reaction when he loaned her his books that made him smile to himself, and then go back to his work.

She couldn't look at Ron. Every time Hermione lifted her head up and spied her husband by the Chudley Cannons goal posts, the chaotic emotional turmoil inside of her would begin burning once more. So instead of subjecting herself to any more unpleasantness, she kept her eyes fixed on the letter she was writing to Viktor. To keep prying eyes, namely Christy and Nicole, from reading over her shoulder, Hermione placed an Obfuscation Charm on it so that only she could read it and it would appear as unintelligible blurred lines to anyone else.

Occasionally, the game announcer would talk excitedly over the roar of the crowd during a thrilling play, in which case Hermione would look up, and inevitably her eyes would travel over to Ron. The announcer made the comment about Weasley flying exceptionally well, and Hermione could not help but snidely think that maybe it was because Blaise had shoved an additional broom up Ron's arse, thereby helping him fly better that day.

Spying the letters on the back of Ron's jersey, Hermione had the most irresistible urge to Charm
the letters to say something else.

'W-A-N-K-E-R. Yeah, that's a good one. Wonder how long it would take for anyone to notice it.'

To amuse herself, when Hermione wasn't concentrating on her letter to Viktor, she began thinking of other things to Charm on the back of Ron's jersey, including: Whore-sley, Poofter, Arse Pirate, Rump Roger, Crack Crammer, Bugger Boy, Fuck Face, Sausage Jockey, Sluttykins, Tramp-oline, and Bludger Bat Bitch. If it wasn't for the fact that all the other players' wives were sitting around her, and it was a stiff penalty fine to cast spells on players during a Quidditch game, she would have cast at least one new nickname to flash on Ron's back.

It was taking so long for the Snitch to show up, Hermione had finished her lengthy letter to Viktor detailing her evening at the Grand Royal Supper Club, and everything that had happened in her life since the end of the war. Sitting there with more blank parchment on her lap, she was tempted to write a letter to Severus, but what could she say that she couldn't say to him in person? Somehow, Hermione didn't think that Severus would be the sort to swoon over receiving love letters, and she wasn't in the habit of keeping a diary. She could write them for the sake of putting her thoughts to paper, but if anyone ever discovered them, it would likely lead to an ending worthy of a Greek tragedy. And though Hermione was well versed in Muggle and wizard literature, she was not one to write poetry either.

Instead she began writing out a shopping list, since she didn't have a chance to go to the farmers' market earlier that day. Hermione had been barely able to get a present for Percy before rushing off to the game. Her trip had been made even quicker knowing that Percy had a fondness for eagle quills, so she didn't have to spend any time browsing around for ideas. It was while she was working on a list of long-put off chores around the flat that a great cheer erupted, signaling that someone had caught the Snitch. The Cannons' Seeker, Wally Bristol, made a victory lap around the pitch, holding the golden orb aloft for all to see.

Not wanting to get caught in the rush of the crowd waiting for the ritual end-of-game handshake or fight between teams, Hermione made polite farewells to the other Quidditch players' wives, and made her way towards an exit. Just before Hermione descended the stairs, she looked up and saw Ron give a friendly pat on William Kidd's bottom.

The bile in Hermione's throat rose up as she wondered if William was bisexual too, and if they did things to each other in the locker room that her mind did not want to imagine.

She did not want to wait for Ron to emerge from the locker room before departing for the Burrow; Hermione wanted to go ahead and avoid her husband at all costs. The other wives finally filed down and waited like good little witches for their husbands to emerge freshly washed, and fawned over by the reporters who covered the game. Hermione kept herself preoccupied thinking about all...
the things she would learn during her apprenticeship under Potions master Dobmeir, but then reality set in: her future boss would be Lavender Brown, who just happened to set Ron up with Zabini. Or maybe Zabini wore a mask like Severus did and hid his Dark Mark, and Ron just wanted a random shag with some black bloke. She did not want to be thinking about these things again shortly before Ron would emerge from the locker room, only to have her resolve tested not to deck him in front of all the reporters, calling him an unfaithful poofter.

Other than the time she saw Ron descend the stairs from Zabini's flat, she had no other conclusive proof that Ron was unfaithful to her, and with another wizard. If she had one other shred of evidence, she'd use it to leave her husband in a heartbeat. There was the time when he was confronted by Harry over dinner as to where Ron went during that week he was gone, but other than his evasive answer that he was staying with a friend, there was no proof of his infidelities. It could have been only one time with another wizard, and she just had sod's law luck to be there when he left. Who knew?

Ron emerged from the locker room smiling and talking with William, and Hermione could only dread Ron saying that they had been invited to another insipid dinner party. They only made the briefest of eye contact before Hermione looked away, repulsed by Ron. She tried to keep her features schooled, feigning a headache to explain the grimace on her face.

“Did you see that Quaffle I caught, barely hanging onto my broom?” Ron asked excitedly, noticing Hermione's pensive mood.

“Not really. I've had a headache for most of the game, and the sun was bothering me.”

“Which is why you had your head buried in some papers on your lap during the game,” Ron retorted a bit shortly.

Hermione closed her eyes and decided she didn't feel like an argument, no matter how much her pride demanded her to stand up and verbally eviscerate the bastard. “We should go over to the Burrow now, as Percy's party will have started by now,” she deflected.

Ron had no reply, and they both walked silently to the Apparition point near the stadium.

The party was in full swing by the time Hermione and Ron arrived. After Hermione handed Percy his gift, Ron pulled her aside and asked what they had gotten his brother. Hermione could only roll her eyes, and stop herself from demanding her husband take his filthy hands off of her.
“You'll find out when he opens it,” she growled at him irritably.

Ron let go of his wife as if the mere touch of her burnt his hands. Figuring she was sore again over their departure from one another on their anniversary night, he did not retort and headed out the door to see if a pick-up game of Quidditch had been started yet.

Hermione headed towards the kitchen for something to drink. Earlier that day she made a promise not to touch anything with alcohol, as she had finally noticed she made a nasty habit of doing foolish things under the influence while she was suffering from stress at the same time.

In the kitchen she found Ginny with a cool glass of water in her hand, easily talking with someone. As Hermione rounded the fireplace, she saw the redheaded witch talking to Harry. Hermione froze in her tracks and momentarily gaped, feeling panic rise in her chest, as if she had been caught.

'Breathe, Hermione! Dammit, breathe!'

Suddenly images of Harry cornering and confronting her about her sudden appearance at the Red Ginseng Thursday night flooded her mind. Knowing she was standing there like a fool, she recovered by saying, “Oh, Harry! I thought you'd be outside. Ron went out there, probably looking for you.”

“Really? Okay, he must want to start up a quick game. Thanks.” Harry gave Hermione a quick welcoming hug before going out the kitchen door to look for Ron.

Once Harry was gone, Hermione collapsed against the kitchen cabinets, bracing her hands on the scrubbed wooden counter, trying to catch her breath. She closed her eyes and willed her knees to become solid once more, and to stop from shaking. 'God, I hope I wasn't transparent.'

Sensing her friend's distress, Ginny walked over and placed a supportive hand on the older witch's back. “You all right, Hermione?”

She whispered urgently, “No, we need to talk. Now.”

Knowing that the kitchen was no place for a private conversation, going outside would run the risk
of intrusion, and bedrooms could be disturbed by people looking for you, Ginny urged Hermione to follow her with a jerk of the head. The two slipped up the back stairs to the attic, which was still overly warm from the summer heat.

Once the door was secured with an Imperturbable Charm, Ginny spun around and asked in equal amount of anxiousness and concern, “What the hell is wrong?” She could clearly see the signs of distress in Hermione's drawn face.

Hermione, glaring at Ginny, flatly said, “You can cut the ignorance act. I know you know about me visiting Severus, for starters.”

Ginny laughed and relaxed visibly. After doing a couple quick spells to remove the dust and a Cushioning Charm, she sat down on the attic floor. “So, you're willing to admit you're visiting him then?”

Ignoring the dust on the arched-top chest, Hermione sat down, oblivious to the large swath of gray filth now smudged across her bottom. With an exasperated sigh, she admitted, “Yes. After Ron left me at the Grand Royal Supper Club–”

“What?!” interrupted Ginny hotly. “What do you mean he ‘left’ you there?”

Knowing that if she didn't explain quickly and simply, Ginny was going to confront Ron on the matter, Hermione gave Ginny a breakdown of events, including his refusal of her sexual advances, as ammunition for more information yet to come.

“So, after Viktor walked you to the carriage,” Ginny said, “you went straight home.”

“Not exactly.” Hermione confessed. This time, Hermione gave her friend a very pared down version of her encounter with Severus, and finished her tale by mumbling, “ThenwekissedandIranaway.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“We kissed.”
“I gathered that,” Ginny replied dryly. “What's this about running away?”

“I don't want to go into it.” Hermione buried her face in her hands, unable to look at Ginny, wondering if she would be furious for her sort of cheating on Ron.

“You have to see Severus as soon as possible. You just can't leave him like that, running away like that!” Ginny pointed out, panic rising in her voice.

“I saw him last night.” Hermione looked up to see Ginny's face shining with hope. “We talked.” ‘We did a lot more than talk last night.’ “I will help get the ingredients, so you can stop pretending like you don't know about everything.” Hermione began to wonder if Ginny's tolerance for her seeing Severus was more out of a need for her to get the Polyjuice ingredients, rather than empathy over a loveless marriage.

Ginny's face broke out into a beaming smile as she rushed to embrace Hermione. The younger witch crushed her friend in a fierce hug as waves of tears overcame her. Overwhelming relief and joy filled Ginny's heart, and it felt like a weighty burden had been lifted from her shoulders. “Oh God, Hermione,” she wailed. “I can't tell you how long Draco and I have waited. I can't tell you how happy you've made us.”

Sensing Hermione was not sharing in her happiness, Ginny pulled back and, after wiping away a few tears and blowing her nose on a conjured handkerchief, asked, “What are you not telling me? There's something else, isn't there?”

Hermione nodded dumbly, wondering how Ginny would take the news. “Last night as I was leaving Severus' flat, guess who I saw coming downstairs from Blaise Zabini's flat?”

Propping her chin on her hands, eager for a juicy piece of gossip, Ginny asked excitedly, “Who?”

Hermione turned her face away in shame of what she was about to tell her friend and sister-in-law. Memories of the smug look on Ron's face, as he tucked his shirt in, came back to the forefront of Hermione's mind. She wanted nothing more than to destroy him at the moment. “Ron.”

“Ron who?” Ginny asked dumbly.

“Your brother, my husband, the redhead wanker that has made my life hell being married to him.
Ronald Bilius Weasley, that's who!” she bit out with all the vitriol that had been building up inside of her during the day. Burying her face in her hands, she wept listlessly, “Oh God! What did I do to drive him into the arms of another... wizard.” Just saying it aloud with revulsion made it sound just as horrid as the situation seemed.

Bowled over by this revelation, Ginny just sat there in silence. Finally, she said, “Are you sure?”

“Of course, I'm sure!” Hermione yelled defensively. “I saw his fucking smug face just outside of Severus’ door. He stopped and tucked his shirt in. Severus and I heard him howling all night long, telling Zabini to 'take it like a dirty bitch' while he shagged him like a madman! No wonder he calls me a lousy lay. How can I compare to the talent of a gigolo who can give him head or take it up the arse all night long?” Hermione was assaulted with more random thoughts of Severus fucking other witches, possibly hundreds as he had earlier confessed, in his bed, the very same bed she had laid in last night. Suddenly, Hermione felt very dirty, and believed that no amount of caustic cleaning solutions or hot showers would ever get her clean again.

Ginny could not believe that Ron was gay. Not her brother. Before she could stop herself, she said tentatively, “Well...”

Hermione’s head snapped around and she fixed Ginny with a wild look. “Well, what? What? You knew?”

“No! God, no! It's just that... No. That would mean that... No. Forget it,” Ginny insisted, but knew Hermione would not let the matter rest.

“Tell me.” It was not a request or a plea; it was a demand.

A blush crept up Ginny's neck until it reached her ears. “I promised Harry I wouldn't tell, but fortunately he passed out before he made me take a wand oath.” Hermione nodded her head that she understood, urging her friend to keep spilling her secret. “You know how Harry is when he gets really drunk.” Both witches laughed, knowing that Harry, if plied with enough alcohol, would tell his friends any and everything. “Well, one time we got really drunk and Harry wanted to know if I had ever done anything with my dorm mates.”

Hermione thought deeply for a moment before comprehension dawnded across her face. “You don't mean...”
“Yes, that's exactly what I mean.”

Snorting with disgust, Hermione added, “What is it with guys getting off on girls doing each other?”

“I don't know, but Harry asked if I ever did anything with my dorm mates: kissing, touching. I won't go into all the things he asked. So I told about how my roommates and I were comparing breasts when they started growing and such.”

Hermione felt deeply embarrassed by this news, as she hadn't even felt comfortable getting undressed with Lavender and Parvati in the same room watching.

“So,” Ginny continued with her tale, “I asked Harry if he and his dorm mates compared... well, you know.” They both laughed nervously. “And Harry said, 'Not exactly.' Then I asked him to explain and he told me about this time during his fourth year that he, Ron, Neville, Dean, and Seamus got into this contest.”

“For what? The biggest hard-on?” Hermione guessed correctly.

“Yes, and more.” Ginny started tittering and giggling. “For who could come the fastest.”

Sputtering in surprise, Hermione asked, “Are you serious?!”

Nodding emphatically, the young witch squeaked, “Yes!”

“Oh my God.” Hermione shook her head and could not expunge the vision of five fourteen-year-old boys wanking off.

“This is the best part,” Ginny said, trying not to laugh. “There were prizes.” Both witches disintegrated into laughter. In between gulps of air, Ginny went on, “Zonko's jokes and Honeydukes sweets to who had the biggest one, and then they all sat in a circle and started jerking off so they could make sure no one cheated. And then..., and then...” Ginny's voice rose in pitch and she tried to contain her laughter. “The grand prize to whoever shot the farthest!”
Hermione's stomach ached, and Ginny had tears coming out of her eyes. Mrs. Weasley needed to laugh, for the only other option available was to cry bitterly.

“So, I know Harry has never even remotely done anything with another wizard beyond that little competition. I don't know what else to say, Hermione. I would have never guessed... Blaise Zabini?” Ginny said, her disbelief hanging about like some ghostly manifestation in the room.

The older witch nodded somberly, brought back to the reality of the situation.

“I'm so sorry, Hermione.” Ginny stood and walked over to give her friend a consolatory hug.

The other thing niggling in the back of Hermione's mind begged for dominance. “Ginny? Did Harry say what he was doing Thursday night at work?” She prayed Harry had told Ginny where he was working.

“Yeah, there was this murder case he came upon. Shook him up pretty bad. He was pretty quiet over breakfast; said he had a lot on his mind after what he saw.” Mrs. Potter frowned to herself.

'If Harry was busy with a murder case, then maybe it was another Auror who watched the building.' This thought unsettled Hermione even more. Perhaps it was only a matter of a few days before Alastor Moody or Kingsley called her into their office to ask why she had gone to the Red Ginseng last Thursday night. Remembering two other things she needed to discuss with Ginny, she blurted out, “There is a Floo point at the Red Ginseng.”

“Really? When did they connect it?” Ginny asked.

Hermione filled Ginny in on the details of the new Floo connection, and Severus' idea for dinner for all four of them Sunday afternoon, along with the rehearsed lie of the two witches going shopping all day. Mrs. Weasley left out the part about spending time with Severus testing out another batch of the Male Enhancement Potion. She was keenly aware that Ginny would probably correctly surmise that she and Severus had been intimate, if she hadn’t guessed it already. There was no point in bringing the issue up.

Knowing that if they did not emerge soon people would come looking for them, the pair finally left the attic just as small children were sent forth by their grandmother to call everyone to dinner.
A long table was set up in the back garden, making use of the last of summer's glorious days. It had rained that morning. The sun warmed the damp earth creating a muggy atmosphere that was only kept at bay by the freely flowing pumpkin juice, and shade from the pergola draped with rambling roses giving one last vibrant show of summer's bounty. Under the honey-scented blossoms of pale gold, peach and pink the Weasley clan ate and drank amid the chatter of several conversations going on at once.

Hermione sat between Ginny and George, as Ron had sat down across from his wife. This might have seemed odd if it weren't for the fact that Michael, Bill and Fleur's oldest, begged his Uncle Ron to sit next to him. Michael kept asking his uncle if he could get tickets to the next Chudley Cannons’ game. Bill and Fleur mentioned that since Harry, Ginny, and Hermione had taken the kids to the game while Fleur was recovering from childbirth three weeks ago, Quidditch had been all that Michael could talk about. Ron was attentive and explained several aspects of the game in clear and simple terms that a five-year-old could understand without talking down to him. Were it not for the fact that Hermione was currently pissed beyond all reason at her husband, she would have found it endearing to watch the exchange. Instead, she spent most of the meal talking with Ginny before casually bringing up her so-called idea to go shopping the next day.

As the meal started winding down, George nudged Hermione conspiratorially. “So. Have you given any consideration to that career opportunity we discussed last month?”

For a moment, Hermione had no idea what George was talking about until she remembered his offer to run the “adult novelty” store he mentioned. “Oh!” Taking a second to gather her thoughts, she replied, “Well, erm. Actually, something else has come up.”

“You got another job?” George asked, surprised Ron hadn't made mention of it during the family Quidditch game earlier.

“Not exactly.” Hermione hemmed and hawed.

“What then?” Fred piped up from across the table, sitting a few seats down from Michael and Ron.

Cornered, Hermione realized she hadn't thought about how she would announce her pending appointment, so she decided to keep it brief, but truthful. “I think I may have an apprenticeship coming up.”

“What?!” chorused Harry, Ron, and Ginny at the same time.
Ginny furrowed her brow and nudged Hermione with her arm, wondering why her friend had forgotten to inform her of that detail.

Giving a half-shrug of apology, she said, “I just found out... last night.” Ron gave her a quizzical look, and she suddenly realized she was caught in a quickly disintegrating lie, and had to lie a little, and believably, or the jig would be up. Looking to Ron sheepishly, she added, “I had a meeting last night and I didn't want to get anyone's hopes up except mine. I really didn't want to say anything until my plans are more, um, solid.” She gave him her best awkward grin, and he seemed to buy it completely. “I was so distracted by my upcoming meeting that I left an experiment simmering at work.”

Hermione gave herself a small pat on the back for the quick recovery to explain her late return home last night. If she could have, she would have let out a huge sigh of relief. As it was, she was too nervous to relax just yet, and felt her knees begin to tremble from the adrenaline rush of fear. She prayed that she could keep the lie going with more half-truths while not digging herself any more holes to fall through. It seemed the scope of her lie only increased with each word uttered. She decided to stick with as much truth as she could in order to reduce the number of lies she had to remember.

Bill, who was in conversation with Arthur, stopped and turned a brightened face to his sister-in-law. “What type of apprenticeship?”

“Potions, actually.” Hermione hoped that would end the matter and other topics would dominate the table, but this was not the case. More people stopped their conversations and paid attention to this latest bit of news until just about the whole table was listening to Hermione's every word.

Jostling her newborn into her other arm, Fleur asked, “Aren't you a bit old for an apprenticeship? They usually don't take someone who has been out of school so long?”

Now, Hermione wished she hadn't said anything and just wished she had told George she was still considering his offer instead of being subjected to so many inquisitive looks as to how she had landed a Potions apprenticeship. Remembering that Albert Dobmeir had just dropped Trevor Spawn as a future apprentice, she ad-libbed by responding, “The apprentice the Potions master had lined up didn't work out. He remembered me and...” She let her sentence trail off, figuring it was best that she shut her mouth before this lie got any more complex. Hermione decided to let everyone else fill in the blanks.

Smiling at his wife, Ron asked, “When do you start?”
That was a good question. Deciding to cut and run from further entanglements in this bit of deceit, she said, “It depends on a few contingencies. I don't know. When I know more, I'll keep you all informed. Right now it's all tentative.”

She hoped that would close the issue, but her insistence to keep quiet only seemed to pique everyone's interest in her affairs even more.

“Who is the Potions master?” asked Harry, who was sitting on the other side of Ginny.

It was all she could do to keep her mind and mouth from blurtting out “Severus Snape.” If Hermione did slip, she could always say it had been a joke. “Albert Dobmeir,” she announced.

Bill lifted his glass in salute. “Congratulations. I hear he's a good and fair one to apprentice under, unlike a few others I've heard of.”

Ron snorted and yelled out, “Yeah, like Snape!”

It was all Hermione could do not to choke on her own spit while the Weasley boys burst into laughter. She hid her discomfort byducking her head and pretending to laugh into her hand; Hermione would not risk looking at Ginny until the moment passed for fear that someone would see them exchange meaningful glances. Arthur and Molly smiled, but did not join in the laughter.

Glaring down at his plate of food, Draco disdainfully commented, “Plain roasted chicken. Your culinary skills are slipping. Or are you still too hung-over from yesterday to bother with a little rosemary?”

Severus ignored Draco's comment, knowing full well the young wizard was attempting to taunt him into divulging information about his Friday night meeting with Hermione; so far, he had told Draco nothing.

Up to this point, Draco had been constantly nagging Severus for information about his progress with Hermione. Since he had entered Severus' flat, he had not mentioned the meeting or questioned Severus how well it had gone.

“I decided to move our formal weekly dinner to tomorrow instead. I'll be serving leg of lamb,” Severus informed his friend as he carefully sliced into the meat with his knife and fork. “And it's
not plain roasted. I peppered and salted the cavity and skin before roasting. It is lightly seasoned.” He chewed with relish as Draco glared back at him.

“Fine. I'll ask how it went with Mrs. Weasley last night,” Draco huffed irritably. “From the fact that you have not killed yourself intentionally with poison, or accidentally with alcohol, nor did I arrive to find your place ruined once more, I can only assume our plans are back on track.” Severus sipped his wine, and gave a genteel nod of his head so that Draco could continue with his rant. “So, she'll get us the ingredients. And just how soon can we get them?”

With intentional cultured grace, Severus set his wine glass down, and dabbed the corners of his mouth with his napkin before replying calmly, “That depends.”

Having been schooled in the way of manners by his father, Draco knew exactly the methods Severus was using, as Severus had learned some of his mannerisms and charms from Lucius, especially the elder Malfoy's evasive and stalling tactics. “Very well, what are the contingencies that will delay us from leaving within one month's time as you had originally scheduled? And of these delays, what measures can be used to expedite the process so that we may leave this damned country sooner?” The blond wizard sat back in his chair, and swirled his wine in his glass with a practiced hand.

“The Boomslang skin and Bicorn horn are not an issue; the fluxweed picked during a full moon is.”

Draco's eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, the fluxweed is a problem? The stuff is a weed, and literally grows like one.”

“Yes, but no great plan can be carried out without some overwhelming hurdle to overcome,” the raven-haired wizard said, waxing philosophical. “You know nothing is ever as easy as it should seem. I planned for the human element to be the problem when actually nature is to blame in this instance. Hermione agreed wholeheartedly to help us in this matter without any begging, coercion, or promise of a Potions apprenticeship. The matter fully rests with Mother Nature, and her willingness to cooperate with us, or her bending to the will of the Fates, who seem to take great joy in fucking up my life as well as yours.”

After a synopsis of the situation of the scarce ingredient, Draco pinched the bridge of his nose, a mannerism he had picked up from his mentor. “Is there any other way to obtain fluxweed? Maybe we can send Ginny over to France to buy some then bring back?”

“You know, as well as I do, that the moment she comes back through the Floo, Apparition point, or
Portkey, anything Ginny tries to smuggle back will wind up in the customs locker down in the Ministry's basement,” the older wizard lectured Draco. “Then, she would only be hauled in for questioning as to why she was trying to smuggle a regulated Potions ingredient into the country.”

“What about Muggle means of transportation? She can take a Portkey to Paris and then take a train back through the Chunnel,” Draco suggested, desperate for a quick solution.

“If England's borders were secured during the Napoleonic Wars to prevent ingredients from being smuggled in, even via Muggle ships, what makes you think the Ministry has not already secured the Chunnel as a smuggling port as well?” Sensing Draco's desperation, he put the idea out of the younger wizard's mind by adding, “Or, would you rather risk Ginny getting caught and interrogated by Moody with Veritaserum, spilling every secret she knows against her will?”

“So we sit and wait for the gods of weather to smile down on the east coast of the United States? Is that all we have left to hope for?” Draco asked with defeat.

“There is Katherine Bigelow in Spain. I have recommended that she should grow some fluxweed for a quick cash crop. I sent the owl to her today, so it should be arriving there by Monday at the latest.” Severus set his napkin on the table, as his appetite had waned with the discussion, but he continued to pour more wine for himself and his guest.

They sat in companionable silence drinking, and thinking about the future, both near and a long way down the road of life.

Studying Severus, Draco decided to test out a theory he had growing in the back of his mind during dinner. He waited until Severus was in mid-swallow before asking, “So, when did you finally bang Hermione?”

The sight of Severus spewing his wine halfway across the table was all Draco needed to confirm that they had actually had sex. The baleful glare Severus shot Draco only solidified his hunch that it was last night.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And this is the part where future chapters are posted as fast as my betas can edit them and then get through the validation queue at Ashwinder. I am posting to AFF and AO3, in addition to Ashwinder. Once they are up on Ashwinder, after begin validated, I'll post on AFF and AO3 as well since there is the odd error that my betas have
missed and I need to correct before it's validated and posted. So it will be easier that I wait for it to be validated on Ashwinder and post on the other fanfic hosting sites after.

If you want to watch for future posting announcements and when chapters are up, you can subscribe to the Twitter page I have set up just for posting updates at: @ATDLHEAbetz
Or on my Tumblr page that also features fan art for this fic, or something that is relevant to the story: http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/

I will include the odd post from Leviosa on Twitter and Tumblr, since I am the Hotel & Logistics Director and also resident HP Mixologist for Leviosa, a Harry Potter & YA Lit conference being held next year in Las Vegas, July 7-10, 2016: leviosa.org.

I have the ENTIRE rest of “And They Didn't Live Happily Ever After” written out and I have proofed it one final time. It's complete. The only thing keeping from posting it all in one go is that I need my betas to go through and clean it up, as all good fanfic should have at least one beta to edit.

So you will not have to worry about me posting more chapters to yet leave this unfinished for yet another nine years before more chapters are written. It is done. Just be patient with my betas as they will edit as fast as they can. Remember, they have lives and are betaing for me for free out of the kindness of their hearts.

A huge round of thanks to my wonderful betas (in random order): GinnyW, JuneW, and Horserider. And addition thanks to my regular sounding board, cocoachristy and GinnyW.
Summary of chapters 1-50

Chapter Summary

For those of you who first read this story ten years ago and wish to have a recap of the first fifty chapters instead of reading them again from the beginning, which is 350,000+ words, here is the summary of the major points so far.

Four years after the end of the war, Harry asks Hermione to spy on his wife, Ginny, who he suspects is having an affair. Hermione reluctantly agrees and, with the use of Harry's Invisibility Cloak and a pair of Extendable Eyes, spies on Ginny and Draco in a very intimate and erotic moment. After Ginny leaves Draco's apartment, Hermione confronts Ginny and becomes aware of not only of their relationship that began before the end of the war, and before Harry started courting and eventually marrying Ginny, but of the Death Eater Decree. The decree was a set of rules enacted shortly after the end of the war in which all Death Eaters are forced to live under involving no Potions brewing, no Apparating, travel restrictions to prevent leaving the country and a severe restriction on which spells they can perform.

After the decree came out, Draco disappeared, which caused Ginny to give up hope on seeing him again and finally agreed to date Harry under pressure from her mother, Molly. It was years after the decree was passed Ginny came across Draco again.

Upon learning about the finer points of the decree, since it came out while Hermione and Ron were away on their Honeymoon, Hermione becomes incensed to learn that it is equally applied to Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape since they were loyal to the Order. However, the two spies for the Order were falsely accused of Dumbledore's Death and letting Death Eaters into Hogwarts during the last days of the war by Moody without any proof. Hermione also discovers that Ginny pays Draco to see him as a gigolo, with Lavender Brown as his madam, since the Death Eater Decree resulted in all monies and property taken from all Death Eaters. They are now only allowed to work in humiliating low-level Ministry jobs like scrubbing toilets, being a lift operator and such. The Ministry also turns a blind eye to other disenfranchising jobs such as begging, trash picking and prostitution.

Hermione tells Ginny she is going to tell Harry about her affair with Draco, which results in Ginny pleading for Draco's life insisting Harry would send Draco away to Azkaban for a Dementor's Kiss or kill him and get away with it without question since Harry is an Auror and defeated Voldemort. Hermione, convinced by Ginny's pleas, is now conflicted and does not want to cause the possible death or more unjust incarceration of Draco because of their affair, yet feels the need to tell Harry.

Hermione insists Ginny stop seeing Draco, but Ginny also confesses she has been in love with Draco since before the end of the war and if she could, she would leave Harry to be with him.
Ginny lets Hermione also believe that her marriage to Harry can be salvaged in order to buy some time, informing Hermione that if Draco dies or goes to Azkaban due to Hermione snitching to Harry, Ginny would leave Harry on no uncertain terms.

Unable to talk with anyone about her conundrum, Hermione goes to a bar in distress where Lavender Brown, who is not only Draco's madam but founder of the hugely successful The Lovely Lavender Company, a beauty and cosmetics potions company, comes across her before she begins drinking. Lavender confesses she has an innate sense to know when people are in distress, which is how she initially came across Ginny, who was depressed and lonely being married to Harry Potter. It is because of her talent to find conflicted and distressed souls that leads Lavender to find many of her clients (and two key employees), who seek either a sympathetic ear, sexual favors or a combination of the two, with one of her gigolos, since Draco is not the only one in her employ in this capacity. Lavender offers Hermione an evening with one of her gigolos in order to offer her a sympathetic ear. To Hermione's own surprise, she agrees to spend the money to have an unbiased sympathetic ear to listen to her while she decides if she is going to tell Harry about the affair.

Lavender Brown secretly set Hermione up with Severus Snape, who is one of Lavender's gigolos. Initially he refuses to agree to see Hermione until Lavender bribes him with a larger than normal percentage of royalties for a line of sex potions they are about to begin work on, since Severus secretly works as Lavender's Potions master, helping her develop lots of the products.

Lavender employs Severus, desperate to have a Potions master to help her develop products and aware he was a spy for the Order, even if he is persecuted under the decree as a Death Eater. Her knowledge that he was a spy for the Order is revealed during a memory in her Pensieve she later shared in the story. In the memory, Lavender and her best friend, Parvati Patil, were abducted during their last year at Hogwarts and held hostage in the Rookwood dungeons. Parvati was hauled off to be raped and Crucioed by Macnair, while Blaise Zabini, who later becomes a gigolo in Lavender's employ, helped Lavender escape. After escaping and winding up in the infirmary at Hogwarts, Lavender comes across Severus incapacitated by a slew of vicious hexes by Lucius Malfoy, in which she sees his Dark Mark and is prevented from killing him after Dumbledore stops her and explains he is a spy for the Order. Parvati returns to Hogwarts in a complete state of shock from her assault and is a permanent resident of St. Mungo's to this day.

Severus works for Lavender consulting and researching, but avoids doing any actual brewing to avoid violating the Death Eater Decree. Draco works as Lavender's director of advertising and marketing; the gigolo night jobs are a cover for Lavender to employ their skills for her beauty potions company under the decree.

Severus hides his identity from Hermione and his other clients with head scarves and masks. Hermione spills her guts to Severus during an evening of tea and tears, unaware it is him. During the conversation, Severus steers her into a decision in which not to tell Harry about Ginny's affair and convinces her into trying to save the Potters' marriage, which is ironic considering Hermione's own marriage to Ron is on shaky ground.
After her one meeting with Severus, Hermione promises never to visit that gigolo ever again, but changes her mind during a drunken bout fueled by anger, loneliness and depression. She views her subsequent visits to her gigolo, Severus, who goes by the pseudonym “Calleo,” as a way of saving her marriage by giving her the intellectual stimulation Ron does not give her.

During these many evenings together, Severus learns of Hermione's low level job in the Department of Standards and Regulations testing all Potions ingredients that enter the country. Severus views Hermione's job as his and Draco's salvation to leave the county and, much later on in the story, eventually convinces Hermione to give them ingredients to brew Polyjuice Potion in which they can assume the identities of others and eventually escape to sanctuary. Three key ingredients that are part of the Polyjuice Potion recipe are highly regulated, and this plan using Hermione is viewed as the only way to obtain them without the Ministry of Magic becoming aware of two Death Eaters' intent to escape. Upon Draco leaning about Hermione's job, he informs Severus of his intent to bring Ginny along during their escape.

Home life for Hermione is no less rosy with a strained marriage to Ron, further stressed by Ron's periodic departures for days at a time when they fight. Ron is a second-string Keeper with the Chudley Cannons, which pays very little, and he works nights as a barkeep at The Listing Broom so that between their three jobs they can barely cover the necessities of life. Molly has been harping on Hermione and Ginny to have children. During Hermione's initial confrontation with Ginny, she finally learns about the magical binding properties of children, making divorce an impossibility once children have been born. Hermione feels betrayed, and possibly entrapped, that Molly has left out such an important detail, assured she had been told by her mother-in-law everything entailed in a wizarding marriage before marrying Ron.

Hermione begins seeing Severus once a week for conversation, and upon seeing how thin she is, Severus begins offering to make dinner for her. Between the dinners and intellectual conversation, an attraction instantly grows between the two. Their mutual attraction becomes more intense after Hermione begins taking dancing lessons from Severus after Ron, in an attempt to help repair their crumbling marriage, suggests they go to the Grand Royal Supper Club for their anniversary, which features dancing. For Hermione to learn the basic dances, their clandestine meetings now happen twice a week: Mondays and Thursdays.

Meanwhile, after one drunken rage where an inebriated Harry yells at Ginny, Hermione demands that they begin seeing a marriage counselor. Eventually Hermione, seeing her own marriage falling apart, gives Ron the ultimatum of marriage counseling or divorce, which he agrees to the former when pressured.

Draco begins pestering Severus when he is going to reveal himself to Hermione and ask her for the Polyjuice Potion ingredients, which Severus becomes very short tempered, willing to drag on the pretense of being Calleo in which to bask in Hermione's affections towards him. Draco's nagging is spurred on by the fact that Goyle was found poisoned in an alley and Pansy Parkinson was found
gruesomely murdered. Lavender begins to get rather short tempered with Severus herself when Severus begins consulting with Hermione during their evenings together regarding some “Potions theory,” since Hermione is still unaware of Severus’ true identity, despite the hints he has started to give. Hermione has expressed she has wanted to become a Potions mistress, but was denied any opportunities for an apprenticeship. Severus discovers that Calpurnia Fudge, his once a month chess companion through Lavender's side business and dear friend to Dolores Umbridge, has had a direct hand in blocking Hermione's attempts to gain an apprenticeship. He then devises a plan: if he is able to flee England, he will set Hermione up with an apprenticeship with the Potions master, Albert Dobmier, who would replace him.

During Harry's birthday party, Hermione is able to accidentally overhear Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt, who is Severus and Draco's parole officer, discussing the two Death Eaters and figures out Calleo is Severus Snape. Hermione is shocked, mortified and feels humiliated, unable to come to grips with the fact that she the wizard she has fallen in love with is her old Potions professor, who warned her in less than kind words about the folly of marrying Ron the night before her wedding and made her cry.

Upon their next meeting, while both know the game is up, they continue pretending as Hermione begins to adjust to the fact that she has fallen in love with Severus Snape, while Severus has been battling against his own desires and deepening feelings for Hermione. Eventually they reach a point where after finding themselves in a compromising position yet again, Severus asks Hermione for an answer if she wants to take things further since he had been holding back based upon her stated reasons that her visits to him were to save her marriage. Hermione promises to give him an answer after her anniversary dinner with Ron, convincing herself that if she feels nothing during a perfect romantic dinner out with her husband, she will allow herself to begin an affair with Severus.

During Hermione's anniversary dinner with Ron, despite both parties are going through the motions, there is no spark left. At the Grand Royal Supper Club, Hermione meets Bascom Nettleton, the man who is the owner of the Mercury Broom Company, Ron's new sponsor since Ron had recently become the first-string Keeper for the Cannons. In addition, Ron has been picked to become the 2004 Mercury Broom calendar pin-up beefcake, which has resulted in Ron going through a rigorous training program and taking potions to gain muscle that make him more aggressive, temperamentally and sexually. Besides meeting Bascom, Hermione sees Viktor and the two catch up on the dance floor during a few songs, with Ron no longer expressing any signs of his old jealous streak.

After dinner, dessert and a stroll through the romantic gardens, they both sense the evening is beginning to drag on when there is an emergency Floo call from Ron's old employers at The Listing Broom. The pub owner's wife, Rogina, begs Ron to help clear out a drunken wizard's brawl that has already sent her husband and the barkeep who replaced Ron to St. Mungo's. Knowing the evening was becoming more strained, Hermione tells Ron to go, but not before she asks, spurred on by a Blue Fairy Martini that is making her feel randy, if she should wait up for Ron so they could have sex when he gets back. Given the slew of fights they had recently regarding sex, Ron refuses her which makes Hermione feel quite bitter and rejected. After Ron leaves, a wizard Hermione “innocently” flirted with at The Three Broomsticks some weeks prior, Alan, accosts
Hermione and insists on a dance. Viktor comes along and saves the day, escorting Hermione back to her carriage to take her home in Diagon Alley.

After the carriage lets her off, still feeling bitter and rejected, Hermione decides to go over to Severus' flat for a revenge fuck. When Hermione shows up on his doorstep, Severus is enchanted and immediately responds to her charms. The game is up and she calls him by his name, in which he finally casts his mask aside. During some rather passionate snogging, but before it turns into passionate shagging, Hermione tries to tell Severus to stop and that she can't do this. She doesn't want her first time with Severus to be based on revenge, but for the fact she loves him. She tells him, “Not tonight,” which he mistakes as her saying “Not ever.” She runs away in tears, leaving Severus angry, hurt and rejected. He also thinks he royally botched up his chance of asking Hermione for the Polyjuice Potion ingredients. Severus destroys his flat in a drunken rage.

After a sleepless night by both, Severus confronts Hermione and yells at her, thinking she had rejected him now faced with the reality of who he is. Hermione understands she has inadvertently hurt Severus and explains why she wanted to wait, expressing her love for him without right confessing “I love you.” They make love and afterwards, Hermione tells Severus she will get him the ingredients he needs for the Polyjuice Potion. During their long evening of making love, the client in Blaise Zabini's flat, which is directly above Severus', is howling very vocally during sex. As Hermione leaves Severus' flat that night, her and Severus spy Ron descending from the staircase above, shocking Hermione with the revelation that Ron plays both sides of the Quidditch pitch.

Severus brings Draco up to speed on recent revelation regarding Hermione agreeing to help them escape by getting the ingredients, but there is a slight snag, given that fluxweed shipments from North America have been erratic due to a succession of hurricanes wiping out many of the growing grounds crops of the essential ingredient. Meanwhile, Hermione confesses to Ginny that she has been seeing Severus, which Ginny knew about from the beginning, and that she will help her and Draco escape, along with Severus.
Hermione had never felt so relieved as when Ron announced bright and early that he was going to get in an early morning workout. As she lay in bed, Mrs. Weasley strained to listen to the Floo address he called out, and breathed a sigh of relief when it was the club headquarters for the Chudley Cannons.

'Doesn't make a difference. He could arrive, then turn right around and Floo to the Red Ginseng from there.'

Ignoring the pessimist in her head, which was being more sensible than the part of her which was trying to deny that Ron could be off to have another shag with Zabini, or maybe even his personal trainer, Hermione got ready for the day. There was nervous excitement building within her as she shaved her legs and put the extra effort into primping herself for Severus. She used a deep cleansing shampoo and conditioner to try and bring back some of the luster her hair had lost since she had started working at her current job; moisturizer was slathered and massaged into her skin so it would be soft and inviting to touch. Though Hermione was not a vain creature, she did want to make herself as attractive as possible for her lover. Was it a sense of doing something significant for a man who had made her feel so special that she wanted to go through the effort of preening herself? Perhaps it was the fact she knew she had to compete against the beauty of a hundred other witches who had visited his bed before her? Severus had declared her lovely the day she came to him bedraggled and lacking sleep. Still, she wanted to make the effort for him.
Staring at her lingerie drawer, she muttered, “I have got to get something a bit more enticing than this.” A drawer full of safe and boring white, cream, and flesh-colored lingerie was all she had to pick from, save for the red knickers and thigh-high stockings that went with her new red formal dress. Hermione contemplated if she wanted to swing by Madame Maurelle Mandel's during her lunch break that week, to do a little lingerie shopping. On the one hand, Madame Maurelle would only offer her the best that would look good on her; on the other hand, she wasn't sure if she could face another one of Madame Maurelle's astronomical bills so soon, nor Ron's snide comments. She would have to ask Ginny before they departed for the Red Ginseng.

Dressed and ready early, Hermione fidgeted on the couch while waiting for Mrs. Potter. To while away a little time, the anxiously eager witch trotted off to the kitchen to make some tea. As the kettle began to whistle, Ginny stepped through the fireplace and into the living room.

“Hermione?”

“In here,” came the reply. Now that Ginny had arrived, Hermione wanted to forget about making tea. She turned the kettle off and didn't even stop to put the tea away. “We should go before Ron comes back from his workout,” Hermione explained, not bothering to offer a cup to her friend.

Ginny agreed, and they left in haste.

As Hermione exited the fireplace at the Red Ginseng, she noted the room was bare, except for a few nails and wires left on the wall. Dust bunnies lingered about the corners, and pale squares of green where pictures once hung, contrasting with the darker green of the walls, an obvious statement about the grime coating the walls. Hermione wondered who lived here last and how long the place had been vacant.

Shivering in her skin, Ginny whispered with reverent horror in response to Hermione's silent question, “Macnair used to live here. That is, until the Aurors finally hauled him away.”

With enough of her curiosity satisfied, Hermione just wanted to leave. The knowledge alone made the bare desolation of their surroundings more sinister than forlorn and neglected.

A quick check confirmed that the coast was clear and they could ascend the stairs unobserved. Ginny waited by Draco's door, not knocking on his door until Hermione reached the fourth floor.
The echo of Ginny's hand had not faded before Hermione heard Malfoy's door open and shut once more.

Standing in front of Severus’ door, Hermione took one deep cleansing breath. The anticipation thrumming through her body made her quake, and she knew her voice would quiver as well if she spoke. This time she knew she would wind up in Severus' bed, enjoying not only the mental, but physical company of each other. Hermione raised her hand and knocked upon her lover's door, unable to wait any longer to be back in his embrace.

Never had Severus anticipated the arrival of anyone at his door more than while waiting for Hermione that morning. Even waiting for her on Friday was with a certain amount of dread, but this was different. No more lies, masks, or pretense, just the open warmth of his lover, and her acceptance of him just as he was.

He had wanted to do so much more with Hermione on Friday than just lay her out flat on her back and fuck her like an unfettered animal. Well, there were the times she was on her knees, or he was on his back, and then a few other positions he introduced her to that made her gasp in surprise when his cock stroked the inside of her in a way she had never experienced before. The point was that she had complained these many weeks of a lack of foreplay from her husband, and yet Severus did nothing more than take her without much beyond a lot of humping, a bit of friction, and a whole lot of orgasms. In the end, Severus chalked it up to a feverishly blind want that needed to be satisfied, and Hermione certainly exclaimed, during her many religious epiphanies, that she had never felt anything so good in her whole life. Still, Severus wanted to bring Hermione to a slow, unbearable boil of irrational desire. He wanted to make Hermione beg with the same desperation that he did the night he ground himself so urgently against her bottom in the kitchen and on the settee. Severus wanted to see her face twisted in agony, pleading to be filled and released, to only find satisfaction from his vast array of techniques he could test upon her – to see which ones would provide the most vocal and pleading responses.

Severus was pacing the main room, thinking about how he could slowly seduce her, while keeping his own raging hormones in check when he heard her knock at the door. His pride demanded he walk over leisurely, but the biological part of his mind pushed him to rush over and open the door quickly.

All the rehearsed hellos that they both practiced in their minds disappeared. Hermione rushed over the threshold to Severus, locking her arms around his neck while Severus wrapped his arms around her, slamming the door shut in the process. Necks bent and craned, and lips met lips. Though it had only been almost thirty-six hours since they had last seen each other, they kissed each other as if it had been a lifetime parted from one another. Their hunger for each other had become more intense after their joining. Like any addiction, their only solace was to consume more of what they craved.

Hermione grabbed at Severus' body, and he pulled her to him with equal fervor; all his plans for a
slow teasing seduction were momentarily abandoned. As they kissed, Severus' hands started pulling at her cloak, while her hands were already pulling at his shirttails. The cloak hastily left on the floor was joined by Severus' shirt moments later. Feeling Hermione's nails scraping along his back brought him back to the present, as he pulled his mouth from hers to let a long suffering sigh escape from his lips. He didn't care how much Hermione knew he needed her, as his arousal pressed firmly against her abdomen was more telling than any vocalizations.

Realizing if he didn't slow himself down, he would only have her clothes half off before burying himself in her, Severus pulled back. Hermione made to reach for him, to close the gap he created, but Severus retreated, giving her his best seductive smile and a slight shake of his head. He had to slow down, but that didn't mean Hermione had to, in his mind; in fact, he wanted to put his witch into such a state that any stimulation, be it tactile, auditory, or visual, would make her body tremble with desire.

Thinking correctly that this was a game, Hermione smiled at him and tried once more to catch Severus within her grasp. Ducking to the side, Severus stepped around her so quickly that before she understood what he had done the wizard was standing behind her, pinning her against his chest, her arms trapped at her sides.

“Not so fast,” he warned her with a playful growl.

With Severus' arms caging her and his hands possessively splayed across her chest and stomach, Hermione could not help but remember her sexual fantasy of her Death Eater-clad gigolo in a dark cloak taking her roughly from behind while chained spread eagle. She whimpered, surrendering herself to the moment by offering up her neck. Severus latched onto her neck, living up to that odd rumor of him being a vampire that circulated around while she was still his student.

Endorphins flushed through her system, turning a slightly painful love bite into something pleasurable. Instinctively arching her back in order to rub her bottom up against him, and enjoying the fact he was losing enough control to grind back against her, she placed one hand atop Severus' and egged him on to palm her breast.

This would not do. The gigolo was losing control of himself once more, and one thing he always was, was in control in the bedroom. It was the only place he could exercise any dominance and direct the outcome, since everything in his life had been dictated by the whims of others. He would not let Hermione direct his actions, despite the delicious feel of her round bottom swiveling sweetly in just the right spot. Holding fast, Severus grasped the encouraging hand by the wrist and brought it up over her head.

Hermione had never felt so vulnerable or more turned on in her life. Severus' grip felt like iron. Not only was he resisting her attempts to be seductive by not jumping on her and taking her
immediately – like Ron – thus prolonging the foreplay, but she trusted Severus enough to give up control to him.

Over the years, Hermione had admitted to herself that she was somewhat of a control freak. She had tried to conduct every part of her life so she could obtain the predicted outcome. She had mapped out every step and even prepared for things that might go wrong. Now, however... though she knew they would reach a pleasurable destination together, she had no idea what Severus would do next, or what he would make her do. It was the journey towards a blissful orgasm that held the fascination and allure for her. To what depths would Severus make her abandon her normally logical self to become a creature of pure physical sensation, totally lost within the moment without a thought beyond her impending climax, she could scarcely imagine, though she was desperate to experience it once again.

“Frog march” would not have been the proper term for what Severus did to Hermione to propel her towards the bed, as she went willingly, but there was a small bit of playful resistance on her part.

Once at the edge of the bed, Severus let go and stepped back. Though his gaze smoldered enough to singe parchment, it made an icy chill of anticipation race up her spine. Leaving Hermione at the edge of the bed, he backed up further until he could sit on the settee. Flopping onto said piece of furniture with feline grace, Severus waved his hand casually to indicate he was indeed the one in control and coolly ordered her, “Undress. Slowly.”

One of the things on Severus’ agenda was to help Hermione get over this complete lack of confidence where her sexuality and body was concerned. This exercise was supposed to not only help this timid creature before him bloom into a confident temptress capable of paralyzing even him with her sensuality, but fulfill one of his many fantasies about her. Even with her lack of self-confidence, Hermione could still make him temporarily lose rational thought and revert to his baser nature.

Out of habit, Hermione set her wand on the bedside table and turned her back to Severus, as she would undressing in front of her husband.

“No, turn around and undress for me,” he commanded in a soft, but firm tone.

Through unsure lowered lashes, Hermione looked at him. Her uncertainty was threatening to overwhelm her, obviously never having explored any part of her voyeuristic and exhibitionist nature.

To rein in some calm on the situation, Severus elaborated, “How have you imagined yourself
undressing for me when you're alone? How have you fantasized about teasing me with a glimpse of your body?"

The poor witch had been exposed to plain vanilla sex, and Severus knew he was pushing the boundaries of what she had ever experienced, but he thrilled in the idea of making her taste what seemed like forbidden fruits, gorging her on them until she became addicted to them and him. She needed to relearn what foreplay was all about. It wasn't just the lubrication of the body, but the honing of one's mind to a certain level of excitement and anticipation.

The blush that crept upon her cheek and her inability to meet his eye was countermanded by Hermione's slow and deliberate unbuttoning of her blouse.

Though not prone to chit-chat in the bedroom, he knew she needed reassurance of her progress from him. “Yes, just like that. Imagine it's my hands undoing your blouse. How would you like my hands to undress you?” To give her additional encouragement, Severus shifted in his seat and readjusted himself, watching her with unblinking eyes.

His mouth watering, he swallowed unconsciously as Hermione slowly pulled her blouse off one shoulder. Her fingers lightly caressed her arms as the fabric slipped past her elbow before she attended the other shoulder. Hermione's eyes would occasionally dart to his, checking to make sure she was doing it right. Each time she would look away quickly, unable to believe Severus was looking at her with unadulterated hunger. Adding to the growing list of things that differentiated Severus from Ron in the bedroom, Hermione realized that when Ron looked at her lustfully, she felt cheap and uncertain; when Severus looked at her in the way he was doing right then, she felt aroused and attractive. Emboldened, she turned her back to Severus so that he could watch the fabric slip from her shoulders, exposing the expanse of skin to enjoy. She remembered how Severus commented that he liked the view of her back before.

Glancing over her shoulder, Hermione was somewhat shocked to see Severus lightly stroking his erection through his trousers. Ron had always treated masturbation as a private matter, and she had done so as well, conducting hers in solitude, too. It was strange to see a man touching himself so freely in front of her.

Severus growled appreciatively, “Lovely, simply lovely.”

Keeping her back to Severus, she unzipped her zipper slowly. When she started to bend over, giving Severus a perfect view of her arse, she suddenly realized she still had her tights on. Hermione thought the sight of her in nothing but heels, plain white cotton knickers and tights on would look rather silly and so she began to try and rectify the situation by pulling her tights down before her skirt, but Severus stopped her.
“No. No, leave them on for now. Take your skirt off, and then you may remove tights,” he directed her in a distracted manner, his eyes firmly glued to the sight of the half-undressed witch before him.

Letting go of the waistband of her skirt, she allowed it to fall from her hips to puddle on the floor. Hermione stepped out of it and bent over to pick it up. The hum of appreciation from Severus made her prolong the act of standing back upright. She carried out the removal of her tights with deliberate torpidity. While bent over, Hermione glanced back and viewed from a sideways angle Severus slightly slack-jawed in awe. When he caught her watching him, the mouth snapped shut and he gave a reassuring smile to continue in order to go back to his unobserved inspection of her backside.

Severus watched as Hermione silently crawled up onto his bed and lay back with her knickers still on. He considered asking her to remove them, but said nothing, knowing that the hint of clothing could be more erotic than being completely nude. To continue his observations, Severus walked over to the edge of the bed and stood there with no intention of sitting down.

Hermione gazed up at him expectantly.

A faint smile curled at the corner of Severus' lips. “I want to know how you pleasure yourself. I want to know how you arouse yourself.”

Hermione simultaneously frowned and blushed. “I...” She just wanted Severus to undress and make her feel wonderful again. She had been touching and fingering herself for years as it was, but now she wanted to feel Severus' fingers and not her own.

His hand reached out and stroked her cheek, brushing hair away from her face in the process. “How can I learn if you don't show me?”

“I could tell you,” Hermione blurted out, desperate to feel the intensity of Severus consuming her whole once more instead of lying on his bed mostly naked and being directed to play with herself. Though Severus gave her no reason to think he found any fault with it, she still felt very self-conscious about her body because of the many deprecating comments she had received from Ron over the years.

His fingers swept once more, gently brushing them over her eyes. “Close your eyes,” he instructed her in soft reassuring tones, trying to coax her. “Let my voice guide you. You're lying in bed, you're
all alone in bed at home.” Hermione momentarily frowned harshly, but quickly shoved aside the many reasons why she would find herself alone at home while Ron was gone. “No one will disturb you.”

“Can we dim it a bit in here?” Hermione requested as she sat up. “I'm used to it being a bit darker.”

Complying with her request, Severus waved his wand, and the drapes drew themselves closed. “Better?”

She smiled back and nodded shyly.

Severus knew he could have just gotten undressed and had her, and she would have probably been perfectly happy with that, but he wanted to give her much more than a good shag. He wanted to bring out the hidden sexual goddess held within that ill-at-ease shell Hermione wore as battered armor. “Continue.”

Hermione sighed with resignation and lay back down.

This was not going exactly as planned for Severus. She was resisting the moment, and looked as if she was going to revolt at any second. Changing tactics, he said, “Imagine you have me tied down. I'm unable to touch you, I can only watch. You want to tease me, torture me, tantalize me by touching yourself, making me wish it was my hands upon you.” It worked, as he saw Hermione smile and willingly close her eyes.

Keeping her eyes closed, Hermione stroked her face with her finger tips a few times, bringing her hands down to trail a single finger down from her pulse point to the hollow of her throat.

Severus studied the way she touched herself, alternating broad sweeps with the pads of her fingers to a single one, then back to multiple points of contact, each varying in speed and pressure. There was one long, slow deep inhalation of breath when her fingers reached her breasts, but instead of touching the areolas and nipples, she teased herself, dragging fingers along the sides and underside of her breasts. As he watched, Severus silently slipped out of his trousers. Hermione was so lost in her own world, she barely noticed the slight shift on the mattress as he lay down next to her, without touching her, to continue watching.

Severus’ cock was rigid from observing Hermione's almost innocuous touching of herself and the small hums of pleasure coming from the back of her throat. It was different from how many other
women he observed pleasured themselves, usually going straight for their own breasts or vagina, but Hermione was taking her time. By the time Hermione lightly touched her own breasts, her nipples were peaked and aching for any stimulation. As Hermione ran the pad of her finger across the hardened nipples, Severus unconsciously licked his lips. He wanted nothing more than to lean over and take one of her plump nipples in her mouth and suckle on it like a greedy piglet, but he could wait a little while longer.

Plucking at one nipple, Hermione sighed as her back arched.

The responsiveness of Hermione’s body to her own touching tested Severus' will power to remain quiet and still.

To his relief, Hermione moved her hands down her torso towards her stomach, where she played with her navel and paid particular attention to the area around her hipbones and along the thigh joint.

She played with her curls, gently pulling at the hair before finally slipping a finger down between her lips.

Severus sat up and swung around on the bed to watch from a better angle. He was pleased when Hermione spread her legs slightly; however, the wizard wasn't sure if she did this for better access or for his viewing benefit. Either way, Hermione's shyness seemed to have departed a while ago, confirmed when her toe blindly reached out and stroked Severus' chest and arm.

Though originally reluctant, Hermione became increasingly turned on by the idea of touching herself in front of Severus. There was a forbidden aspect to it that enticed her. And though there is nothing morally wrong with the act itself, it was something she had never pictured herself doing in front of a man. The more she touched herself, hearing small hums of appreciation from Severus, the more she was spurred on to continue. She still couldn't bear to see him watching her, so she kept her eyes closed, but the idea that he was watching her inspired her. Finally relaxed, her fingers ventured lower, and she sensed him moving to get a better look. Knowing Severus was now gazing at her most intimate regions was initially unnerving, but she rationalized that if he could stick his cock in there, then what was the harm in him looking there as well?

As her fingers moved languidly, stroking her outer lips, then sliding between them, Severus simply murmured, “Beautiful.”

Hermione was relieved to hear this from Severus. She had no basis of comparison to compare those particular parts of her body to other women, so it was reassuring that he didn't make any odd
comments, unlike what Ron had said to her in those too candidly insensitive moments of his.

Heartened, Hermione spread her legs a little wider and began stroking herself, using tried and true techniques to make her reach orgasm quickly. It didn't take her long, as just the physical presence of Severus was enough to enhance the mood more than anything she could have done by herself alone at home. Her breaths became strained and short as her hips began to rock slightly, keeping very quiet while her fingers worked quickly over her clit, while she worked a couple fingers in and out of herself. She could orgasm without his assistance, but Hermione wanted to feel her G-spot stimulated as she came. More so, she would have felt more comfortable with Severus participating with her instead of just watching her.

“Please, Severus. Please help me. Just stroke that spot inside of me. Help me,” she pleaded with a whinge.

Sensing she was close, he obliged. He had learned enough for the time being that he was now eager to watch her climax. Licking two fingers to wet them, he slowly pressed his fingers alongside Hermione's.

She removed her own fingers and put to use her now free hand on her nipples. As Severus eased his fingers into her, Hermione let out a strangled gasp. Her back arched and arms reaching above in surrender, her hands grasping at the sheets. As her hips began to gyrate and rock in order to match each movement of Severus' hand, she completely abandoned all intentions of masturbating anymore. Feeling her lover's fingers inside of her only fed the fire, demanding that she join with him as soon as possible.

“Severus, I need you,” she sighed. Hermione held out her arms to encourage Severus to crawl up between her legs and slide into her.

Severus didn't want to rush this. Oh, he understood about desire and hunger and the base need to copulate, but they had all day, and he wanted to bring Hermione up to a slow and unbearable boil before finally sinking himself into her at the moment when she would be beyond all reason, basically irrational and senseless with wanton need. At the moment, Hermione had not even had her first orgasm yet. Considering that most of her sexual experience was with a wizard who was done before she had yet even begun, Severus understood her trained reaction to shag before the moment was over.

“Shhhh,” he soothed, keeping the movements of his hand steady and slow, stroking her sacred spot with each pass. It pleased him to note how her eyes would look heavier the longer he stimulated her G-spot. “We have all day. There is no rush. Relax, enjoy the moment.”
This seemed to put Hermione in a different frame of mind altogether. No longer were the small noises from the back of her throat rising in pitch, like some urgent need to be sated. She sighed and relaxed, still moving her hips in response to her lover's touch.

Stretching his arm out, Severus’ other free hand began to touch Hermione in the same manner that she touched herself, mimicking the movement. Instead of small hums of pleasure, Hermione gasped and groaned loudly, arching her back once more into his touch. When the pads of his fingers stroked the skin over her hip bones, the reaction he elicited from her was akin to some women's orgasmic bliss, complete with crying out. Unable to resist, Severus dipped his head and began to kiss his way down Hermione's stomach until his mouth reached the spot he wanted to devour. Before his tongue even darted out for that first tentative, teasing taste, her legs were shaking with intoxicating anticipation and her breaths were short rasping grunts.

Elation would be a word that could describe Hermione's reaction to Severus' deft tongue work between her legs, as much as “nice brush work and use of light” could be used to describe a Rembrandt painting. She could honestly say in retrospect that she never felt anything quite as exquisite as what Severus did to her, making her body feel things she had only imagined or heard about in excerpts of trashy romance novels that Ginny used to quote to her years ago.

By the time Hermione climaxed, she was beginning to realize that she had missed out on a lot of good foreplay over the years if it could be this great. Feeling temporarily sated, Hermione sighed, feeling pleasantly exhausted for the moment, but soon discovered she would get no respite.

Having brought his lover to a rousing orgasm the likes of which should have prompted Draco to knock on his ceiling a few times – if it were not for the fact that Hermione remembered halfway through to put up a Silencing Charm so the rest of the building would not hear their activities – Severus was ready. He had brought Hermione a great deal of joy, and a sore throat from all her screaming, but watching the twisting grimace of her face as she came made him want to join her more than anything else.

As he slid up between her legs to position himself, Hermione's eyes lit up with understanding that he had yet to take care of his own needs yet. Suddenly realizing that all the pleasure she had experienced was entirely for her alone, made her welcome him into her with eagerness.

The feeling of Severus sliding into Hermione was nearly overwhelming for both parties. Hermione was still relatively tight, and all the blood engorging her lower region made everything even snugger. Once again for Hermione, it was finally being filled and feeling complete with something long, hard, and thick inside of her.

Knowing Hermione’s needs had been more than taken care of, he took everything he could from her in the act, culminating in savagely thrusting into her. He was encouraged by her cries of
exaltation, some of them muffled as they kissed fiercely. Though normally quiet during the act, Severus found himself to be more vocal than usual and groaned and screamed as he approached climax, which only seemed to excite Hermione even more. As he came, he could not open his eyes, as they were shut tight from the total paralysis his body experienced as he emptied himself into Hermione.

Hermione watched with awe as her lover lost himself in the act of making love to her, and though she nearly came once again, she didn't mind for once. Severus had assured her they had all day, and she still felt blissful from her previous orgasm.

As Severus nearly collapsed on top of Hermione, exhausted but satisfied, he noted the completely elated smile on his lover's face.

Hermione immediately snuggled up next to a panting Severus, feeling the light spangle of sweat across his chest as she threw a possessive arm across him. She blew lightly across his brow to help him cool down.

Severus closed his eyes and enjoyed her tender ministrations, the sort that two lovers might share. He certainly did not engage in this sort of intimacy with his paying clients, even when they asked for a bit of post-coital cuddling. Any cuddling done with other witches, he did so grudgingly. But Hermione was different in many ways. For one, he didn't wear his mask during the act, something he found liberating; the other was the fact that for once, he had some emotional attachment to the woman he was shagging. Though he might claim sex is sex, there was an undefinable aspect of caring for Hermione that took the simple transitory act of fucking and transcended it into something more visceral and substantive.

“Would it be cliché if I said that was amazing?” Hermione asked with a weak laugh. She brushed a damp tendril of hair out of his eyes.

Opening his eyes, Severus smiled. “Yes, it would, but I'll allow it just this once.”

Hermione gave a playful laugh with a nudge to his ribs before settling back down and snuggling up next to him once more.

Severus didn't want to ask, but he knew he should. “Did you take both the vials I gave you the other night?”
Lightly humming to herself, she then replied, “No. All I needed was one, and I slept through the night.”

He tried to keep his voice light with none of the gravity of the subject he was going to bring up. “You should have taken both. One was a sleeping potion, the other was for your protection.”

“You don't have to worry about me. I'm already on contraceptive potions.”

“It's not just contraception the potion provides, but protection,” he added.

“Protection from...” There was a pause in her question.

Severus hoped she would put the pieces together without having to spell them out.

She did not finish her question.

“The second potion I gave you protects you from not only pregnancy, but all maladies of a carnal nature.”

Hermione stiffened and sat up. Her stomach began to twist into knots upon the realization that she could have contracted something from Severus. “You mean venereal disease,” she clarified in a tone bordering on accusatory.

“Yes,” Severus bit back sharply. “But I would not have given you any disease, as I take the potion as well, as required by Ministry standards.”

“Ministry standards?” she practically shrieked.

“Yes.” He knew if he did not clarify a few things, it was going to be a long morning, but even given the situation, Severus knew this was going to be an unpleasant conversation, particularly for Hermione. “Back in the late seventeenth century, there was a problem with many wizards contracting venereal diseases, mostly through Knockturn Flies.”
“Knockturn Flies?” she interrupted.

“A period term used for damsels who used to frequent Knockturn Alley to sell their favors at the time. Damsel is also the name of an insect... damsel flies... I think you can see the origin of the term now.” Severus sat up and rolled over and reached into his bedside table and pulled out another vial of the one he had hoped Hermione took the other night.

“Wizards were coming home and infecting their wives,” he explained. “Since many Ministry officials also did not want to explain to their wives why they had to take certain potions or have the fabric of society disintegrate upon news their husband gave them the clap, or suddenly have bastard sons showing up on their doorstep years later, they made it requisite for all persons of a certain profession and clients to take an elixir. It avoids complications of pathological and societal nature.”

Lifting up the vial for her inspection, he concluded by saying: “I take this, as does Draco, even Ginny. Considering the fact you do not know with whom your husband has been with other than Zabini, I recommend you take this for your protection at home as well.” Severus knew he had to bring up that factor as well, concerning Ron Weasley's other possible sexual partners, but his clarification and illumination of that fact pushed Hermione into tears.

She didn't want to admit it, but the thought of Ron bringing home something to their bed, and infecting her, had crossed her mind more than once on Saturday. Hermione took the vial from Severus' hand and swallowed it quickly. “Will this interfere with the potions I'm on now?”

“No, they are designed to not counter any contraceptive potions you are currently taking.”

It was bad enough to realize her lover had to take this for his job, but that aspect of his “profession” had to leak into her secluded sanctuary, soiling what would otherwise seem like an ideal and perfect extramarital affair. Lying back down, Hermione felt drained. Without trying to stop herself, she began to cry. She didn't try to hide it, but she tried to do it quietly as she lay next to Severus. Hermione knew he could tell, as her tears were rolling off her cheek and nose onto his chest and shoulder.

He said nothing. Stroking her hair and back was the only sign that he acknowledged her suffering, though he would have done that even if she wasn't crying.

After a while, Hermione rose and went to the bathroom to take care of her needs and wash up her face. A little Lovely Lavender's Puffy Poof Eye Crème and she felt presentable.
Shuffling back to the bed in Severus' black silk dressing gown, she found the raven-haired wizard sitting up in bed with a predatory smile. Hermione heard him cast some Charm spoken in Arabic and she instantly felt freshened up. Before she could ask what Charm he cast, he pulled her into his bed and announced with a growl that it was time to begin more research into the Male Enhancement Potion, knowing a bit of “research” always cheered her up.

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Thoughts about her husband, or of Severus' official profession, stayed at bay mostly during the next few hours. She was too busy enjoying what could simply be called the best one-day jaunt she ever had. Granted, she never left Diagon Alley, but it certainly was more enjoyable than any trip out to some castle ruins or a hike.

Lunch time rolled around and Hermione was dismayed when Severus demanded his silk dressing gown and had nothing for her to wear. She stole his linen shirt instead, happy to have something covering her that smelled of him. Walking into the kitchen, her nostrils were assaulted by the scent of fresh garlic and crushed rosemary; it was strong, but a pleasantly savory scent.

“Since you offered to help me in the kitchen, I thought I would take you up on your offer,” Severus announced.

“Great!” she answered brightly with eagerness. “What do you want me to do?”

Severus handed her a bowl full of apples and a peeling knife. “I thought we'd start with something that is also an exercise commonly done by Potions apprentices. Peel one apple, and try to take off the skin only, leaving as much flesh of the apple as you can.”

“This is an exercise?” she asked with uncertainty.

If Hermione truly was his apprentice years ago, he would have snapped at her for questioning him. However, he knew her question was merely to seek an understanding behind the exercise.

“Some ingredients are very rare and costly. Peeling apples is a good way to hone your skills of using a knife while wasting as little as possible in the preparation process.” He could see the comprehension in her eyes. “Peel one, and then I will see how you've done after I've put the lamb into the oven.”

Wanting to make a good impression, Hermione peeled very carefully. Though she was fairly
skilled with a knife after working at her job for years, she tried to be extra careful when peeling the fruit. By the time the lamb was set in the oven and Severus had cleaned his hands, she was done.

Sitting up with a straight back and a proud gleam in her eyes, she presented Severus with the peeled apple.

“Show me the peelings.”

She scooped them up and handed them over to the Potions master. There was no smile, but there was no frown either. “Not bad for someone who hasn't begun their apprenticeship.”

“Not bad? I barely took any skin off!” she protested.

Severus took the knife from her, and scraped the edge of the blade along the back of the peel, showing Hermione just how much of the fruit she had taken off. Presenting her the juicy pulp stuck to the blade, he said softly, but firmly, “That, my dear, on a rare Miniature Man-Eating Masdevallia orchid seed pod is about ten Galleons, given the price runs at about forty Galleons for each pod.”

“Well, if it's that expensive and precious, I'd be more careful,” Hermione insisted defensively. “And the price is now fifty Galleons a pod,” she corrected him.

“The point is that apples are a cheap means of practicing your skills so you don't waste anything when it comes time to prepare rarer, costly ingredients.”

“Show me.”

Severus felt a bit self-conscious. Though cooking had helped keep his skills somewhat up to par, they were not nearly to the level they were when he was still a teacher at Hogwarts wielding a knife every day for lengthy periods. Picking up the apple, he studied it for a moment before putting blade to fruit. In one quarter the time it took Hermione to peel her apple, Severus had peeled his. He looked at it and shook his head.

'I have gotten rusty.'
Hermione studied one peeling and could find no fault with his technique. By the grim set in his mouth, she could tell he wasn't pleased with his own attempt.

With a grumble, Severus mumbled, “I could do better.”

“Better? There's nothing but peel.”

Severus took the blade of the knife and scraped a thin film of creamy pulp away from the skin to show her his own shortcoming. Before Hermione could comment, the Potions master took another apple and began to carefully peel it slowly. He presented Hermione with a peel that was translucent with virtually no flesh left on it. Holding it up to the light, she could see the light from the window through it and could make out faint shapes.

“That is the level of skill you must attain during your apprenticeship.” Severus fetched another knife and presented it to Hermione. “I'm baking a French apple tartin for dessert. You can begin practicing and I can get a little practice in as well.”

As they peeled apples, Severus was reminded of his own apprenticeship, where Potions master Chuff used to make a game out of it. Though Reginald Chuff was a bastard at times, he knew how to make even the most mundane tasks seem a bit fun. Usually shots of Ogden's Single Malt Firewhisky were involved.

This time, he decided to make a different game. So far, he had performed cunnilingus on Hermione no less than three times, but he had yet to ask for her to reciprocate.

Severus knew of Hermione's attitude toward fellatio when reciprocation was given poorly and grudgingly. However, he had performed with zeal and produced the most pleasant results for both parties. Now it was time to engage Hermione's interest in the act.

Reaching for another apple, Severus paused and said casually, as if suddenly struck by inspiration, “I have an idea for another wager.” He did not restrain the amused lilt in his voice.

Knowing that tone very well by now, Hermione willingly took the bait and said, “And just what do you have in mind this time?”

His eyes drifted to the half-full bowl of unpeeled apples. “We'll each take an apple, similar in size.
I'll even take the larger one if you think your skill is not good enough. We'll each peel our apple. If your peeling weighs no more than twice mine, I will do anything you ask of me in bed.” Severus knew he'd win, as he had seen how much flesh Hermione left on her peeling.

“And if they weigh more than twice yours?” Hermione asked, trying to be demure, but failing miserably as a knowing smirk crept upon her lip, and her face flushed brightly.

As his hand reached out to trace her lips with his thumb, his voice dropped to a husky whisper in earnest anticipation of her answer. “Then I would like to have your lips wrapped around parts of me that have yet to be caressed by them.”

Hermione could feel the heat rushing to her face. When phrased that way, and with that voice, she was more eager than ever to give Severus a blow job. Of course she had wanted to return the favor he had done to her earlier, but she felt very uncomfortable broaching the subject. It's not that she was a prude; she was just uncomfortable with bringing up her desire to try. Though there was nothing wrong with a witch wanting to give head, she couldn't bring herself to appear enthusiastic.

“I could agree to those terms,” she said quietly, her head ducked down, feeling the urge to tuck in her shoulders and cross her legs at the ankle like a timid maid.

Severus could see her coyness was not some act.

Each took care to peel carefully. Though his attention was on his own apple, he could see Hermione glancing at his trying to observe his technique. Since Severus was not allowed a set of scales, even for cooking, or Charms that replicated them, Hermione cast her own Weighing Charm. It was deemed that Hermione's peeling weighed exactly twice Severus', since the Charm was only accurate to the nearest quarter of a gram. Technically, Hermione won. They both knew that if a proper set of scales could have been utilized that Severus could have possibly won.

As Severus made the crust, Hermione sliced the peeled apples. Assisting Severus in the kitchen made Hermione a bit melancholy, knowing this is what she would prefer in a marriage than what she had with Ron. They worked together, Severus requesting ingredients and Hermione Summoning them for him, then she would return them to their place in the cupboards as he requested the next. It was all very mundane, but even the simple things in life could hold great meaning for her. Once the tartin was in the oven, Marf was instructed when to pull it out to cool on the counter, as they both knew they would be too busy fulfilling the wager to bother later.

Once lunch was over, they wandered back to the other room. Standing next to the bed, Severus awaited Hermione's direction. He preferred to not be in a situation reminding him of his obligation
to fuck other women by fulfilling their requests, but – he reminded himself – Severus wanted to please Hermione. This was for her, and not done for an exchange of coin or to perpetuate his cover.

He prompted her to make her request. “Tell me what you want?”

“Please sit on the bed.” Hermione had no idea how to ask for guidance without sounding vulgar, but she tried anyway. Kneeling next to the bed, she insinuated herself between his knees. While she stroked her hands over the tops of his thighs, she tried to meet his eyes but couldn't. Instead, her eyes fixated on her lover's semi-flaccid member laying there between his legs. “I want... I want...” She couldn't bring herself to flat out ask.

“Tell me.” Severus placed a finger under her chin and lifted her face up.

“I want you to tell me how you want my lips to caress other parts of your body.” There. I said it, and it didn't sound too vulgar.’

The raven-haired wizard cupped her cheek and gave her his most gentle and reassuring smile – an act he did not do very often. “Touch me with your hands.”

By beginning with simple touch, Severus could eventually work Hermione up to fellatio itself. Her hand was small compared to his own, and it felt so wonderful wrapped around his stiffening length. With awe, the witch commented how much it amazed her about the difference in size between soft and hard. All comments from her abated, and Severus barely noticed once her mouth found its way to the tip of his cock. Tentative licks only seemed to increase the anticipation of her mouth engulfing him entirely.

When Hermione was a student, her over-eagerness was somewhat nettlesome to Severus in the classroom, but in the case of this lesson, it was quite welcomed. She was observant to notice changes in his breathing, and was willing to experiment with techniques with the slightest prompting, and sometimes with no prompting at all. It was an exercise in experimentation, testing to see which swirl of the tongue elicited the greatest response, and if alternating with slow then fast then slow was better than a nice steady rhythm.

Lost in the moment, Severus barely remembered to warn her he was about to orgasm. Either he didn't enunciate it very well, she didn't hear him, or she didn't mind; Severus came with her lips still firmly wrapped around him. There was a moment when she choked as she tried to swallow, and then finally pulled away. By the time Severus opened his eyes, Hermione was already Summoning a tissue for her face and hair.
“Allow me.” Taking his wand, he waved it over Hermione’s head and said, “*Kala ma’hab’bi irruh.*”

That same refreshing feeling returned to Hermione as the anointed parts of her were suddenly clean. “What spell was that?” she asked with great curiosity.

“An old Arabic spell,” he told her, as it was nothing, and not caring to elaborate.

“Really? Where did you learn it?” Hermione practically flopped on her belly and propped her chin in her hands in eagerness to find out more. Sexual charms in the British wizarding world seemed as taboo a subject as flashing knickers and piano legs during the Victorian period.

Severus could see he could not really get out of answering her question, so decided he might as well tell her. She might even appreciate the result of her question, thus satisfying intellectual and sexual needs.

“The book landed on the bed with a soft thud. It was bound in carmine leather with ornate gold Arabic calligraphy engraved into the cover. Passing a hand reverently over the cover, Severus knew Hermione would ask how he obtained such a rare copy, in the original Arabic, so he volunteered to tell her.

“I used to take commissions during the summer to pad my vault. The usual method of payment was half upfront, and the other half upon delivery of the potion. One particular client had some financial difficulty that nearly bankrupted him while I was brewing the potion, so as payment he allowed me to take any book from his extensive library as the other half of the payment.”

“Who was it?” she inquired, wondering who had such a book collection.

“That is a matter that I can never discuss. But I can tell you that it was one of the more impressive private collections I had seen. Though most of the books he had were either available at Hogwarts in the Restricted Section, or in the private collections of many of the professors there – which we regularly shared amongst ourselves – I came across this and knew I’d never see another book like it again.” Severus would not have been surprised if Albus had a book like this in his own extensive
collection, but the old Headmaster was never in a habit of sharing books with “morally questionable content.” Dumbledore may have been wise and a bit odd, but he still projected the proper facade of a gentleman wizard, a product of being born and raised during the Victorian era.

“Was it Lucius Malfoy?” Hermione had to ask, though she knew she might risk irritating her lover.

“No. And if you had guessed correctly, I still would have said no. End of discussion,” he told her firmly with a tone that he would not brook any more questions on the matter.

Knowing when she had pushed him to the limit, Hermione went back to the topic of the book. “So what is the title again? What does it translate into? And I didn’t know you knew Arabic as well.”

“Saha al kw’wai’yis nasa’mi: gemel sha’h’wa’ni sa’hir. Loosely translated: 'Awakening of the Perfumed Soul: The Sensual Sorcerer.' And yes, I forgot to include Arabic in my list of languages that I know. But as I was saying, from what I could tell from research, with a little help from Madam Pince, this was written before the Muggle version, 'The Perfumed Garden for the Soul's Recreation.' One bibliophile I owled with informed me that there is speculation amongst several wizard Arabic scholars about the author of both The Sensual Sorcerer and The Perfumed Garden.”

Hermione settled herself on the bed ready to listen, and raised and crossed her ankles. When Severus went off on one of his informative tangents, they usually proved to be most informative and illuminating.

“Some think that the author of 'The Sensual Sorcerer' was a wizard in the court of Sheikh Nefzaoui, the author of 'The Perfumed Garden'. It is rumored that Sheikh Nefzaoui knew of the wizard's magical capabilities. Though there are some authors of the time period who might be attributed to writing the book, any correlation between wizarding documents and Muggle ones to confirm wizards who were in the Sheikh's court were destroyed when the Hafsid dynasty collapsed, and the Ottomans took over. Changes in power do not always go smoothly, and fires have a habit of erasing history,” Severus noted with some lament. He was not about to go into his own self-pitying maudlin funk about how the death of Albus brought about equally disastrous changes, and quickly continued on with his historical literary oration. “But analysis of writing style points to Ibrahim Zakariya, the Elder. He wrote several informative and anecdotal books on Transfiguration that are still used as reference in the Arabic world.”

Opening the book, Severus opened it to a page featuring a moving illustration of a mostly nude male sitting between the thighs of his lover. A trail of scented flowers streamed from the man's mouth and caressed the prone female form that writhed and smiled.
Hermione moved back over next to Severus to view the book better. She could smell the scent of damask roses, orange blossoms, and mint wafting up from the pages each time the man in the illustration blew across his lover's skin.

“This is *the lover's perfumed kiss,*” Severus said, reading the text under the illustration. He leaned sideways and brought his mouth to that spot behind her ear that made her whimper to his delight.

Distracted by his warm breath, Hermione missed the incantation spoken in Arabic. The flutter of flower petals brushing that sublimated upon contact with her skin was like no other sensation she had experienced, like a hundred butterflies brushing her with their wings. She reveled in the cloying scent enveloping her: jasmine, roses, and violets. When she opened her eyes, she was on her back looking up at Severus, who gazed intently at her.

Enthralled, she whispered, “Teach me more,” as she gazed up at him.

To say that time flew would state the obvious. With each new spell Severus taught her, Hermione tried it as well, each taking turns at sensual Charms the book described and illustrated. The young witch was reluctant to admit it, but the illustrations added to the sense of eroticism, as if she were a voyeur spying two lovers in the moment, then wishing to repeat the same act with her own lover.

As Severus was helping her with the Arabic pronunciation of a spell that was supposed to help increase the blood flow to a woman's pelvic region, Marf appeared by the side of the bed with a pillowcase over his head for the sake of Hermione's modesty.

“I is so sorry, Master, but you is having company over at four o'clock. Marf knows you and Missus wish to make yourselves presentable. I is so sorry to disturb, Marf will go and punish—“

“No!” Hermione interrupted with a start. “No, thank you, Marf. You don't need to punish yourself.” Though the small creature had something covering his eyes, Hermione still felt obligated to clutch the bedclothes to her person. She ignored the small growl in the back of Severus' throat indicating a little punishment may not have been out of line for disturbing their playtime. “That was kind of you to remind us that we need to get ready.”

There was the temptation for Hermione to nudge him not so gently in the ribs about his attitude towards the house-elf, but she guessed it would only dissolve into a heated argument about house-elf rights, or more sexual play which would leave them still naked and covered in dried sweat and bodily fluids by the time Malfoy and Ginny arrived.
To his dismay, Severus did note the time. Marf had given them just enough time to freshen up, but if dinner was going to last a couple hours, as it usually did, especially when Ginny joined them, then there would be little time left afterwards for him and Hermione to be alone before she needed to leave. He prayed his Sunday night client would owl him at the last minute and cancel.

Both had hoped their shower together could have been more leisurely, fulfilling all those fantasies they had had about each other over the weeks involving soap, water spray, and feet firmly planted against a cold tile wall with a back braced on the opposite wall and lots of friction, but alas, it would have to wait for another time.

Hermione had barely finished placing the drying charm on her hair and slipping her shoes on, and Severus just tucked his shirt into his trousers, when Draco gave his signature knock.

Surreal was an understatement as to how Hermione felt at that moment as Malfoy and Ginny strolled into Severus' flat, arm-in-arm like a young married couple, while their host greeted the pair. It was a snapshot of some alternative universe she could have lived in. Hermione could have never married Ron and eventually dated then married Severus, while Ginny and Draco were never parted and eventually married. It was even stranger to watch Ginny approach Severus, stand on her tip-toes and place a chaste welcoming kiss on his cheek, and Severus return the gesture with a fleeting kiss upon her cheek.

“Severus, it's so good to see you,” Ginny nearly exclaimed with a gleam in her eye and a rosy glow about her person.

“And you, Ginny. Draco,” the older wizard greeted the younger.

Draco was too busy staring at Hermione, and she stood there unable to move, pinned by his gaze. Ginny and Severus exchanged glances, Mrs. Potter the more nervous of the two, as they thought of what might erupt between old enemies.

Hermione had the good grace to give a perfunctory tight-lipped smile. This was Severus' flat and Draco was his friend; she would not do anything to embarrass or cause a scene, but if provoked, she would defend herself. “Malfoy,” the brunette witch said carefully, trying not to sound too frosty or saccharine.

Draco slid his hands into his trouser pockets and returned her smile with a cavalier smirk of his own. “Mrs. Weasley,” he drawled insolently.
Hermione could feel her back going up in response to his attitude. The prat purposefully stressed her married title, and said her last name in the same way that used to drive Ron up a wall.

Noticing the tension in the room went up an order of magnitude, Ginny suddenly piped up, “Severus! What's for dinner? It smells absolutely delicious.” Her overly bright tone was not missed by anyone.

Severus suspected that at some point Hermione and Draco would cross paths, but it seemed they could not put their differences aside any easier than he could with Sirius Black. He knew better than most how old grudges could not be put aside so easily.

Dinner was a pleasant, but slightly strained affair. Conversation flowed easily enough, but it seemed neither Hermione nor Draco addressed each other directly. Draco had the good grace to keep all sotto voce comments to himself, though Ginny knew him well enough to hear them in her own head. Hermione was only slightly worse as she ignored some of Draco's comments to Ginny or Severus, interjecting remarks that steamrolled over him, disregarding his input in the conversation. To be so easily dismissed irked him as easily as his arrogance vexed Hermione.

“What a simply marvelous dinner, Severus,” Ginny complimented her host. “As always.”

Severus bowed his head slightly in acceptance of her compliment.

Hermione was finally becoming used to the easy way in which Severus interacted with Ginny, though he did have a somewhat polite formality about him as he conversed with her.

“Ginny, would you be so kind as to come to the kitchen with me and help me pick out a wine to go with dessert?” the older wizard asked. There really was no need for Ginny to help Severus, as he had already picked out a lovely Sauterne to go with the apple tartin. In truth, he needed Hermione and Draco to speak freely and get their hostilities out into the open without the presence of Ginny stifling the inevitable heated exchange to come. Of course, he would still have Marf eavesdrop for him in case there were difficulties, and then he would have a witness to truthfully account the matter.

As Severus pulled out Ginny's chair and escorted her to the kitchen, the redhead cast a worried glance over her shoulder at her lover and best friend, glaring at each other across the table from one another.
Once the door swung shut Hermione was the first to bark, “Fine, Malfoy. Why don't you just say what you really want to say. Go on, Severus isn't here now, so you can spew your vile remarks and call me nasty names again. I know you've been dying to.” Her hand clutched tightly to her wand, expecting to deflect some curse, momentarily forgetting about the restriction of the Death Eater Decree and Draco's wand.

Draco’s stare went from somewhat amused to deadly cold. All humor left his face and he bore a frighteningly close resemblance to his father. “For someone who purported the equality of Muggle-borns to those who are pure-blood, you can be quite the elitist snob yourself. Whatever happened to the merits of one's actions?”

“Actions? What actions? As far as I know, this is some elaborate hoax where your end goal is for Ginny to leave Harry, thus humiliating him by making his wife leave him for a Death Eater, oh, I'm sorry...EXDeath Eater,” Hermione yelled, throwing her napkin down on the table in disgust. “And I am not a snob, nor an elitist,” she added with conviction for good measure. It galled her that he called her a snob, just like Ron. She momentarily wondered if Ginny ever told him about that bit of name calling between her and her husband.

“And how do I know you are not engaging in some hoax. Potter did ask you to spy on Ginny. Maybe you're just going to gather enough damning evidence so that Potter will fly into such a rage, he'll kill me without a second thought, he would be exonerated of all abuses of his Auror powers; no one would bat an eye over the death of the last Malfoy.” Draco tried to appear calm, but the twitch in his jaw muscle was more telling of his building anger.

“And why would I do that? That would get Ginny into almost as much trouble as you would be in, if Harry knew.”

“Yes, but how much trouble would you be in if he knew you were shagging Severus? And by the way the chandelier in my flat rocked about today, I'd say it was rather rigorous shagging,” Draco drawled with that damn smirk fixed upon his lips again.

“Is that a threat?” she asked incredulously. “Are you going to try and blackmail me? Get Severus into trouble to settle your own score against me?”

“You think this is about you or Potter, but it's not!” Draco stood up and threw his own napkin down. “Dammnit, but you're annoying! I don't know how Severus finds your company tolerable. He has more patience than I give him credit for, because I certainly would have risked the Death Eater Decree and hexed your mouth shut,” he grumbled to himself. Spinning around he glared at Hermione. “This is not about you! This is more than the animosity between us. You just don’t understand the scope of things. Always rushing off trying to save the world when you have no idea what the fuck is going on around you.” After running a hand through his hair, the young wizard
rubbed at a knot of tension building in his neck.

“Malfoy, always the drama queen,” Hermione drawled derisively, slightly shocked at the sound of her own tone. “If it's not a hippogriff who attacked you, who has wronged you this time? Hagrid's dead, so you can't blame him.”

The sudden memory of her old friend, and that she had so casually used him to lash out at her opponent across the room, brought on the pricking of tears behind her eyes.

Hermione's comment struck truer than she knew, and Draco slumped against the mantle, seeking strength from the wall to keep him upright. His head bent, he mumbled, “If I could cast one hex, one curse, one Unforgivable, I'd cast it upon Molly Weasley.”

“What?”

Lifting his head up, Hermione could see a seriousness in his eyes that could only be matched by the look on his face when Severus had first brought Malfoy to the Order, explaining he was ready to become a spy for their side.

“Molly Weasley. I hate that witch more than you ever could imagine. If it wasn't for her damn meddling, Ginny wouldn't be married to Potter,” he explained plainly.

“I'd think Moody or Fudge would be first on your list. And what has Molly ever done to you? I mean, I know how she pushed Ginny into dating Harry –“

Hermione was cut short when Draco grabbed a small piece of decorative crockery from the mantle and threw it against the wall with fury. She flinched at his sudden outburst, but before she could say anything, he began to tell his tale.

The now disheveled wizard turned once again to Hermione and yelled, “I was there! The morning the decree came out, I went to the Burrow to see Ginny. I came through the Floo and Molly told me in no uncertain terms that I should go. She said if I didn't leave soon, she'd Floo the Ministry and have the Aurors remove me. I wanted to see Ginny so badly, but she kept insisting I go. Finally when I threatened to stay put until Ginny came back, she promised to give Ginny my message. If my mind wasn't so... if it wasn't for that damned decree distracting me, I would have had the sense to make her take a wand oath on it. Instead, like a fool in love, I left.”
Hermione remembered how Ginny told her how she had thought Draco never tried to make contact with her after the decree, that he dropped off the face of the earth without word. There was nothing Hermione could say at the moment. If she had a daughter, she might feel compelled to lie to someone like Malfoy to keep him away from her as well. What mother would want their daughter involved with a convicted former Death Eater with no prospects and whose fortune had been taken away, without a Knut to his name?

To fill the oppressive silence, Hermione lifted her glass of wine and sipped at it daintily. Something was niggling in the back of her mind, but she discounted it. Instead, she continued to stare at the kitchen door while praying Severus and Ginny would return so she could go on disliking Malfoy, instead of dealing with this welling feeling of sympathy for the sod.

It perturbed her to no end she was actually feeling something along the lines of compassion towards him, and tried suppressing it by finally speaking up. “Maybe if you didn't become a Death Eater in the first place, then Molly might not have sent you away. You’d still have your money and no decree to worry about.”

There was something about Malfoy that just set Hermione off in such a way she would do things that seemed totally uncharacteristic of her, including saying obvious and incredibly insensitive remarks, in addition to smacking the bastard upside the head.

“Let me see you say no to a syphilitic lunatic father with a wand pressed against your temple, telling you to go through with some damn initiation binding you to a madman,” Draco snarled at her. “You deal with the threat of having your mind scrambled to the point where Goyle and Crabbe would have been my intellectual superiors, and see how well you can reason your way out of that scenario!”

Hermione had to admit she’d never asked Ginny if Draco ever wanted to become a Death Eater or if he regretted it only after becoming one, but from the blond wizard's tone and remarks, it seemed he’d never wanted to be one in the first place. It would certainly explain why, when Severus first brought Malfoy to the Order, explaining how he was willing to be a spy, the younger wizard had seemed to have aged by years overnight, and how he had a hollow look about his eyes until the end of the war.

It suddenly occurred to Hermione that she had never asked Severus why he became a Death Eater either, or why he turned spy, but wondered if she would be overstepping her bounds and straining their tenuous affair by asking.

To her relief, the moment was broken by Ginny bursting back through the kitchen door holding four glasses and the dessert wine. Severus trailed behind holding the apple tartin, which he could have easily had Marf serve, but didn't. Dinner dishes were cleared away with a sweep of the wand,
sailing through the air and into the kitchen, making room for the final course.

Dessert was consumed at a civilized pace with relish. The Sauterne seemed to make Hermione feel a bit tipsy, and she was tempted to bait Malfoy, but didn't have enough energy to put up a good fight if it came to words. She knew in this slightly tired and intoxicated state, he could probably find far better words to parry than she. Besides, she didn't want to ruin her first dinner with her new social subset.

Odd, how Ginny and Severus were becoming part of this alternative life she was leading, she mused to herself. Mrs. Weasley really didn't want to involve Malfoy, but he was part and parcel of it. To help Severus and Ginny with acquiring the Polyjuice Potion ingredients was, by default, helping Malfoy.

As Ginny and Malfoy left Severus’ flat, Hermione knew her day with Severus was coming to an end soon. Mrs. Potter gave Severus a kiss upon his cheek, and Malfoy and Severus clapped each other on the back in a brotherly fashion. Hermione watched the exchange between comrades, trying to hold fast to her own preconceived notions of who and what Malfoy was. In her rapidly changing world, grasping onto the familiar was comforting. It was one of the few shreds of her original world left to hold onto, now that it seemed to be unraveling so fast.

Ginny glanced at Hermione and said softly, “Knock on Draco's door when you're ready to go.”

Hermione nodded briefly before Ginny and her lover slipped out the door. With the snick of the door's lock, Hermione and Severus were alone together once more. Sensing their time short, Hermione walked over to Severus wordlessly, stood up on her toes and kissed Severus with a desperate urgency.

His arms wound around her possessively in response to her kiss. Both knew what was to come. As their tongues stroked each other and their hands roamed, gorging on the sense of the other before the night ended, Hermione's heart ached more than ever. Now that she and Severus had cast aside all pretense and made love, she longed to stay with Severus in his flat more than ever.

To stop herself from crying, she let slip a self-deprecating laugh, muffled against Severus' neck. “We never got around to dancing the tango.”

Severus was thankful for the distraction, as he was torn between his desire to tell his Sunday night client to sod off when she showed up, and peevishness at himself for feeling so emotionally needy. He had let himself care for someone too much once before, and it had taken years for his heart to recover, though “recover” would be not be an accurate term when his heart had never healed
properly in the first place.

His wand made quick work of the dinner table. It was cleared, followed by the chairs and table ambling off to the kitchen, meandering like livestock heading off to the trough.

The music began and they fell into step immediately. There was no holding back as they danced. Their eyes – fixed upon each other as they glided around the room – spoke pages of their passion for one another. Severus' fingers grazed along Hermione's lower back, pressing her closer to himself. Hermione felt his erection pressing against her hip, and she was tempted to give up on the dancing for one last love-making session before she had to go. They had agreed that Hermione could keep up on her pretense of Monday night dance lessons; and Hermione couldn't give a care if Ron protested one bit, especially since she discovered his own extracurricular activities. But having to be parted for twenty-four hours seemed rather unbearable for her at the moment.

After a couple more dances, Severus soon had Hermione pressed up against the wall, his hand skating up under the hem of her skirt. The knowledge they could not consummate their desires seemed to heighten the moment. Raising her leg, she wrapped it around his and slid it up the back of his thigh, encouraging him to settle between her legs. Severus began to grind himself into her through their clothes.

“One last time, Severus. Please,” she whispered with desperation.

Though he told himself he would much rather make her squirm with anticipation all day tomorrow, his own body craved one last release. His resolve dissolved instantly as Hermione latched onto the side of his neck and rotated her hips enticingly.

Breaking apart from her for a brief second, he yanked her knickers down hastily, stood up, undid his trousers, pulled himself free and lifted Hermione's leg back up. He adjusted his stance, positioning himself just so and making sure Hermione's back was properly braced against the wall before he slid into her quickly.

Hermione's head knocked lightly against the wall as she threw her head back, reveling in the sensation of being filled so quickly. Her first thought was of the one time she and Ron tried this in a broom closet once at Hogwarts, but that thought was quickly banished as this was so much more erotic and intense when it felt good, instead of uncomfortable and dank.

Severus grunted with each thrust and his lover thrilled in listening to him gradually lose control. When Severus came, it was either very quiet and controlled, or loud and furious. This time, he came with almost a pleading whimper, as if he was surrendering some part of himself as he came.
He wanted to hold out until Hermione came, but the knowledge that she would be going home with his essence still inside of her – with her husband none the wiser – excited him in a way that it never had before, even after working as a gigolo for years. Severus was marking his territory, claiming the prize of this witch from another wizard. It seemed irrational to him at the moment, but it still brought him to a quick orgasm.

As Severus withdrew from Hermione, he offered to bring her to climax manually, out of courtesy. Hermione kissed him with gratitude of his consideration of her pleasure, and told him he could pay her back Monday night – with interest, of course.

Once she was quickly reassembled, Hermione left, but not before one last urgent, yet hurried kiss before exiting Severus' flat.

He heard her knock on Draco's door, collecting Ginny before the two witches Floo'ed home.

Now that she was gone, he felt the emptiness of her presence. It more than unsettled him.

Severus questioned how he would function without Hermione once he was free and living far away from her.

'You could always take her with you,' the ghostly mirage of Albus piped up.

“Are you out of your imaginary and sugar-addled mind?” Severus retorted, swiveling on one heel to face his mental manifestation sitting on the settee.

'Severus is right this time,' the image of Minerva added, who had taken a seat in a wing back chair.

“See, even she agrees with me,” Severus gestured towards her with his hand.

'But what would she have if she stayed here that she could not have if she went with you?' Albus pondered aloud, stroking his ethereal beard. 'An inquisition from Moody, should he figure out it was she who gave you the Polyjuice Potion ingredients? A loveless marriage, that considering some of her recent reading material, is probably going to end in divorce, which in turn will turn her into a social pariah, coupled with Calpurnia Fudge's ongoing machinations to keep her 'in her
'Yes, but what of Hermione's Potions apprenticeship, which has been arranged,' Minerva countered, 'and then there is her salary working for Miss Brown. Plus she would never be able to see her parents again.'

'Muggles do have the ability to travel over land and sea, Minerva,' Albus reminded her.

Normally when Severus' memories of Albus and Minerva instantiated in their gossamer forms, they were always in agreement with one another, debating with Severus' conscience choices. This was a turn of events, with imaginary Albus and Minerva at odds with one another instead of mutual agreement.

Severus was ready to add his own observations, but the two subconscious apparitions continued on before Severus could butt in on his own mental debate.

'I am fully aware of all the technological marvels Muggles are capable of,' Minerva tartly replied, her Scottish brogue becoming thicker. 'However, having Mrs. Potter and two ex-Death Eaters suddenly leaving the United Kingdom under dubious circumstances – as the Ministry will phrase it – will no doubt be cause for the Ministry and Moody to go into a panic. But to have two ex-Death Eaters, Mrs. Potter and Mrs. Weasley, who is friend to both Harry Potter and Mr. Weasley, would no doubt result in an even bigger incident resulting in the Ministry taking even more drastic measures to bring Severus and Mr. Malfoy to so-called justice.'

'And all the more reason why Hermione should leave with Severus. Moody will put no one above his suspicions, even her,' insisted Albus. 'Besides, once Harry realized his wife has left him, he will try to follow her anyway. The danger during their escape will be no more or less perilous if Hermione were to join them.'

“At no point have I made any mention of Hermione fleeing with me,” Severus interrupted. “The plan is for Ginny, Draco, and I to leave. I am not complicating this by adding another body, which is yet another factor to result in possible failure, to the list of departing. End of discussion.”

The vision of Albus gave a sign of dissatisfied resignation, while the image of Minerva gave a short nod in agreement that it was the end of the matter and she was in the right.

Severus reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose, but was stopped short by a knock at the door
signaling that Mrs. Paxton had arrived.

A few quick, and allowable, spells were cast to set the room to rights and Summon a mask before letting his Sunday night client through the door.

Mrs. Paxton trounced in with a twinkle in her eye that signaled to Severus she was in no mood for talking, but for a good and thorough rogering.

Severus was relieved he at least remembered to cast the Arabic freshening charm on himself, as it would not be entirely good etiquette to have Hermione's bodily fluids still clinging to his own cock.

To not prolong his duty any further than necessary, Severus found a left-over bottle of forty-eight hour enhancement potion, which would give him just enough vigor to get a perfunctory shag out of the way.

'Ugh, this is getting to be tiresome,' Severus thought as he went through the motions. Mrs. Paxton remained oblivious to his boredom, bucking and rocking against him on all fours. He couldn’t help a mental sigh each time he slammed himself deeply into her.

The potion gave his body a believable performance of interest in Mrs. Paxton, but he had to catch himself from yawning once or twice since his mind was engaged in other matters, such as calculating the volume ratio of kettle to cauldron, and what the weather was like in the eastern portion of the United States right now.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 51 A/N: Someone in a review brought up the issue about STD's, which I addressed by casually mentioning in Chapter 22, "Catch Me If I Fall" or "In Vino Veritas,": “...he had wine, a vial of the usual combination post-coitus contraceptive-venereal disease eradicating potion, and a deaf ear ready for her weekly rant.” But I felt this had to be more thoroughly explored in this chapter.

Kala ma'hab'bi irruh translated from Arabic is “Remove love essence.” Saha al kw'wai'yis nasa'mi: gemel sha'h'wa'ni sa'h'ir translates into "Awakening of the Perfumed Soul: The Sensual Sorcerer." Kindest thanks to Potion Mistress (AKA Jen) for her translation services. Some of you may recognize the original book that inspired the book for this chapter, “The Perfumed Garden for the Soul's Recreation”, translated by Sir Richard Burton.

Next I would like to give a huge round of applause to my betas, JuneW and
Rogue_Panda, for editing and correcting this monster chapter. Also, thanks to JuneW for her title suggestion.

Yes, yes, I know. It's been nine plus years since I updated, but life happened. My mother-in-law died of cancer in 2006, I went back to work full time, I lost my job during the 2008 crash, was depressed that I was unemployed, did other things, and dealt with another death in the family, but still this story kept rattling around in my brain all these years, demanding to be expunged and committed to keyboard. I've had people at various Harry Potter cons over the years ask me if I ever intended to finish, and I said yes. And I meant it. So in January 2014 I started finishing chapter fifty-one, which I first started back in April 2006, and started writing, and writing, and writing.

And the one thing I swore was that I wouldn't post any more chapters until I finished the whole damn thing, including epilogue, so that way I would not have to write my way out of any more holes again. No more WIPs; too stressful. Well, the story is done and it will be posted in its entirety. Thanks to the many who have contacted me over the years hoping I'd finish it some day. Your periodic emails and reviews hoping I'd finish spurred me on to write this story to its completion. Thanks for being so patient.

You can watch for updates either through this fanfic archives' update page or these two social media sites: Tumblr, which includes fan art links that you can view now since some links have died over the years, and will feature new fan art I've commissioned: http://atdlheabetz.tumblr.com/
Twitter: @ATDLHEAbetz

_Point of note: Regarding Twitter and Tumblr, I'll also include some posts for Leviosa, a Harry Potter conference (July 7-10, 2016) that I am helping organize as I'm the Hotel & Logistics Director and resident con Mixologist. Other than the occasional Leviosa post, those sites will be for ATDLHEA updates only._
Chapter Summary

Hermione begins her temporary 'life of crime' by stealing ingredients. Later, Severus and Hermione reverse engineer Ron's special potion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fifty-Two

“The Vapors”

Disclaimer: I saw the best fanfic writers of my generation disclaim by legalese (as do I), stating Rowling owned Harry Potter, dragging themselves through Diagon Alley at dawn looking for a lemony fix, angelheaded fanfic! Dracos burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the scar-headed Harrys in the slash of night, who Potterverse and OTPs and Deathly Hallows and Potions masters sat up casting spells in the wizarding darkness with characters shagging in Prefect bathtubs floating in towers of Hogwarts contemplating Wizard Wrock...

A/N: This disclaimer is a parody of Allen Ginsberg’s opening of Howl.

Hermione did all she could from audibly squealing with delight when she caught sight of the shipment of powdered bicorn horn. It was even the varietal from Russia, which Hermione thought was a superior product to the Turkish variety Severus originally recommended. There was a box of bicorn horn from China as well, which would have worked if there was a shortage like the fluxweed.

Setting the bicorn horn and some other random ingredients aside in a pile, Hermione told Trevor that they were ingredients she would test herself since they required a more practiced hand to be done correctly, but she would show him how to perform them, training him to better perform his job.

Madam Dushka had been reminding Hermione with greater frequency that her performance review was coming up, and that Mr. Spawn had better improve for her to earn a good review and possible
raise. It took all of Hermione's fortitude to plaster on a believable visage of concern and fear of Madam Dushka, and not want to smugly smile knowing that better prospects were on her horizon and that her cunt boss would be no part of it. But Hermione continued on, pretending as if things were to remain status quo, and played her hand close to the vest.

She worked hard to help train Trevor to come up to snuff on the testing of ingredients, since it was in her best interest to not only try her best, satisfied by a job well done, but that once she was gone, someone competent would be in place to test ingredients. That way, The Lovely Lavender Company would not suddenly be besieged by a bout of faulty ingredients that had not been tested properly.

The testing of the bicorn horn usually took about half an hour, so knowing that Trevor always left at the chime of noon, Hermione began testing the Russian powdered bicorn horn at a quarter to twelve.

At the stroke of noon, Hermione looked out of the corner of her eye, expecting to see Trevor bolt for the door with his cloak, when she noticed him standing behind her observing how she stirred the bicorn simmering away.

“Oh, Trevor,” she said, trying to not sound guilty or surprised by his continued presence. “I thought you were heading to lunch. I didn't notice you standing there.”

It was true; she wasn't expecting him to be there.

“I'm just observing, since you said the powdered bicorn horn was a tricky ingredient to test,” he offered as an explanation for his presence.

'Bugger, now he takes his job seriously.'

“This is the Russian batch, and we still have the Chinese bicorn to test. So, how about you head off to lunch and I'll save the Chinese batch for you? That one is more tricky, as the bicorn is not as evenly ground and is more challenging,” Hermione explained, informing Trevor of the differences between the two.

“Oh! You'll let me handle the more difficult batch?”
“Well, I'll be supervising, but yes, I think you can handle it,” she added, trying to equally bolster his confidence, which had been shaky since the lab burning incident, and to coax his backside out the door. Then she could get around to creating a false report of a ruined experiment to cover the fact she was going to smuggle some regulated potions ingredients out of the Ministry.

“Thanks! I guess I'll see you after lunch then,” the young wizard shouted over his shoulder before grabbing his cloak and exiting the lab in a hurry.

Once he was gone, Hermione placed her face in her hands and gave a great sigh of relief.

Hermione noted earlier in the morning that Trevor had left a box of actual magical Mexican jumping beans, not the silly Muggle ones infested with larvae, atop a teetering pile of other ingredients that needed to be tested. The box was poorly taped and rather beaten, looking as if a troll had used it for a pillow. Normally she would have taken him to task that this would result in another batch of ingredients strewn to the four corners of the lab, similar to the walking irises incident, but now she saw it as an opportunity for her ruse.

Hermione then went to grab an empty box, after quickly locking the doors to the lab. Grabbing the box of Mexican jumping beans, she found a seam along the edge of the box that was close to splitting open. With just a little coaxing with the edge of her fingernail, the box split open and Hermione dumped the entire box's contents into a fresh box, placing the paperwork from the shipper inside. She then scooped up a small handful of the beans and knelt down to scatter them with force across the floor, making them skitter across the tiles to wind up under various cabinets, tables and desks. What few beans weren't under some piece of office furniture were kicked lightly with the side of Hermione's boot. To finish off the staged scene, Hermione tipped over the teetering pile of boxes the Mexican jumping beans sat atop (after making sure none of the boxes contained any glass jars), lightly crushed the beans’ original box a little to make the split seam a little larger, and placed the damaged box in proper alignment with the other fallen boxes.

Moving back to her bench, she withdrew a vial from the pocket of her robes. While securing the pilfered bicorn horn in her pocket, the witch gave a thankful sign that the amount required for the Polyjuice Potion was less than the amount she used for standard testing. It wasn't enough for two batches, but there would be a little left over in case some was accidentally spilled.

‘One down, two to go,' she noted, hoping the other two “accidents” would be just as easy to stage. In order to hide the lifting of certain ingredients under the Ministry's radar, Hermione would have to botch a few other tests so that it would not be obvious that only regulated Polyjuice Potion ingredients needed retesting. As opportunities arose, the clever witch would have to ruin more
experiments on purpose. Granted, she had an excellent record of not wasting ingredients with additional tests, but Trevor Spawn was providing a plethora of accidents to exploit. He had already caused a great many ingredients to be retested since beginning work at the Department of Standards and Regulations, so this would merely be a continuation of the current streak.

By the time Trevor returned from lunch, Hermione was filling out the paperwork to record her supposed botched test, as was required by the Ministry. Since Trevor began working there, she had become on expert on filling out form 42a/hgg, listing which ingredient required additional testing, how much was used, and why. The warming charm Hermione placed on the original batch added credibility to the perception that Hermione had just finished testing the Russian bicorn horn a second time.

Sounding peevish, Hermione told Trevor to pick up the boxes that he had left to fall over carelessly. She mentioned that there still might be a few more Mexican jumping beans on the floor, waving her hand off in the direction she had strewn them, without bothering to look at Trevor, as she finished filling out the form.

Knowing the less said was better, Hermione let Trevor imply on his own that the Mexican jumping beans spilling all over the floor had caused Hermione to be distracted and the batch ruined in the process. This was confirmed by Trevor, with no prompting from her, apologizing for making her test the bicorn horn a second time. Then he began setting up the testing of the Chinese batch under Hermione's supervision.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Pacing the room, Severus tried to stop the bile rising in his throat. His new Wednesday client was due any moment, causing the former spy to be agitated with good cause. He had used the latest reformulation of the hair coloring formula to temporarily dye his locks a rather nondescript medium golden brown, and he had picked his bauta mask to conceal his whole face.

He nearly jumped out of his skin with the knock on the door signaling his client's arrival.

Severus opened the door and welcomed Molly Weasley into his flat.

“Good evening, Madam. Please, enter,” Severus said with a Spanish Castilian accent, raising the pitch of his voice from his natural baritone to a passable tenor.

Severus hoped that by changing his hair color, the depth of his voice and affecting a slight foreign accent, Molly would never be able to place Severus as the gigolo she was seeing for a sympathetic ear.
The middle-aged witch nervously scanned her eyes about the place before walking through the threshold. With a quick glance back over her shoulder to make sure no one was spying, she entered the residence.

“Please, have a seat,” he urged, sweeping his arm towards the choice of a wingback chair or the settee.

Molly quickly shuffled over to the wingback with uncertainty and sat down, still wearing her cloak.

“Let me take your cloak.”

She rose and took off her own cloak, trying her best to avoid any physical contact with Severus when she handed it to him. He then handed the cloak off to Marf, who appeared only for an instant before disappearing again.

“Oh! You have a house-elf,” Molly remarked, her overly bright tones trying to mask her nervousness.

“Marf is under the employ of my employer. He is not mine,” Severus replied, remembering to use more hand gestures when talking, since that was a conversation mannerism of witches and wizards from Spain.

“Where are you from?” she asked, noting Severus’ accent.

“I come from Spain. Have you ever been?” he asked, hoping to keep the conversation as light and non-personal for as long as possible.

“No.” The single word reply hung in the air, adding to the awkwardness, until Molly added for further clarification, “No, but it always seemed like such an interesting place to visit. You speak very good English for a foreigner. I have a daughter-in-law who is a foreigner.”

There was additional silence that stretched. Severus was finding this to be a very difficult conversation to bear, as Molly's comments almost sounded as if she was in denial of her slight xenophobia and was over-compensating.
“Is your daughter-in-law from Spain?” he asked, knowing Fleur was French, but trying to spur Molly along.

“No, she's French, but she's still a good wife to my oldest son, Bill.”

It took considerable strength for Severus not to cringe at the way Molly thought her backhanded remark about Fleur's national origins was acceptable when qualifying it with her domestic skills.

Severus decided to interrupt this painful discourse with the offer of refreshments.

“Tea would be lovely,” Molly answered with relief.

Both members of the Order of the Phoenix needed the fortitude of a little tea to get through this night.

After tea and a little more small talk, Severus broached the subject at hand.

“I was informed you needed a sympathetic ear,” he prompted her.

That was the last thing Severus said for the next two hours, while Molly poured out every personal detail regarding how unappreciated she felt by her children, how much she wished her husband, Arthur, was more ambitious instead of wallowing away in a position that brought little chance for advancement or pay raises, and finally on to the subject of how her daughter and her youngest son's wife were denying her the happiness of grandchildren. However, she added for measure her hope that Ginny would soon be coming around to her way of thinking, since Hermione said she herself was going off potions to let nature take its course.

This last topic of the night tested Severus' ability to act as a sympathetic ear. He had heard from both Ginny and Hermione the arguments they had used – in counterpoint to Molly's nagging – about why they were not interested in getting pregnant. And Severus definitely knew, from first-hand experience, that Hermione was definitely not going off potions, and this was a ruse to stall Molly from harping on her any further regarding the subject.

Severus' only physical contact with Molly was a sympathetic pat on the top of her hand when he
noted she had all run out of steam and was done railing on for the night.

“I feel so much better,” Molly sighed cheerfully as Severus called for Marf to bring Mrs. Weasley her cloak. “I can't wait until next week. Thank you.”

And before Severus could be the gentlemanly good host, Molly marched with renewed vigor over to the door and showed herself out, lightly slamming the door closed.

Gobsmacked, Severus collapsed into a wingback and asked Marf to bring a snifter of something strong to help muddle and dull some of the memories of the evening. The alcohol would never erase the memory of that torturous evening, but alcohol certainly seemed like a damn good excuse to help diminish the pain.

“She never even asked my name,” Severus noted dryly, before draining the last sip and rising to go to the bathroom. He hoped the hair coloring solution would come out with one wash, so he could finally declare this potion finished and no longer have to fiddle with it.

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If it wasn't for the fact that Hermione was getting shagged good and proper twice a week now, she was sure she'd be in Azkaban for having performed an Unforgivable on Ron.

While Ron wasn't home, she was able to grab another sample of the potion he had been taking as part of his new exercise and fitness regime in order to build up muscle and tone, in preparation of his upcoming photo shoot spread for the 2004 Mercury Broom Company calendar. She was convinced steroids and hormones were key ingredients, since Ron had been showing increased agitation, aggression and a great deal of muscle piling on quickly.

Even the shirts he once wore that had hung loosely on his frame were now too tight. Ron had gone out to the tailor’s to get some fresh shirts made, ditching his usual t-shirts and casual wear for something a little more refined, picking up a couple pairs of tailored slacks to go with his new wardrobe. There were a few new T-shirts he'd bought to replace his old ones, but now he was dressing more like an adult instead of an overgrown adolescent.

Hermione welcomed Ron's interest in improving his grooming habits and appearance, but it also came with the side effect of a little more preening. Hermione noticed that some of her beauty lotions that she used sparingly were suddenly cleaned out.

When the exasperated witch asked Ron if he had used the last of her Lovely Lavender Maximum
Moisturizer, her husband got rather short with her. He admitted he’d used it since it seemed she hadn’t, and he needed it since he spent so much time out in the elements and needed to look his best for the upcoming photo shoot.

“Ron,” Hermione ground out with tried patience, trying not to set her husband off on another rage, which had become a more frequent occurrence, “it’s called Maximum Moisturizer because you only have to use very little. A tiny dab goes a long way, which is why it is so effective. That jar would normally last me a whole year and you’ve used it up less than a week. ‘Maximum Moisturizer’ is not a direction to use the whole jar in one go.”

“I didn't use the whole jar, only half,” he bit back, as he plowed through the ice box looking for some quick protein to snarf down before leaving for practice.

She wanted to point out that he’d used six months of her lotion in a mere week, but decided to shut her mouth and avoid Ron busting up any more crockery. There were only so many times you can Reparo the same shattered platter or mug until the spell would no longer work. And considering how often Ron was now busting up the dishes in a sudden fit, she didn't want to add any most costs, considering she was going to have to buy a new jar of moisturizer and Ron's new tailored shirts weren't cheap.

If Ron was going to start using beauty potions, she was going to get him something cheap, and hide her good and expensive stuff from him.

“So, you still going to dance lessons Thursday nights?” Ron asked out of the blue.

“Uh, yeah.” Hermione replied, sounding a little stilted, surprised by the non sequitur. She might have mentioned she was taking “dancing lessons” on Monday night as well, but figured that the less said, the better.

“Good, you seem to like them and certainly seem like you're in a better mood the day after,” her husband noted nonchalantly.

Hermione bit the inside of her lip and turned to face out the kitchen window in order to prevent any tells from betraying her otherwise impassive face.

Standing over the cauldron, Hermione let her hair drape around her face, creating a curtain in which to trap the scent of Ron’s potion as it slowly released volatile oils and light tendrils of
fragrant steamy vapor, per Severus’ instruction.

She was glad Severus had prepared that night a light meal of trout and salad, so her sense of smell would not be hindered or dulled by strong scents from dinner.

“Slowly drag the spoon through the potion, and then inhale deeply once again,” her old Potions professor instructed her.

Hermione caught the scent of a new ingredient, something musky. “It's definitely something familiar,” she said to herself. “Goat. I think it's a scent gland from near the horns.”

Severus leaned his head over the cauldron to catch the vapor as Hermione moved her head aside so he could give her a second opinion.

“No, not the glands near the horn, that's just plain old goat penis,” Severus corrected her, scrunching up his nose as he recalled the scent.

On a piece of parchment, Mrs. Weasley wrote down “goat penis” at the bottom of an ever growing list of ingredients. Hermione had brought a small cauldron and various utensils from home with her so that Severus could truthfully answer, during future interrogations, that none of his kitchen items had been used for any Potions, even for the reverse engineering of one.

Glancing in the slowly simmering cauldron, Hermione noted that the potion had nearly evaporated and inhaled one last time. Severus breathed in and out one last time, and confirmed Hermione's opinion that the goat penis was the last ingredient.

As Hermione reviewed the list she’d compiled, Severus sidled up behind her and glanced at the parchment. They had put off making love until after the lesson was completed, as Severus had informed Hermione that sex can alter one's abilities to smell certain scents correctly.

“No wonder he has the temperament of a bull lately,” Hermione said more to herself than for Severus' benefit. She knew this potion was a temporary thing, until the photo shoot was over, but she didn't know how much longer Ron would be taking it, nor when in November the shoot was scheduled.

“The scent of this potion is having an effect on me,” Severus murmured into her hair, noting the
potion through inhalation was affecting him as well.

With a small gasp of surprise, Hermione felt Severus position himself right behind her, pressing his erection firmly into her backside. She could feel a slight twitching of his cock, the pulsing matching the beat of Severus' heart, which she could feel through his chest on her back.

“Tell me what symptoms you feel,” she asked, feeling aroused by her lover's sudden amorous attentions, but also disconcerted as Severus merely inhaled the fumes of this potion, whereas her own husband has been taking two vials of this stuff daily.

Strong hands possessively grabbing her hips moved up to latch on to her breasts with much more force than Severus had ever shown before. “That if I don't fuck you until you split in two, I'll go mad and tear this room apart,” he growled into her ear, his voice thick with impatient tension.

Before Hermione could continue her line of questioning, Hermione felt Severus roughly grab the hem of her skirt and yank it up forcefully, followed by the shoving of her knickers barely down her thighs with one hand and his other hand undoing his trousers.

As she was about to suggest they move to the bedroom, Severus' arm swept across the table, clearing it of the cauldron and Potions equipment. He placed a firm hand on the back of Hermione's neck, guiding her face down onto the table. With one quick thrust, Severus entered Hermione without preamble and began to fuck her with bestial abandon.

Severus roared aloud as he sunk his nearly painful erection into Hermione’s core. Hermione gave a yelp, a mixture of pleasure and surprise. If she wasn't already somewhat aroused and slightly slick with anticipation, Severus’ rough penetration would have been painful. Grabbing her hips once more, his fingers digging into her flesh, Severus began to grunt with each fervent thrust.

Hermione clutched to the edges of the table to hold herself in place as Severus' movements were tossing her about as if a toy. She arched her back to allow deeper penetration, which spurred Severus to tuck his hips under and begin hammering her with jackrabbit-like speed. Before Hermione could climax, Severus screamed hoarsely, adding in the odd swear word as he orgasmed. The stunned witch felt Severus' body give a sudden shudder before his knees gave out and he collapsed on the floor, his trousers tangled about his knees and his shirt tails hitched up around his midsection as he lay on his back.

Gasping great gulps of air, Severus breathlessly croaked out, “I am so sorry.” He paused, panting a few more times before continuing, “I should have known the vapors would affect me in such a way.”
Hermione, who was finishing smoothing down her skirt and blouse, eyed Severus with astonishment.

“Wow,” she said.

Severus cracked an eye open and could not decipher the wide-eyed look on his lover, whom he’d taken so roughly. “Wow, as in...”

“Wow, as in if the vapors alone did this to you, no wonder Ron howled like a beast with Zabini. No wonder he flies into a rage at the slightest provocation,” she explained, continuing, “And ‘Wow,’ as in that was incredibly wild and I never thought I’d ever see you lose control like that, and that was pretty incredible and yet almost a little scary had I not trusted you like I do, and ‘Wow,’ as in I’m glad I was a little ready for you to begin with or else dry penetration like that would have been extremely painful.”

Severus winced, shamed his own knowledge as a Potions master did not foresee such a quick and visceral response to the potion's vapors. “May I see the list?” the worn-out wizard asked as he slowly tried to raise himself from the floor and pull up his trousers.

Hermione fetched it from the corner of the kitchen, as it had been flung from the table in Severus' moment of blind lust.

Scanning over the list, he noted that some of the ingredients were the same as the male enhancement potion he was now testing with Hermione, but many of the other ingredients dealt strictly with muscle development, testosterone production, and reduction of fat.

Now sitting in a chair, Severus gave a pained sigh while hanging his head, forehead resting against his hand. “I should have had something to counter the effects on hand. Damn, I hate these restrictions. If only I had my Potions lab, I would have had something to negate the effects and not do what I did,” he lamented, waving his other hand at the mess caused by his momentary lapse of reason. “As a Potions master, you're supposed to have safety protocols in place so that you do not become a victim of your own Potions work.” He glanced at Hermione from between his fingers and a hank of hair that had fallen across his face, looking a bit ashamed of himself.

Hermione walked over to Severus and moved his arm to sit herself in his lap, lacing her hands around his neck, after tipping his chin up to meet her square in the eye. “One, I've learned something new today. And two, of all the Potions to fall victim to, this one was at least
“I didn't even let you orgasm before I selfishly satisfied myself,” he retorted bitterly.

“Well, you can always make it up to me tonight,” the young Potions apprentice retorted. “Besides,” she added, a mischievous glint in her eye, “I wouldn't mind you under a less potent version of that potion's vapors.” Nuzzling her nose along Severus' neck, she whispered, making sure her warm breath grazed his ear, “I hope you aren't averse to fulfilling a little fantasy of mine.”

Severus' eyes rolled up in his head before he closed them, relishing in the way he was being seduced and the idea he would be part of Hermione's fantasy.

“The me, restrained. Tied down... or chained up... A dose of that lubrication potion coursing through me, making me so...” Hermione sighed, licking the curve of Severus' ear. “Very...” she continued, her hand raking across Severus scalp, noting his increased rapid breaths. “Wet... Unable to escape. Yours to do anything...” she paused for dramatic effect as she grazed her nose along his cheek. “Anything you want.”

Severus grasped Hermione's face and kissed her forcefully, but not so much as the same force he used earlier. He held back enough to signal that he was in control of his faculties, as opposed to earlier. He had tied down many a witch, but the fact he was being so deliciously enticed to fulfill this request made it all the more arousing.

Arriving home, feeling thoroughly relaxed after several orgasms, and smiling with the knowledge that Severus was going to fulfill her little fantasy sometime in the future, Hermione strode through the door of her flat, ready to take a quick shower and go to bed.

She didn't notice the tall figure in the kitchen who slipped from shadow and followed her into the bathroom.

Lost in recalling Severus' analysis of the potion Ron was taking, Hermione thought about how the inhalation of fumes resulted in a different reaction than imbibing. The Potions master gave some detailed analysis about how olfactory and digestive systems absorption differed, and discussed with her the properties of the solids that they scraped from the bottom of the cauldron during their post analysis.

'So Ron will have a raised libido, but the solids from some ingredients temper the sexual arousal
part of the potion. Makes sense, not to have a bunch of hormonally uncontrollable wizards running about on this potion,' she surmised just as she noticed the sound of the shower door opening.

Her husband was naked, entering the shower with a similar glint in his eye that Severus had in his eye before his uncontrolled bout of urges overtook him.

“It's been too long, 'Mione,” Ron growled.

Hermione noticed then his voice had become a little lower in pitch over the past few weeks, a sign of increased testosterone levels.

'Between us, not long enough.' She turned her head back, keeping her back to him.

The air was thick with tension as Hermione waited for Ron's next move while she continued to pretend to ignore him. Ron slowly slid up next to his wife. He pressed his erection against her hip and slid a possessive hand across her belly before gliding it down lower until his hand was cupping her mons.

With a single finger, he started to slide his digit back and forth, stroking her clit.

Hermione silently damned the prolonged effects of the natural lubrication potion she was still under. She didn't want Ron touching her, but considering how long it had been and how normally she'd be crawling out of her skin by now without a fuck by her husband for weeks, she figured she better get around to shagging her husband or else arouse suspicion by turning him down.

“I can tell you want me,” he hissed, his fingers stroking her between her folds in a way he had never touched her before.

Hermione hated the fact that the way he was touching her right now felt pretty good. Coupled with the fact she had been fucking her brains out earlier in the night, her body was already aroused and took little to bring it back up to its heightened state once more.

'Aw, fuck it all, he is my husband. Maybe this time I can finish before him.'
Hermione didn't fight off Ron's hungry attentions and even arched her back in invitation to join with her, dissembling her own indifferent emotions.

“Not so fast,” Ron laughed throatily in reply to his wife's nonverbal signal. “You want to orgasm first, well then…”

He began stroking Hermione's clit with longer strokes, his other hand entering her and searching for that elusive spot, making her spread her legs wider. Ron's long finger eventually found it, making Hermione hitch her breath; she was surprised he actually knew what he was looking for, as the pressure and speed of his fingers on her clitoris increased.

Unbidden, Hermione began to whimper, lost in the feeling of an impending orgasm. She did her best to imagine it was Severus finger-fucking her in the shower. Pitching forward in the shower, Hermione braced her hands on the wall and rode out her orgasm, letting Ron hear her scream to verify completion. Before she could finish coming down off her orgasm, he grabbed her by the hips and lifted her up, while spinning her around, quickly hitching her leg up over his arm and then driving himself into Hermione.

She braced her back against the cool tiles, as Ron grunted and howled as he fucked his wife. Hermione was surreally reminded of the night's earlier events, distracted by the strong sense of déjà vu; the same animalistic loss of control, the brutish grunting, the feral look in the eye. Severus did warn her that her husband would have an enhanced libido, as a side effect of the potion, and Ron did show a bit more restraint than Severus did, though not by much. At least Ron's hands didn't leave bruises on her hips like Severus' did, which Hermione had made sure to spell away before dressing to come home that night.

Hermione allowed herself one more orgasm, as she just ignored her reservations and revulsion about her husband and let herself enjoy the moment. It was a pity, she thought, that it had taken this long for Ron to finally give her an orgasm that she would have been rapturously grateful for three months prior. Now she was glad at least Ron's efforts weren't a complete waste of her time, this time.

Plastering a believable smile upon her face, she beamed up at her husband while breathlessly exhaling, “That was fantastic.” If anything, a little praise may soothe the savage beast.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 52 A/N: I know, Hermione fucking Ron. But she doesn't want to arouse suspicion, like Ginny did with Harry by changing her behavior patterns.
There were a few correspondences addressed to Sebastian Delgado waiting in Severus' office as he arrived at work with a spring in his step, despite the fact his weekly parole meeting was that morning. Things were humming along nicely, except for the possibility that Tropical Storm Henri would yet again continue the ruination of the 2003 crop of fluxweed, which needed to be picked during a full moon. The moon didn't necessarily have to be shining above during harvest, but fluxweed had to be collected during that phase, nonetheless.

The next full moon would be September 10th in five days; Severus counted each day, hoping Henri would not develop into a hurricane. Even so, tropical storms were strong enough to cause plenty of havoc on crops; Hurricane Bill, back in late June, had decimated most of the fields where fluxweed was grown, just a month before the summer harvest usually began. Each successive crop that was sown afterwards was usually washed out by yet another hurricane or tropical depression that roared through the mid and south Atlantic. Even along the northern Atlantic coast where fluxweed grew naturally, wild stands of it were turned to slime from the incessant summer rains.

Severus would not let something as unpredictable as the weather foul his mood that day. Hermione had delivered the powdered bicorn horn to Ginny, and she estimated a Friday shipment of
boomslang skin would await her when she came into work that morning.

Opening his correspondence, he smiled to see the first letter was from Katherine Bigelow.

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Dear Sebastian,

Thank you for the recommendation of crops to grow for some quick cash flow. Greasing these Spanish bureaucrats' palms is something I'm going to have to factor into the price of my plants. It is quite the other side of the coin to be working as a grower, harvester and exporter to Britain instead of an importer, but the climate is far more tropical, which seems to agree with me and the rare plants I once only imported. It's been a while since I've done this much physical labor, but it feels good to get my hands back in the earth once again, despite the slight ache in my back at times.

I was able to get a crop of young nettles sown and harvested, since there seems to be a shortage coming from the Americas, as you mentioned. Additionally, the burrowing four o'clock and Appalachian rose gentian. I should be able to get them both to flower before winter comes, providing a much needed infusion of Galleons. Unfortunately, due to the protected designation of fluxweed by both American Muggle and magical department agencies, and the damage sustained by this year's weather, I am unable to procure any fluxweed seeds. It seems they are keeping all seeds within the United States in order to ensure at least one crop this season through successive plantings, and something to plant next year in case there are no seeds to harvest this year.

As always, thank you for your continued guidance and frank opinions. Should you need anything, please do not hesitate to ask.

Kindest regards,

Katherine

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'The one thing I would ask for and she cannot help me.' Severus gave a small huff of disappointment.
Setting the letter aside, with dour and dark clouds now brewing above his head, Severus petulantly picked up the latest catalog from Pawnography in search of a new chess set. He had accidentally decapitated several pieces during his drunken and apoplectic bout of destruction after his first kiss with Hermione, which led to a very great misunderstanding, resulting in the aforementioned fit of rage. Severus’ chess set would no longer play, especially since all of the monarchs of the set were beheaded.

Glancing through the pages, there was the usual Merlin era set, with a Guinevere model for the queen who was sculpted wearing a richly embroidered bliaut and mantle. In the catalog photo of the set, both Guinevere and her counterpart Morgana twirled to show off the fine craftsmanship of their costuming. Different periods were represented with their own themed chess board, each with their own historically accurate costuming.

When Severus reached the twentieth century section of the catalog, he came across a page promoting the new Albus Dumbledore chess set, and he dropped the catalog, flinching as if it bit his fingers. Severus did not want to look at the page and be reminded of his late mentor. He did not want to even view the figure of the Dark Lord, or see if he himself was made a replica in wood or semiprecious stone. Who knew which side he was placed in those sets, but he could guess – since he was not honored as a hero after the end of the war, but instead persecuted as a war criminal.

He picked up the catalog once more and selected a chess set from the Renaissance period: an Italian costumed ensemble. It had classical looking figures and looked refined without bordering on ostentatious.

Severus wrote a quick missive to Lavender that he required her to purchase the set for him. He handed the note with the catalog off to Wonkle to relay to their employer, Miss Brown.

The temporary hair dye formula was now completed and the male enhancement potion had been thoroughly tested with the help of his lover and temporary Potions apprentice, Hermione. Severus pulled out his notebooks from the nearly four years he had worked for Miss Brown and began paging through them. The edible body paint was still not finished, but he would have time to work on that later.

It would create a sticky situation for his employer should it be pieced together that Severus Snape’s disappearance coincided with the “going abroad” of her former Potions master, Sebastian Delgado. Therefore as a way for Severus to help Miss Brown to counter any claims that Severus Snape and Sebastian Delgado were one and the same, Severus would need to draft letters creating proof of the ongoing owl correspondence between Miss Brown and Master Delgado, based on his notes.
The thought of his nom de guerre brought back memories of his latest meeting with the elder Mrs. Weasley.

The part-time gigolo still inwardly winced when recalling the name Molly assigned to him two days ago, during their second meeting.

‘Eduardo.’ He shuddered.

Severus noticed that when Miss Brown read the letter to him, having received it while he was in her office at the time, she did not mock him for adopting the Spanish accent, and gave him merely a sympathetic grimace.

Given that Molly was now a client, he prayed for his escape to come as soon as possible.

Having woken up late Friday morning, Hermione's day would only go from bad to worse. She had come home just after midnight, the night before, having helped Severus test the last batch of male enhancement potion. Sixty-six hours was nearly as potent as the seventy-hour version, and left her no less bow-legged and exhausted than after her first marathon fuck fest with Severus, in which they tested the most potent of brews. She was thankful she wasn't too tired to remember to cast the Arabic post-coitus freshening charm and spell away the bruises and love bites before returning home, as Ron was waiting for her and pounced upon her once she set foot through the threshold. Ron went much longer than usual and came twice, never losing his erection after the first orgasm to continue on to a much longer session for his second go at his wife. Hermione was beginning to think she was getting callouses in her delicate areas since she wasn't sore anymore where she normally would be. She figured her body was becoming adjusted to a very healthy and rigorous sex life. By the time Ron finished, it was nearly two in the morning and Hermione was exhausted beyond all measure.

In addition to oversleeping, Hermione's mirror kept on winking and giving her an exaggerated thumbs-up, having witnessed the longest and most “successful” coupling Hermione and Ron ever had; Hermione came more than once, something Ron even congratulated himself for before falling asleep eventually. The mirror was not being very cooperative as she was rushing to get ready for work, which delayed her even more. She also wanted to take Ron to task for letting her oversleep, but she didn't have time for a row with him since she was running late as it was.

The line at the Twenty-Four Blackbird Bakery was unusually long that morning, as she arrived later than normal, and by the time she got to the front of the line, they were out of all sweet baked goods. No scones, no hot runic buns, no brioche, no sweet croissants – just plain croissants and unsweetened breads. The croissant she grudgingly purchased shattered into a thousand tiny buttery shards upon the first bite, Hermione had to spell the croissant flakes off her robe twice as she rushed off towards work, eating and running at the same time; she wished she had the forethought
to fix breakfast at home, since it would have been faster.

Madam Dushka was waiting for her in the hallway, tapping her foot impatiently, alternating between glancing at her wristwatch and folding her arms with obvious impatience and displeasure as Hermione bolted down the hallway to reach the lab.

“You're late,” her boss barked at her.

“I'm sorry, this is the first time I have overslept for work and it won't happen again,” Hermione apologized, trying not to snap at her boss. It was very unlikely Hermione would get fired, but considering how important her position was in helping Severus and Draco escape, she did not want to imperil her employment status either. “I'll stay late to make up for lost time,” Hermione added.

This seemed to give Madam Dushka some satisfaction, as her scowl turned into a triumphant smirk. She minced off towards her office.

Still running down the hallway, Hermione hurriedly changed into her work robes.

Bursting through the lab doors, careful not to startle Trevor if he was in the middle of testing a batch, Hermione's eyes scanned the pile of boxes, reading the labels of ingredients marked on the side.

'Where is the boomslang skin,' she worried, beginning to panic that a shipment didn't come in. 'It should be here.'

Before Hermione could turn around, Trevor piped up, “I got here a little earlier today and started in on the Re'em blood and boomslang skin. I hope that's okay,” he added, sounding a bit uncertain if he was qualified enough to test them without her supervision.

Hermione winced, then schooled her features before turning around with a reassuring smile that it was okay that he showed some initiative. “No, that's good. You're perfectly capable of testing those ingredients.”

'There is always next week,' she told herself, making a mental note to cut short her Thursday night with Severus in order to make sure to beat Trevor to work next Friday, when the next batch should be arriving. She just hoped Ron would not keep her up half the night again, or she'd have to make
sure to feed Ron a sleeping draft so he could get in a decent night's rest and wake up extra early.

Trevor stayed late, helping Hermione. They both were in a foul mood, as the box marked “Powdered Limonite,” which is commonly known as yellow ochre, was mislabeled. In the process of cleaning up the lab after the explosion, Trevor and Hermione deduced that the shipper had switched the label for the powdered limonite with the label for powdered sulfur and vice versa. Both ingredients were yellow, but though the color difference between the two should have been enough to cause suspicion, even Hermione admitted to herself that if she was distracted enough – as Trevor had been when he opened the box as Madam Dushka came in to invite Trevor for a leisurely lunch – she might have made the same mistake.

At least it was Trevor's fault for blowing up the lab, which was only slightly different from his recent accident of nearly burning down the lab. But Trevor found his lunch invitation with his boss rescinded, as Madam Dushka had to make an emergency appointment with her hairdresser, since half her hair got burnt off in the explosion because she had been standing closest to the cauldron.

Once the lab was put back into order, Trevor and Hermione had some paperwork to fill out as to why they had to test the powdered sulfur again, as blowing it up is not a measure of purity for Ministry standards. There were also forms to inform the shipper of the mislabeling so they could notify all their other customers of the mix-up before someone in another country blew themselves up on accident.

“Thanks for staying late,” Hermione told him, as he changed out of his work robes.

“It's the least I could do considering I nearly blew us all up,” he replied morosely.

She gave a small quirk of a grin. “Well, at least the explosion was small, though I don't think our boss would say that.”

Trevor cringed in memory of the furious look on Madam Dushka's face as she stormed out of the lab on the verge of tears. “I have buggered it big time.” He sighed despondently. “What should a bloke do when flowers, candy, and wine won't cut it for an apology this time? She's really pissed at me. You're a witch, what do you suggest?”

Hermione was momentarily stunned, as Trevor had just indirectly confirmed that the two were having an affair, which – considering that Madam Dushka was married and considerably older than him – would be scandalous should it become common knowledge within the Ministry. It
wasn't so much of a shock to Hermione since she was having her own affair with a man old enough to be her father. But so far, despite Madam Dushka's obvious flirting with Trevor in front of her, Hermione had not heard any rumors from others about an office romance; however, she wasn't eating lunch with the other office witches anymore due to time constraints, so she couldn't be certain of that.

“First of all, discretion. Any suggestions I give you, don't let her know I gave them to you.” Hermione knew that knowledge — without the other party knowing you're in possession of it — can lend one the upper hand, so she didn't want Trevor to tip his hand to his lover that Hermione knew of their tryst. “Second, jewelry is always a good idea, but considering your current financial status and your father cutting you off, I can't recommend that.” Pondering a moment, Hermione looked away and up at the ceiling while she thought. “I would bet that her husband makes her do all the cooking at home. Cook for her and give her a nice massage, as not having to do a chore and being pampered a bit would certainly be a treat that one can't necessarily buy.”

Hermione could certainly attest to the fact that Severus cooking for her and giving her massages certainly wooed his way into her heart.

“Wow, I never would have thought of that,” the young wizard admitted honestly. “And thanks. Yeah, maybe I should have been a bit more subtle. I shouldn't have aired my dirty cauldron like that,” he admitted sheepishly, now realizing how he lacked discretion.

“No need to raise the ire of Mister Dushka, if he is unaware or would become overly concerned,” Hermione added, driving home the point that Trevor should not make his mistress' indiscretions more public than they already were, with her obvious flaunting with Trevor.

Hermione had started to like Trevor since he turned over his new leaf, after having his apprenticeship taken away from him and being financially cut off from his father. He had been making an honest effort to work at his job and be more humble. If anything, the death of Trevor Spawn at the hand of an enraged jealous husband would mean Hermione having to train a new person for the position of Potions ingredient tester, and possibly someone more annoying and incompetent than Trevor initially was.

“Thanks.” He gave her a lopsided smile and left the lab with smudges of burnt sulfur still clinging to his cheek.

After the door swung shut, Hermione summoned the latest copy of the Daily Prophet and checked the world weather report, frowning as Tropical Storm Henri showed a track that threaten Georgia and the Carolinas before the next full moon.
A/N: A bliaut is an over-tunic, worn over the chainse (chemise) in Medieval period dress.

A short chapter, but most future chapters run in the 6,000 to 9,000 word range with a few topping out at 10,000 to 12,000 range.

Once again, thanks to my wonderful betas, JuneW and Rogue_Panda. Send them a little love and thanks for their generous help.
“Of Bets and Brandy, of Binges and Brave Gryffindors, and Why the Bath Is Boiling Hot”

Chapter Summary

Severus teaches Hermione about the origins of Fairy Brandy, as well as telling her what the staff at Hogwarts used to do for amusement. Plus, inspiration strikes when one least expects it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fifty-Four

“Of Bets and Brandy, of Binges and Brave Gryffindors, and Why the Bath Is Boiling Hot”

Disclaimer: I claim to disclaim, yet by disclaiming, I am making a claim. How silly this logic puzzle is to simply state that Rowling owns Harry Potter, and I do not, though if you've read this far it should be pretty bloody obvious.

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The rap upon Severus' office door had a cadence to it, indicating that Miss Brown was in a good mood, something of a welcome sign considering how she had been running hot and cold as of late.

“May I enter,” the witch asked, looking more cheerful than usual, “or would you rather come to my office?”

The weary wizard gauged his employer's mood. He didn’t know if something would turn her disposition sour and thereby risk having all his papers strewn about his office in a fit should something upset her. Playing it safe, Severus suggested they go to her office, using the truthful fact there was more room in there to talk and possibly take tea as well.

Settled upon a comfy chair, with his cup and saucer in hand, Severus prompted her that he was ready to talk.

“Well, first of all, your chess set came in. Would you like Wonkle to deliver it to your flat, or have Marf pick it up?” she began.
“Either way works for me,” he replied, trying to keep his mind off his upcoming meeting with Hermione that night. He was hoping she was able to procure the boomslang skin that she predicted would have come in last Friday.

“Next,” Lavender soldiered on sunnyly, not noticing Severus’ distracted behavior, “everything is settled with the lawyers regarding Albert Dobmeir and his legal problems. The monies have been returned to Haymitch Spawn, Trevor's father. The judge, who took over the case from that dodgy arbitrator, has rendered a quick, fair, and equitable resolution to Albert's wife's will. The relatives are gone, and though my lawyers could not get all the Galleons that his wife's cousins pilfered, the judge did rule that they had to return three-quarters of the cost of the room and board they incurred.”

Severus hummed in acknowledgment absentmindedly. He had heard everything Miss Brown said and understood it, but his mind was elsewhere. He was happy for this news, it was just that his mind became more and more fixated in coming up with contingencies should the fluxweed prove to be unobtainable via the original plan. Tropical Storm Henri had swept through Georgia and the Carolinas over the weekend, and the full moon was tomorrow. He wondered how the fields fared.

“Also, I have purchased a place in Diagon Alley for the adult novelty store and was able to get it at a decent price. I signed the paperwork over the weekend, and crews are beginning the refurbishment today,” she announced with some small amount of smug triumph. “I'm having them work on the top floor first, making it into an office space. It should be done by the end of the week. Once it's done, I'll Obliviate everyone who worked on that office and cast a Fidelius Charm on the office as well, with me as the Secret Keeper.”

Severus was brought out of his reverie with the mention of a Secret Keeper. He had been listening, but Lavender had finally grabbed his attention, mostly. Now that his mind wasn't elsewhere, he finally noticed that Wonkle had brought a tray with his favorite nibbles with the tea service. He grabbed a jammy thumb biscuit before sitting back in his chair, giving Miss Brown his complete regard.

“You, Ginny, and Draco will be the only ones who'll know, besides me,” the witch continued, giving Severus a pointed glare that Hermione was not to be included in this part of the plan. “Once you are gone and safely wherever you have gone off to, I'll end the Fidelius Charm. But while it's in place, you and Ginny will be able to brew the Polyjuice Potion without the risk of being discovered while construction continues on the floors below you.”

“And getting there without being unobserved?” Severus interjected.
“Floo connection. From the research I've done on the Fidelius Charm, it will allow only those within the Secret Keeper's informed circle to know of or access the Floo.” Lavender gave a self-satisfied smile, knowing she had done her research beforehand to address nearly every conceivable possibility. “The Floo connection should be done either tomorrow or Wednesday, but I informed the construction crew to not use it once it's connected – not before I take care of memories and charms,” she added.

Nodding to himself, Severus checked some things off the list in his mind. “And have you and the Weasley twins come up with a name for this adult novelty store yet?” He didn't want to imagine the name he'd be calling out when Flooing to the office to work with Ginny. “And I thought the twins would also be buying the property jointly with you,” Severus added, concerned if – as co-property owners – the twins would wonder where their top floor space had gone. He questioned if Miss Brown was quick enough with a wand to Obliviate them both.

His employer's face suddenly looked pained as she placed her forehead in her hand, as it to ward off an impending headache. “One name the twins want to call it is 'The Wicked Witch,' which is wrong on so many levels.” Severus scrunched his eyes up in revulsion to the suggestion, recalling recent events. “It's so sophomoric,” she groaned, “besides, there is a strip club named that already.”

Severus forcefully shoved the memory of The Wicked Witch out of his head, as it was behind that particular strip club that Pansy Parkinson was found dead. “Well, what name do you suggest?”

“I was thinking something along the lines of 'Circe's Boudoir' or 'The Purple Rose,' but Draco came up with 'The Sirens' Secrets.'”

“That's it,” Severus jumped in. “It's subtle. It's alluring without being lurid.”

If Severus went through all that bother to create sex potions, he would at least like to know that they were being sold at an establishment that didn't sound like a strip club. He also didn't want a name from a trashy romance novel that some of his older clients were prone to quote from when describing the sexual favors they were searching for.

“That's just about what Draco said,” she admitted. “As for the twins, they were happy with my insistence to put the capital upfront for the property and have it titled in my name, since they are using their own capital invested to make most of the goods to stock the store. We're splitting the construction costs.

“But on to other business. Now that the male enhancement potion is done and the temporary hair dye will begin production in time for the Ministry Masked Ball, how is the edible body paint
Severus really hated working on the edible body paint. He had done all that work using moonstone, which tasted like chalk no matter what he did, to finally come to the realization with Hermione's prompting that moonstone would not be the best ingredient to use. She pointed out that the moonstone could give away a person's feelings a little more honestly than they were willing to admit. Instead, body-temperature reactive body paint was a much better avenue to explore, with fewer complications and the chance of fewer disgruntled and unhappy customers. Between other last-minute interruptions, surprises, and creating the paper trail of Delgado's correspondence with his employer, Severus hadn't put much work into this latest potion.

“Honestly, not very well.” Gazing at the fire slowly burning in the fireplace grate, the Potions master knew what he would have to do, but he knew Miss Brown would not want to hear it. “I have to put this project down and step away from it temporarily. I need to let my mind get away from this and approach it anew once I've had a rest from it. Inspiration has usually struck when I've been stumped like this before.”

“And when do you anticipate your holiday,” she hinted delicately. “I hope you will have time to complete it beforehand. We are also looking at an opening date of December 6th, just in time for Christmas shopping season. It would not make or break the store should Mr. Dobmeir need to finish your work, or should you finish it after the store's opening, but I would prefer to have as many items available for the grand opening as possible,” she explained, hoping to let him know from a purely business perspective that she needed to know.

Draco had nagged him, despite being assured that he would be notified when there was an update on the procurement of each ingredient, but that didn't stop his incessant harping on the subject that vexed Severus. As much as he wanted to be short with Miss Brown, the Potions master held the sharpness of his tongue, as she only made mention of it when prompted by his mentioning.

“These things have a way of working themselves out,” he found himself saying, to his own chagrin. This was advice he could only fully believe in when it came to own his talents and the craft where Potions was concerned, but would scoff at if suggested to apply this philosophy to real-life experience in everything else.

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Hermione found the drudgery of work to be a welcome escape from her home life. Since Ron was no longer working nights at The Listing Broom, he spent his evenings home now instead, when not going out to the occasional business dinner with Bascom Nettleton, owner of the Mercury Broom Company and the Chudley Cannons’ First String Keeper's new sponsor. Since he started going on muscle-enhancing potions, Ron's libido had reached the level of a rabid niffler in the middle of mating season. Even after coming home from a post-practice workout with the Mercury Broom's personal trainer, who was trying to get Ron beefed up and ready for their upcoming 2004 calendar shoot, the young wizard was ready for a tussle or two with his wife. Though his technique had not...
improved much, his increased stamina in the bedroom merely meant that Hermione had to put up with shagging her husband for longer periods of time. And though since Severus had helped train her body to relax and she found orgasming to be a much easier pinnacle to reach, the increased frequency and prolonged act of Ron humping his wife into the mattress, or random piece of furniture, still proved to be tiresome to her. Her sexual indifference to her husband only made it more of a chore.

There was no passion in the act for Mrs. Weasley, as her love for him did not grow or develop into anything more intimate. She still resented Ron due to the knowledge that she caught him shagging another wizard, though Ron was none the wiser she was aware of this fact. Him fucking her was something to tolerate, an act that she must pretend to be ever grateful for, since Ron's previous lack of stamina had been an issue of contention for Hermione before. Knowing that a change in Ginny's bedroom behavior led to Harry's accurate suspicions of his own wife having an affair, Hermione kept up the act in order to avoid any perceivable deviations from her usual behavior.

So Monday night, Hermione stayed at work until it was time to go over to Severus' place.

As Severus opened the door, Hermione trudged in and straight into her lover’s arms, burying her head against his chest, with a sigh of relief escaping her lips now that she was in her sanctuary.

With a bit of mock overacting, Severus inhaled deeply. “Come straight from work, have we?” he asked jovially, trying to lighten the mood. “Hmm, what do I smell?” He inhaled deeply once more, exaggerating the sound. “Chinese Chomping Cabbage.” He sniffed again, burying his prominent nose into her hair, barely confined by a bedraggled braid. “Valerian, birch and...” He inhaled once more. “Exhaustion?”

He tilted her head up, a slight smile played upon his lips.

“Oh, Severus!” she whinged, before shuffling over to one of the wing back chairs to flop ungracefully into it. She dreaded this moment, but she figured it was best to get it over with so they could at least attempt to enjoy the rest of the evening together. “I couldn't get the boomslang skin.”

With her eyes closed, Hermione knit her brow together in discontentment as she emitted a small whimpering groan from the back of her throat.

Severus was a little insulted that she started out their evening with the news that she could not procure a needed ingredient for his plans. Granted, he had high hopes and expectations of her having gotten a hold of some boomslang skin, but it stung him a little that she threw that information out before even a proper kiss and greeting.
“Is that all you think I have to look forward to with your company?” Severus asked, trying not to sound bitter. “That ingredients are all I wish to see you for?” It was his initial desire just a few months back, but their relationship had changed so dramatically since then. The wizard moved to sit in the matching wing back chair next to her.

Hermione's brow became even more furrowed as she leaned forward to place her face in her hands in order to collect her thoughts before speaking.

After a deep cleansing breath, she lifted her hands away from her face and turned her tired countenance toward her lover.

“I'm sorry. I thought that I'd get this bit of bad news done and out of the way so we could move on and enjoy the rest of the evening together. It’s been hell since I left here last week, and I'm rather exhausted,” she explained, hoping to take away whatever slight Severus felt. “I know how you truly feel about me, and I know you're not using me. I just thought I could just get it off my chest right away since it's been bothering me all weekend.”

“What happened? Another catastrophe in the lab?” Severus asked in jest.

“Yes,” she replied flatly. “One of the shippers mixed up the labels for lemonite and sulfur.”

Severus hissed in response to this news, flinching, knowing what sort of damage that could result in.

Hermione continued ranting, “But that happened after I overslept for the first time in over four years on the job, and, additionally, Trevor showed initiative and showed up early to work for once and tested the boomslang before I even got there.” She let out yet another sigh of exasperation.

Chastising himself for keeping her up past midnight that Thursday as they tested the last of the male enhancement potion, Severus apologized, “I'm sorry I kept you awake as long as I did, then, the night before.”

Hermione cut him off before he could continue. “You weren't the reason I overslept. Ron was.”
Severus looked at her, a scowl growing upon his face. “Was he abusive to you again?”

“No, no, nothing like that. It's that damn potion he's taking,” she explained, exasperated just thinking about the hours of Ron rutting she had had to endure as of late.

Comprehension dawned on Severus’ face. And while Hermione was not being emotionally abused by her husband anymore, she still looked to be suffering from her husband’s attentions.

“At least if I was interested or enjoyed it, it wouldn't be such a chore. I mean the last time I showed any interest really at all in Ron was the night of my anniversary,” the witch rambled on.

Severus stared at her, his face an unreadable mask.

Hermione noted the odd and unsettling lack of expression on Severus' face, then went on to explain herself. “I had a drink at the Grand Royal Supper Club. A Blue Fairy Martini. It made me horny as hell – and I've no reason why as alcohol normally doesn't make me feel that way. That’s when I came on to him and he rebuffed me, and I was upset he rejected me. So, I came here that night upset and angry, out of revenge...” She trailed off with her hand gesturing that they both knew the rest of story.

Looking at the dark-haired wizard anew, she saw a smirk play at the corners of his mouth.

“What?” Considering how awful that night played out, she was confused as to why he was smirking.

“You had a Blue Fairy Martini and you don't know why you were 'horny as hell?’” Severus asked, looking more and more amused.

“Should I?” Hermione looked a little bewildered, too tired to hide her lack of knowledge or as to guess why.

“Do you know how they distill Fairy Brandy?” he asked, which was answered with a shake of her head. “First of all, you know that Himeros is a progeny of Aphrodite and is sibling to Eros, Anteros, and Pothos?”
Hermione nodded, trying to find the mental energy to fully pay attention. Normally she'd be alert, but the sound of Severus' low and sonorous voice coupled with her exhaustion was making her eyelids feel heavy.

“Can we have a bit of tea to wake me up before we continue? Your voice, your lovely deep voice, is lulling me to sleep. As fascinating as this is, you are making want to curl up and drop off,” she admitted unabashedly, too tired to be coy about how alluring she found his voice.

Marf gladly served up tea, and Severus waited until Hermione was more alert and ready to continue listening.

“As I was saying, you know about Himeros, the god of sexual desire and impetuous love, and his family,” Severus continued. Hermione nodded that she was alert and knew her basic Greek mythology. “Well, not much is generally known beyond that. However, in the Restricted Section I found an obscure Greek Potions tome that had a chapter covering a variety of emotions one could elicit with certain potions. They didn't create the emotions out of nowhere, but merely amplified any feelings that already existed, even if they were subconscious emotions the person was not consciously unaware of. So if one was slightly envious of a person, a potion could enhance that into full-blown jealous rage. Another potion might bring out feelings of admiration, another anger, which if used improperly could result in someone flying into a blind rage. In the chapter, I found a potion regarding sexual desire, and it included the use of Fairy Brandy.”

“So what you are saying is that an Amortentia may make one infatuated with an intended target you may have no attraction to at all, but a potion of sexual desire would merely increase the desire one already had for someone?” Hermione asked, seeking clarification.

“Yes.”

“Ahhhh,” she replied, suddenly understanding why she was attracted to her husband and repulsed by Alan, who had accosted her after Ron left that night. It also explained why Hermione felt inexplicably drawn to Severus' flat that night as well, besides having a revenge fuck.

“Himeros, as explained in this book, supposedly had an affair with a naiad named Langia who lived in the freshwater spring in Nemea, in southern Greece; because she was tied to that particular spring, Himeros went to live with her. Their issue were winged creatures, supposedly the first winged water faeries.” Severus paused to take a sip of tea and gauged Hermione's continued interest before going on with his explanation. “Now this may all be mythological conjecture put to paper, but on the slopes of the hills of Nemea is an ancient magical vineyard, hidden from Muggles, which is irrigated with the waters of Langia's spring. And in the Spring evenings, winged fairies – the supposed descendants of the Greek god of sexual desire, which are commonly mistaken as moths by the local Muggle population – pollinate the grape blossoms. Those grapes
are then turned into wine, which through further distillation of their essence results in Fairy Brandy.”

A pained groan suddenly escaped Hermione’s lips. Embarrassed by the realization, she buried her face in her hands. “Urgh, Pete should have never served me that shot of Fairy Brandy,” she mumbled into her hands.

“Wait, you had a full shot of Brandy Fairy in your Blue Fairy Martini?” Severus queried. He was shocked she showed that much restraint as she did the night she showed up.

“No, I swung by The Listing Broom one night. Actually, it was the night I came over and realized who you were really were,” she confessed. “I was still terribly confused and conflicted by the end of our evening, so before going home I swung by the bar for a drink to settle my nerves and give me a little courage. Well, Pete – the barkeep who took over for Ron when he left – gave me a full shot of it when I asked for something strong.”

Severus snapped his mouth shut realizing his mouth had fallen open. “Either the clueless dolt had no idea what he was serving you, or he hoped to land you in his bed later that night,” he ground out, annoyed by the ignorance of the boy.

“No, I think it was ignorance, since he was rather new at bar keeping and recently just out of Hogwarts,” Hermione said, standing up for Pete's defense in absentia. “He probably failed his Potions O.W.L.s. Besides, I did fairly well in Potions and I still had no idea about Fairy Brandy.”

“So what happened to you with a full shot of Fairy Brandy?”

Hermione fidgeted in her seat uncomfortably. “Well the Blue Fairy Martini was only a quarter shot, mixed with vodka, vermouth, blueberry liqueur and passion fruit juice, and that was enough to get me in the mood for sure.”

Severus gave her a stern glare that he was not fooled by her evasive answer, but the effect was lessened by the curious quirk of one amusedly raised eyebrow.

Closing her eyes, as she was embarrassed enough from remembering it alone, she professed, with reluctance, “I got up onto the bar and started singing.”
He kept staring at her knowing she hadn't fully divulged everything.

“All right,” she huffed in defeat. “I started stripping my clothes off, too. It was a good thing Rogina, the pub owner’s wife, stepped in and stopped me when she did.”

Severus had a satisfied and somewhat predatory smile upon his lips when Hermione finally looked at him.

“Do you have a rather lovely pair of coconuts,” he purred.

“Gah!” Hermione buried her hands in her face one more time. “I was hoping you hadn't read about that post-N.E.W.T.s binge.”

“I lost several Galleons that year as I had bet it was going to be Seamus Finnigan who would have wound up on the front page of the Daily Prophet. There is always someone who goes on a royal bender and winds up being front-page news,” he confessed unabashedly.

Hermione really did want to crawl into a hole at the moment, as she was his student and Severus was her professor at the time of that infamous incident.

Slightly lost in thought, Severus recalled, “Minerva won the bet that year. I had to question whether she encouraged you or provided some of the liquor involved in the incident.”

Hermione was aghast now, looking at Severus with shock that not only did the staff bet on which student would do something phenomenally embarrassing enough to make front-page news, but that her own Head of House bet on her.

“Don’t look so shocked. You’d be surprised at what the staff at Hogwarts did, at least when I was there, to help break up the mind-numbingly mundane chores of teaching the same classes year after year, correcting mountains of scrolls of illegibly scribbled homework, and performing the other day-to-day duties we had,” the former professor explained. He suddenly desired a drop of something strong himself to help banish the memories that came flooding back from that period of his life.

Conceding that she really had never thought of her professors being equally bored as some of her classmates were with the rigors of studying and academia, Hermione felt a little bit more
sympathetic towards Severus' years as a professor, more than she could initially appreciate until after having to train Trevor Spawn.

“So, you both bet on Gryffindors?”

“Yes, as Gryffindors, once properly pissed up to their eyeballs, are the only ones with enough fortitude to go ahead and do something outlandishly brave,” Severus went on, exaggerating the word with mocking air quotes.

“What, and no other House has students to be that foolish,” she retorted a bit tartly, the pride for her House slightly stung through this admission.

“Usually no,” Severus shot back, a bit smugly. “Ravenclaws are too smart to drink themselves that blisteringly blind. Hufflepuffs, if that drunk, tend to look out for one another and make sure their Housemates don't do anything too outrageous due in part to loyalty to one another. Slytherins try to engineer it so that if they do get that drunk, they're more discreet in their alcoholic-induced adventures; and if caught, they can at least bribe, Obliviate or blackmail their way out of it so that their exploits do not wind up in the Daily Prophet. Gryffindors, as a habit, tend to egg on the drunken party, convinced that it is characteristically brave to go ahead with some randomly suggested dare, or to go ahead with whatever drunken idea pops into their head.”

Hermione folded her arms, feeling as is some part of her character had been attacked and belittled. Severus never said she was a foolish drunk, but with a broad paintbrush, she felt that he painted her as one.

Knowing he had let his Slytherin pride be a bit too rough with his Gryffindor lover's dignity, he added, in hopes of thawing the distinct chill wafting from Hermione, “But be that as it may, Hufflepuffs are the biggest party poopers, ready to give up on a party in order to put in a good night's sleep than let loose. Ravenclaws usually prove to be a bunch of uptight arses, trying to figure out how much to drink without getting too drunk and tend to over-analyze everything. And never, well,” he paused, reaching across the space between his chair to gently squeeze Hermione's hand, “mostly never, with a few exceptions, Slytherins are not to be trusted around drunks since they will take advantage of the situation. Gryffindors, when it comes to drinking, can be fun and lively, and will not exploit a poor drunk sod. Their noble natures mean they can be a trusted friend to drink with,” Severus recalled. He remembered the many times he and Minerva, Sprout, Flitwick – his fellow Heads of House – would have several rounds of drinks at the end of the school year once the students had left on the Hogwarts Express; and what a good drinking companion the Head of Gryffindor was.

Hermione felt that that was the best apology he could give her for indirectly insulting her.
"And of these few exceptional Slytherins who can be trusted," the circumspect witch asked, "can you name anyone who should, or can, be trusted?"

Severus got out of his chair to stand before Hermione, offering his hand to help her out of her chair. "There is one particular Slytherin I can name whom I think you can trust, considering he trusts you completely."

Hermione placed her hand in his. She allowed him to pull her up out of her chair and back into his arms in a post-bickering embrace, despite how tired she still felt and would have preferred to keep sitting.

"Can I trust this Slytherin to make sure that if I fall asleep, that I'll at least get out the door at a decent time tonight?" Then with an exasperated huff, she added, "Not that that would do any good if my husband is waiting to jump my bones again the moment I walk through the door."

"Short of a Sleeping Draught, I don't know how to stop or curtail it. And if I complain about too much sex, then that's a risk of making him suspicious, since I complained he didn't have enough stamina before." She tilted her head up, eyes pleading, "Any suggestions?"

"Have you eaten dinner?"

Hermione nodded, explaining she brought her lunch and dinner to work that day.

"Then let's discuss some possibilities while taking a bath," he suggested, unable to stomach the discordant aroma of different ingredients commingling on her person.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The bath was commodious, large enough for both to comfortably fit without being cramped. Hermione sat in between his legs and let Severus lather her hair, luxuriating in the feeling of his long and nimble fingers massaging her scalp. She reveled in the intimacy of the moment, closing her eyes and trying to engrave the moment in her mind – the feeling of Severus’ chest against her back as he breathed in and out, the contours of bone and tendon as she rested her hand on his knee, the black hairs on his pale legs.

"So you say just a few drops of Sopophorous bean oil, mixed with a regular oil like almond oil or olive oil, will make a person drop off to sleep?"
“Yes, and applied during massage it will knock him out, but not suddenly like a Sleeping Draught would do. It will appear to be a natural reaction to the soothing touch of a massage,” Severus finished explaining.

Hermione was about to drop off in the bath to Severus’ soothing touch herself. “Are you sure you didn’t use any on me, because I could fall asleep right here, right now,” she murmured.

Nudging her forward off his chest, he filled the dipper with water. She tilted her head back and he rinsed the lather from her hair. The weight of the water pulled her hair long and straight against her back, and it tickled his lower abdomen and caressed his thighs.

Severus moved her hair aside before grabbing a bar of soap and washing her skin from the pungent scents that still clung to her. Hermione drew her knees to her chest and rested her cheek upon her knee, relaxing under her lover’s tender ministrations.

“Is there anything else I can do to get him to stop humping me like a dog with a leg?”

“You’re fairly knowledgeable about Potions ingredients. What other ingredients can you think of that might help him to sleep, or relax him so much as to counter the libido side effects of his potions?” he prompted her.

“Lavender...”

Severus hummed in agreement for her to go on.

“Eschscholzia californica.”

“But what parts of Eschscholzia californica?” he prompted her.

“The aerial parts.”

“Yes, very good. What else?”
“Lemon balm, valerian, motherwort, red clover, Anthemis nobilis and catnip.”

Severus filled the dipper once more and rinsed her back, then coaxed her to lean back against his chest as he started soaping her arms.

“You forgot another one, passion flower,” he added.

“Passion flower? I thought it was used more in love potions than as a sedative,” Hermione countered.

“It can be used for both. Anxiety can hinder arousal, while relaxation is conducive to arousal,” he expounded, as his lather-filled hands moved across Hermione's shoulders to begin slowly massaging her breasts.

Hermione, feeling simultaneously drowsy and aroused at the same moment, could appreciate the logic of Severus’ explanation, and arched her back in response. A throaty chuckle came from the back of his throat, turning Hermione on even more. In response to Hermione aching for his touch, he lightened his attentions even more, delicately playing with her nipples which were quickly turning into firm peaks from his gentle teasing. A mewling plea came from her, as she arched her back even more trying to press her breasts more firmly into his soapy hands.

“Now,” he continued, hoping to continue their discussion while she was under a lust-filed fog. “How could one create a potion and discreetly administer it to someone unsuspectingly, in your situation.” For effect, he lightly flicked the tips of her nipples making her gasp at the pleasurable effect it had.

Hermione could only whine for Severus to continue.

“Now, now, how can one train to be a Potions mistress without being able to think under stressful conditions,” he murmured into her ear, continuing his attentions to her breasts. “How can. You slip him. A potion. Without. Him. Noticing.” he said, pausing every few words to play with Hermione’s nipples in order to tease her into trying to think while distracted.

Hermione stuttered a few incoherent vowels out before finding her tongue. “Um, in his juice at night?”
“And does he drink the same juice at breakfast?” Severus asked.

“Yes,” she gasped as one of Severus' hand slipped from her breasts and slipped down her stomach to cup her mons.

“Then how would you ensure he wouldn't drink it in the morning?” he prodded her into thinking, while also slipping a finger between her folds to start stroking her clitoris.

“I... I... I'd have to serve up the juice myself and slip it in?” she answered questioningly, since she was having great difficulty thinking at all.

“Yes, and how long do you think that will work until he catches on?”

“A couple times,” she moaned distractedly as her hips began rocking in time to the motion of Severus' hand.

Severus started having trouble concentrating as well as Hermione's movements were inadvertently stroking his now rock-hard erection against her back. A little repositioning and he could easily bury himself in her.

“So how else could one slip him a sedative?” he growled, trying to remain in control.

“Face cream.”

“What?”

The water in the tub started sloshing back and forth vigorously, splashing over the sides and onto the tile floor.

“Face cream!” Hermione fought to shout out. “He's using face creams at night to improve his skin before his photo shoot.”
Normally Severus would have given a derisive snort over the vanity of a man using night creams, but he was busy concentrating on the intellectual grilling of Hermione during his seduction of her.

“Does he have one he only uses at night?”

“Yes!”

Severus grabbed her hips to guide her up and slipped his own hips beneath her before guiding himself into her.

“Yes!” Hermione continued to shout, in response to Severus' last questions and in encouragement of what he was doing to her physically.

The water in the tub was now splashing violently over the sides as they rocked together, Severus' hands guiding her hips.

“And... And...” Severus gasped. ‘Fuck it all, I'll finish the lesson later,’ he thought before fully concentrating on the current task at hand.

Feeling relaxed, and yet also equally refreshed, Hermione used a towel to dry her hair before she would use a spell to finish drying it before going home. Severus was lying in his bed next to her, his eyes heavy.

“I can't drug him every night, as much as I'd like to,” Hermione admitted with resignation. “And then there is the question of the success of your male enhancement potion.” She swiveled her shoulders around to regard Severus. “If the male enhancement potion is similar to the effects I'm having to suffer through myself from Ron, then you might wind up with a bunch of witches trying to drug their husbands and lovers too.”

Severus blinked owlishly, suddenly feeling more alert with this fact Hermione pointed out. Realization that a bunch of non-interested witches putting up with unwanted amorous advances – well, it finally dawned on him that it was a problem.

Continuing with her current tangent of thought, she added, “But if you sold the male enhancement
potion along with Blue Fairy Martinis, then women getting bored with their husbands' extra attentions wouldn't be an issue. They'd be just as eager for a good shag as well.”

Now Severus was sitting up, his mind quickly changing gears from blissful post-climax to Potions master mode. “What did you say was in that Blue Fairy Martini?”

“Quarter-shot of Fairy Brandy, Siberian vodka, vermouth, blueberry liqueur, and passion fruit juice,” she replied, suddenly remembering that she herself wondered if the passion fruit juice mixed with the Fairy Brandy was the impetus of her lust that night. Recalling Severus' recommendation for passion flower, she asked, “How does passion flower and passion fruit juice differ in their properties? You suggested passion flower for putting Ron to sleep, but the Blue Fairy Martini has passion fruit juice?”

Sitting forward now, his mind alert, he said, “Well, passion flower is good for sedatives, something I'm sure you've tested in your job, while the juice of the fruit is a much milder sedative, but with aphrodisiac properties. It's like oysters and chocolate; it's an ingredient to be used in aphrodisiacs, but is primarily imported as a food item so it is something that would not have come through your department for testing. Passion fruit juice would act as an enhancing agent for the Fairy Brandy, magnifying sexual desire one has already possessed.”

This made sense to Hermione and confirmed her hunch that the passion fruit juice coupled with the Fairy Brandy did arouse her desire -- what little she did have left at the time -- for her husband.

Severus rose from his bed and put on his dressing gown as Hermione finished drying her hair with a charm before getting dressed to go home.

Once dressed and her cloak placed upon her shoulder, Severus held Hermione, tipping her chin up to view her face as he tentatively spoke, “I would have to speak with Miss Brown, but I think she would be eager to agree to my suggestion of a new potion. If she agrees, would you like to work on a new potion with me? A female libido enhancing potion?”

Hermione smiled broadly. “I would love to. And who says it has to be for females only?” she added, remembering how Ron had not been in the mood at times when she was in need of a good shag and they had been fighting.

Severus recollected Hermione's laments about her being spurned. “Yes, indeed.”
Even though Hermione would be coming back over to his flat in three nights, it was no less difficult for either to say good night to the other. Kisses were slow and languid, unhurried in their fashion knowing that they'd eventually have to stop.

“I'll send an owl to you in the hand of Sebastian Degaldo with a list of ingredients to bring, in addition to the usual cauldron, utensils and implements we might need,” he informed her, speaking softly into her hair as they gave their final embrace of each other.

“Oh, darling,” Hermione sighed with a lighthearted gibe, “it's so sexy when you talk Potions.”

“Be careful, or I might have to give you a detention with that cheeky attitude,” he threw back at her in a matching tone.

“Will detention involve spankings?”

“Only if you're very good.” Severus held her at arm’s length, gently pushing her away. “Be gone, temptress, before you make me ravish you again.”

Hermione laughed lightly, realizing this was the first time they had sexually joked about their previous relationship as student and professor.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 54 A/N: The title inspired by Lewis Carroll's “The Walrus and The Carpenter” poem from the section: "The time has come," the Walrus said, "To talk of many things: Of shoes--and ships--and sealing-wax-- Of cabbages--and kings-- And why the sea is boiling hot-- And whether pigs have wings."

Langia is a genus of moths in the Sphingidae family. Yes, it is primarily a species located in Eastern Asia, but who is to say that the magical issue of a Greek god and water naiad would bother to follow the whims of taxonomists.

Eschscholzia californica is the Latin name for California poppy. The “aerial parts” refers to all parts of the plant above ground.

Anthemis nobilis is Roman Chamomile. “Both Roman and German chamomile have
excellent calming properties, but Roman chamomile is more effective for irritation, impatience and feeling disagreeable, and has great value in treating PMS and other menstrual and menopausal problems, while German chamomile is superbly effective on the skin, not only to soothe and calm, but to heal and for tissue regeneration.”

http://www.essentialoils.co.za/essential-oils/chamomile.htm
“Green-Eyed Monsters, Fairies and Sirens”

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Severus continue on with their experimentation. Now it's Severus' turn to learn something new.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fifty-Five
“Green-Eyed Monsters, Fairies and Sirens”

Disclaimer: Doth Harry Potter and its legal courtly entourage belong to aye? Nay, verily I protest, with most sincere of heart, that yon intellectual property pertaining to Harry Potter, including its tender concepts and chattel, thus belong to that of Mistress Rowling, the story’s enchantress.

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Miss Brown was not as pleased as Severus had hoped. Here he was, offering up a new potion, a libido-enhancing potion, to compliment the male enhancement potion; it was something that should certainly sell very well, and yet she was looking more aggrieved than pleased. The source of his employer's testiness could have been partially due to the fact that Severus had informed her that the potion was Hermione's idea; however, it could also be because Severus mentioned to her that he would have Hermione help develop the potion at his flat instead of at The Lovely Lavender Company headquarters. A mention of five percent royalties to Hermione did not seem to improve her mood either.

“Don't tell me that you're jealous of Hermione,” Severus inferred.

“What?!?” yelled Lavender with a bit more force than she meant. “Why would I be jealous of her?” Miss Brown began to pace about her office as she barked, “WONKLE! Tea! Now!”

“Maybe because I am working with her on a potion without you. That you feel supplanted. I would think you'd be glad you'd have one less product in need of development requiring your precious time, freeing you up in order to work on other potions in time for the opening of Sirens' Secrets.” He surveyed her face for any sign that might confirm or counter his deduction.
"I just don't like the fact that you've been talking business with her behind my back without consulting me first," she snapped.

"As I mentioned before, Hermione was the one who pointed out that, in light of her own experience and perspective, maybe not all those witches will view a significant increase of their husband's libido as something to cheer about and may find the act of coitus with their spouse a more bothersome bit of prolonged drudgery to endure," Severus bit out, trying not to snarl at his boss. "Hermione is not the first witch to complain of such problems. I've had plenty of other witches before her compare their husband's carnal efforts to be on par with scrubbing cauldrons, some witches even saying the act itself is much like a scrub brush abrading an empty pot that hasn't had a fire lit under it for ages."

"You know, there are plenty of witches out there who are happy fucking their husbands, and are not so miserably mismatched in the bedroom," Lavender groused, sounding like a petulant child, as she poured herself a cup from the service Wonkle had discreetly brought in.

"True enough, and there are plenty of wizards who have the stamina of a bull, but that isn't stopping us from selling the male enhancement potion, and your argument should not stop us from developing an arousal potion," the Potions master countered. "I never said this potion was to be for females exclusively either, because it would work for wizards as well. I'm sure there are a few witches who would like to put their husbands in a more amorous mood at times, not just ready and hard like a stud for service."

His employer said nothing but continued to sip her tea.

Severus wondered what else was going on in her mind that would make her so hostile in light of progress.

"Whatever issues you have with Mrs. Weasley, I suggest you iron them out," he insisted. "When I'm gone, she will be Dobmeir's apprentice, and she will be underfoot everyday. However, if you place your faith in Dobmeir to work without your supervision, you won't be confined to the lab, since he is under no restrictions as I am, therefore leaving you free to work on other areas of your business to which you have been unable to give as much attention. But your paths will cross frequently, so whatever it is about her that abrades your nerves, you'd better deal with it before her apprenticeship begins."

The normally unflappable Miss Brown gave Severus a worried look before schooling her features. "I'm sorry, Severus. There has just been so much change going on lately. I guess I'm used to being involved from beginning to end of all aspects of all my products. I feel a little out of place that"
some aspects of the male enhancement potion, and now this libido potion, have been discussed and worked on without me there the whole time. I’m used to being in control of everything.”

Severus set down his cup of tea. “When I first became Head of Slytherin House, I had a great many things to do in addition to teaching Potions. Professor Dumbledore taught me that being able to delegate to the right people would allow me to be a better Head of House to my students. I had to learn to trust and utilize the Head Boy and Head Girl and the Slytherin Prefects. Just as Dumbledore could not do everything,” Severus said, and paused dramatically, rolling his eyes for effect as he continued with a sarcastic drawl, “despite his outward appearance that he could do and know everything, he delegated many thing to the Head of each House, and each Head of House delegated certain duties to free us up to tend to more important matters. As such, you must learn to delegate and decide over what you can give up control, and what you must attend to personally.”

Lavender chucked the other half of her uneaten biscuit in the fire. Sighing, she agreed, “You’re right, Severus. But I do wish you to leave the business of royalties to me. You didn't have to promise her five percent. And instead of having Hermione go shopping for materials, give me the list, as I can get them at wholesale and have Wonkle deliver them to your flat. The less paper trail Hermione leaves before she officially begins her apprenticeship, the better.”

“I didn't mention any royalties, nor promise her any for this potion. But since she was the one who originally came up with the idea on her own, without my prompting, it is only fair that she should have a share of the profits.” On the other matter, Severus could see the logic behind having Lavender provide the materials for the research and development phase.

Severus was almost certain he could hear Miss Brown grind her teeth, but it could have also been the sound of the floor creaking as well, as he shifted position in his seat.

“Just make sure that you don't inadvertently do any Potions brewing on your own, and she takes all her equipment home. Marf can deliver samples here,” she instructed, much to Severus’ chagrin as he felt it was beyond bloody obvious after so many years that he'd never do anything so foolish as to slip up so carelessly.

“I hope I can accomplish that simple task after years of restraining myself here in your labs. I wouldn't want to inadvertently slip up in my own home,” Severus uttered acerbically, ignoring the withering glare she gave him for being the target of his sarcasm. “Now if you will excuse me, I have to prepare for Mrs. Fudge's arrival.”

As a parting shot, in addition to having the last word, Lavender snipped at his back as he left her office, “Next time you go to the spa, you should have the elves trim your hair. You're getting a bad case of split ends.”
As much as it thrilled him to stick around and be the emotional whipping boy for his employer's irrationally foul mood, it was more prudent and enjoyable to prepare himself mentally for a long afternoon with a formidable chess partner and even more challenging conversational sparring with a fellow Slytherin.

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Hermione was a little disappointed that she didn't have to go shopping for materials, as indicated in Severus' letter to her, under his nom de guerre, but it was a relief. She had skipped her period and was stressed enough – until confirming with a simple charm that she was indeed not pregnant yet again – without having the additional task of hunting down and buying ingredients. The letter did contain a list of equipment to bring, and though she would have remembered to bring her mortar and pestle and a sieve, she would not have thought to bring her chinois. She fortunately had one, so she didn't have to go out and procure one.

Ron had gone out drinking and schmoozing the night before with Bascom Nettleton, so that gave her the chance to get everything together without him asking questions or trying to hump her in the kitchen again. She just hoped that when Ron made dinner for himself Thursday night, he would not wonder where a few of the cooking implements or some of the choice knives had gone. With a simple shrinking charm, Hermione was able to fit all the equipment into the inner pocket of her cloak and not alter the way it hung about her shoulders.

When Hermione arrived at Severus' flat, she greeted him with much more enthusiasm than the Monday prior. She was rested and did not have to endure any Trevor-induced catastrophes at her work that week. So far.

Severus served up a simple dinner that was ready when Hermione arrived. A kettle of fish chowder was slowly simmering on the stove, and a large loaf of crusty bread, fresh from the oven, rounded out the meal. It was simple yet hearty fare that would keep her full of energy for the night of work that lay ahead. They didn't dawdle as they supped, but chatted about what first they would need to do before beginning on the libido-enhancing potion.

Once dinner was finished, under Severus’ instruction, Hermione began preparing an anaphrodisiac tincture she could administer to herself and Severus, should they be overwhelmed by the effects of the potion they were working on. The reverse engineering of Ron's muscle-enhancing potion made it clear that antidotes should be prepared ahead of time, just in case. Severus wasn't sure if his table was durable enough for another bout of unrestrained rigorous shagging.

A mixture of mint, cilantro and finely chopped black licorice was macerated with plain vodka before being strained, and then the blood of an Arctic mongoose was added to the mixture. Severus had used a similar mixture as an antidote when he and Miss Brown were working on the male enhancement potion and both felt the effect of the vapors. Fairy Brandy was different from
Ashwinder eggs, but he was sure that this tincture would also make an adequate antidote for their research tonight. And if that failed, Miss Brown supplied a box of bezoars.

Once the antidote was complete, Hermione began halving and scooping out the seeds and jelly-like flesh of the passion fruit, straining the juice through the chinois to collect in a bowl below, leaving behind a sticky mash of seeds and pulp in the strainer. Next, under the direction of Severus, she went on to grind almonds, chop figs, crush dried rose petals, mince fresh rose petals, pulverize to powder dried pomegranate seeds, juice fresh pomegranates, and prepare a smattering of other ingredients that Severus thought might increase the effectiveness of the potion, starting with a base of passion fruit juice and Fairy Brandy.

With an array of prepared ingredients before them, Hermione and Severus began their experiment.

“First we should start with a mix of Fairy Brandy and passion fruit juice to feel the effects of the Blue Fairy Martini,” Severus began.

“What about the vodka, vermouth, and blueberry liqueur?” Hermione queried.

“The vodka adds nothing, since the Fairy Brandy already has alcohol in it. The vermouth was to sweeten the taste, and the blueberry liqueur may or may not affect it, but we can always research that later tonight if need be,” he explained.

“Since it had a quarter-shot, and a shot is twenty-five mL, a quarter-shot would be six-point-two-five mL. A teaspoon is five mL, so I would say start with one teaspoon?” She raised a questioning face to her mentor.

“That would be a good start. And how much passion fruit juice would you say your martini had?” he asked, encouraging her to continue.

“I would say it was a four- to five-ounce glass,” Hermione began recalling. “Subtract about one ounce for the Fairy Brandy, vermouth and blueberry liqueur combined, and two ounces for the vodka. So that would leave two to three ounces for the passion fruit juice, but since it was shaken and nicely chilled, I would say possibly up to an ounce of that was melted ice from the mixing process. So I would recommend starting with two ounces,” she concluded.

“Very well, begin.” Severus extended his arm out, indicating that she should proceed.
After measuring the Fairy Brandy and passion fruit juice into a small glass, Hermione held it up to the light. It was an unappetizing orange-brown color, as the Fairy Brandy had darkened the color of the fruit juice and given it an oxidized color resembling fruit that had started to turn bad.

“Well? Bottoms up,” said Severus, suppressing a chuckle, aware what would happen next. He would finally know what it was like to be on the other end of the master-apprentice relationship, remembering how Reginald Chuff made Severus drink all his own experiments first.

Hermione tipped the glass up to her lips and drained it in one go.

Watching her face carefully, Severus noticed the sudden dilation of the pupils, the warm rosy glow spreading across her cheeks, the change when her eyes suddenly became heavily lidded, and the way she began to regard Severus hungrily.

“What effects do you feel compared to the Blue Fairy Martini?” he asked, trying to remain impassive as Hermione slunk over towards him with a sly predatory smirk upon her lips.

“Not as tipsy,” she mused as she began toying with his buttons, “but just as aroused.” Boldly, she grabbed hold of Severus' zipper and pulled it down.

Before she could continue her seduction, Severus gently cupped her cheek and whispered silkily, “Close your eyes.”

When Hermione's eyes slipped shut and her lips parted ready for a kiss, Severus put a dropper full of the antidote into Hermione's mouth. With a sputter, she choked it down.

“Gah!” Hermione bent over and swore like Mundungus Fletcher. “I hate the taste of black licorice!” A violent shudder then suddenly shook Hermione to the core. “And that antidote is like being hit with an ice shower. What a way to kill the mood.”

“That was the point,” Severus reminded her. “We need to work on something small, potent, and not the color of troll vomit.” Looking at the bowl of remaining passion fruit juice, he suggested, “Perhaps if we reduced it through simmering, that might make it a smaller dose to handle.”

“The taste was fine, but the color is disgusting,” Hermione added. “Will cooking the juice change the flavor, color, or potency?”
“Only one way to find out.”

Hermione then measured out one cup of the juice and reduced it slowly in a pot she brought herself, simmering it down to one-half cup. With it reduced, she used half as much juice and the same amount of Fairy Brandy.

The color seemed to intensify with reduction, but the color was still unappetizing when mixed with the Fairy Brandy, which had a vibrant blue-green color.

“The flavor is a little more intense,” the lust-crazed witch began, “but I bet it still doesn't taste as good as your cock in my mouth right now.” Hermione whipped out her wand, and before Severus could disarm her, she dropped his pants with the intention of getting on her knees and performing fellatio right then and there.

The wizard who had once easily disarmed Gilderoy Lockhart in a duel, did not anticipate Hermione using her wand on him in such a sexually aggressive manner. Granted, it would have been fun to let her eagerly wrap her lips around his stirring cock, but this was a time for work, not play. Severus would have plenty of time to have Hermione test out how long the potion would last once they figured out potency, taste, color, texture and viscosity.

“Expelliarmus.” Severus hitched up his pants with one hand, while holding Hermione's wand and his wand in the other.

Once disarmed, Severus had to pin Hermione up against a wall to force another dose of antidote down her gullet, which was a little difficult considering she was trying to kiss him desperately.

While Hermione was easily overpowered by Severus’ height and strength, he wished he could use a binding spell, but alas, binding spells were among the many spells he was prohibited from using due to the Death Eater Decree. Severus’ old Potions master had used a binding spell on him plenty of times to make him sit or lie still while pouring the antidote down his throat.

Once again, Hermione protested at the taste of the antidote before finishing with another uncontrollable convulsion.

“I don't remember you being this rambunctious the night you showed up at my flat,” the Potions master noted bemusedly. “And I don't think you were quite as frisky with your husband in such a
public space at the Grand Royal Supper Club.”

Grabbing a napkin to dab the drop of antidote that didn't make it into her mouth, Hermione replied with a scowl upon remembering that night, “First of all, you said this potion would amplify feelings one already has. I am far, far more attracted to you than I am to my own husband. Second, being rejected by Ron was not exactly an antidote, but certainly kicked down my attraction to him afterwards. Third,” she continued to tick off possible reasons why she was more restrained that night, “running into that twat, Alan, certainly put a bit of a damper on my mood, crushing some of the potency even more.”

“Alan?”

“The berk from the Three Broomsticks, who came on to me after Ron left, and that Viktor had to rescue me from.”

Severus acknowledged that he now recalled the incident, and signaled for her to continue.

“Fourth, I was nervous as hell when I came over that night. Nervousness, you have mentioned before, can hinder libido. And last, I think the vodka, vermouth or blueberry liqueur, or a combination of them, lessens the effect. It also could be that we have done the deed and therefore I feel far less inhibition in terms of being sexually assertive,” Hermione surmised. “Shall I try a Blue Fairy Martini to see if the effect is the same as just the passion fruit juice and Fairy Brandy alone?”

“It's the only way to be sure,” he agreed.

Severus had restocked his bar and had all the necessary ingredients on hand should they need to make a proper Blue Fairy Martini as part of the potion testing process.

After closely recreating the cocktail, Hermione placed a bluebell flame atop of the concoction.

“You didn't mention a bluebell flame,” Severus said, a bit shortly.

“Sorry,” Hermione apologized meekly. “There were many things that night I have tried to put out of my head. It slipped my mind. Will it affect anything except burn off alcohol?”
Severus wondered. “We’ll try it with the bluebell flame and then without.”

As the night wore on, small variations were tried. The first variation discovered was that the bluebell flame did lessen the effect of the Fairy Brandy, which was good news, as Fairy Brandy was an expensive ingredient so less would be needed to be effective in the final potion. Hermione was certainly aroused, but much more in control of her senses and her hands. Another variation resulted in the discovery that the blueberry liqueur made Hermione feel more energized, which made it all the more difficult for Severus to pin Hermione down to give her another dose of the antidote. After each Blue Fairy Martini variation, Hermione swallowed a vial of Sobering Potion so that each new trial resulted in observations based on a clean and sober test subject.

Eventually, they had worked out a routine where – before she took the next trial potion – Hermione would bind herself to a chair, leaving one hand free and then handing her wand over to Severus. The Potions master would then hand her the latest test batch, get a verbal comment on her present state of mind and level of arousal, give her the antidote, and then give her back her wand to free herself before preparing the next batch. It was tiresome and made the process go slower than Severus would have preferred, but he had to be vigilant in his actions so he could truthfully answer he had not engaged in brewing any potions or confess anything illegal, when subjected to another round of Veritaserum under Moody's supervision at his weekly parole meeting.

By the end of the night they had figured out that powdered pomegranate seeds and fresh pomegranate juice were just as effective as the blueberry liqueur in terms in increasing energy, and made the mixture a more appetizing rosy color instead of the weird blue-gray color produced by mixing the blueberry liqueur with the orange-colored passion fruit juice. Almonds made the mixture feel gritty in the mouth and added nothing in terms of arousal or taste, and coriander did invoke more lustful feelings, but ruined the taste. The powdered hooves of the Mooncalf made Hermione want to dance, and the dried tongue of a turtle dove made Hermione sing about her desires. It was the addition of a pinch of powdered mother of pearl that Severus thought they might have come across something really interesting and unique. The ingredient was used in some love potions, so he wanted to see what would happen if it was used in an arousal potion.

When Hermione drank the potion containing Fairy Brandy, fresh pomegranate juice, reduced passion fruit juice and the powdered mother of pearl, she displayed the expected dilated pupils, heavy-lidded eyes, and licking of lips. What Severus did not expect was that there was an alluring glow about Hermione that he was having a hard time to resist. Each breath Hermione drew pulled his eyes to her chest, bound tightly under her own spell. Her skin took on a lustrous color that made Severus want to stroke her skin longingly. Her eyes took on a positively hypnotic quality about them. Upon realizing that the potion not only was affecting Hermione, but him as well, Severus quickly handed the object of his growing desire a vial of antidote before he would succumb as well.

“Oops, I seemed to have dropped it,” Hermione purred with false sincerity as she intentionally let
Severus didn't react to the shattering of the glass vial on the floor.

The voice that came out of Hermione seemed to place a fog over Severus' mind. All he could think about was holding Hermione in his arms and making love to her until his last breath escaped him.

“Hand me my wand, Severus,” she bid him.

Severus was about to do as she commanded when he suddenly shook his head violently in order to help break this lull he had fallen into. With all his fortitude, he forced his mind back to the present: he grabbed another dose of antidote and poured it down Hermione's throat before she could speak again.

Once the antidote took effect, Severus felt the potion's power lose hold over him.

Hermione came back to her senses as well with a rather stunned look on her face that bordered on bewilderment.

“Whoa. That was unexpected,” she exclaimed. “Did the potion affect you, or was I imagining that?”

“You were not imagining that. That is a rarity for a potion to affect people other than those who took it themselves.” The shaken Potions master was surprised that the mother of pearl would react in such a way with the ingredients. When it was included in love potions, it never created an effect in anyone but the imbiber.

This was something revolutionary and new; then again, it may not be new, but considered so dangerous as to have been buried away in ancient books, hidden from witches and wizards who would use such knowledge carelessly. One could claim that love potions were currently being hawked at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, much to Severus' chagrin. Also, one could counter that the Dark Lord was the issue from a witch who had recklessly used a love potion on a Muggle, resulting in a twisted orphaned child who rose to power to use magic wantonly and without conscience.

Hermione understood the importance of Severus' cautiousness. He looked a bit frightened by the
power of the potion they had created and the fact he’d almost succumbed to it, but there was a hint of excitement in his face that he discovered something he had never read about before.

“How was this different from previous batches?” he queried, looking for any change from previous variations, besides his own affects.

Trying to find the words, Hermione began, “Everything was the same as in the last previous batch, but...” She paused, closing her eyes to recollect that fleeting and indescribable feeling that was different this time. “When I took the previous potions, as much as I was turned on and aroused, I was aware that you could not fall for my attempts to seduce you, try as I might and hoped, before you gave me the antidote. But with this latest batch, I felt more confident. It was as if you couldn't resist me and I knew you were enthralled.”

There was a moment of silence while both thought of the implications of such a potion, before Severus finally remembered to give Hermione her wand back to free herself.

“If this potion only amplified feelings that are already felt by the imbiber, would the addition of mother of pearl also only affect those who are already attracted to the imbiber?” she asked, wondering the same thing Severus was contemplating. “And if the amount we used was this incredibly potent, perhaps the use of a much smaller portion of the mother of pearl should be used instead.”

Severus considered a trial using himself, Draco, and Ginny in the room. If Ginny drank it and only Draco was affected, it would confirm Hermione's hypothesis.

Now free from her own bindings, Hermione inspected the jar of powdered mother of pearl. “This doesn't say where this was harvested from or what type of oysters,” she noted with disappointment. Curious, Hermione had a feeling she might be able to determine its origins.

After cleaning her cauldron and drying it, she took a pinch of the powdered mother of pearl, added some white vinegar and brought it to a slow simmer.

Severus watched quietly, noting the steps Hermione was taking to test the ingredient using the addition of some dried whole red rose petals they hadn't crushed earlier that night. Hermione extinguished the flame under her cauldron and dipped a few rose petals in the cooling liquid before laying them out on the table for inspection.
“I thought so!” the triumphant witch exclaimed. “See how the iridescence breaks up into individual colors, as light through a prism?” Severus leaned the table over to observe the phenomenon Hermione was describing. “If this was regular mother of pearl, it would not do this; the iridescence would not break into a rainbow pattern. This particular mother of pearl does break into a rainbow prism, which means this is mother of pearl harvested off the Italian island of Capri.”

Amazed she was able to discern the origins of this particular mother of pearl, Severus asked, “How were you able to discern the specific locale of this mother of pearl?”

Hermione gave Severus a small smirk of her own before explaining, “Because, this is the mother of pearl the twins use in their love potion. And I know this because I’m the one that told the twins about the potency of this particular mother of pearl.”

She sat back down in her chair before continuing. “Ron and I went on a two-week honeymoon to Italy. While there, I wanted to go to Capri and see the Sirens off the coast – while wearing ear protection, of course. So while we were in Capri, we ate at this little restaurant owned by a wizard who harvests the oysters from the same bed that the Sirens eat from. And on the cliffs above the oyster beds is a grove of limes, from which the blossoms of limes drift into the sea. After a dinner of the Sirens’ oysters and lime-ade perfumed with lime blossoms, you can imagine the night I had afterwards.” Hermione trailed off, not bothering to elaborate on the heightened amorous feelings they experienced, even if the sex was still mediocre.

Severus sat heavily down in his chair while digesting the implications of mother of pearl gathered from the same oysters the Sirens ate from, as well as the addition of a lime grove next to the oyster bed's locale. He remembered the use of lime blossoms for lust when he was still experimenting for the male enhancement potion. “But how did you know how to test it?” he queried. “When I was working there years ago, there was only one type of mother of pearl shipped in at the time.”

“See, after ingesting the oysters and feeling its aphrodesial effects, I asked the restaurant owner about them. He proceeded to tell me about the magical properties of the oysters – and how they are very popular with honeymooning couples – and the mother of pearl from these oysters. He sold a few of the shells to some local women who ground up the mother of pearl into beauty powders, but not enough to use up all the shells he piled up. So, knowing the twins use mother of pearl in their love potions, I brought some shells home and gave them to the twins; they were so happy with the results they opened up an exclusive trade with the restaurant owner, buying up all his shells. The twins told me how to test for this particular mother of pearl's purity to compare with regular mother of pearl, as the owner showed them when they went to Italy to broker the deal. So when a box of this comes through, I use vinegar and rose petals and watch for the prismatic reaction to ensure it actually is Caprese mother of pearl.

“But if the twins have an exclusivity of this ingredient, how did you get some of it?” Hermione asked.
Both their faces alighted upon the same thought.

“Miss Brown and her 'secret partners,’ no doubt,” he drawled, referring to how his employer referred to the twins when first discussing her business arrangement with them.

“The twins told me Caprese mother of pearl costs twice as much, but is eight times as potent as regular mother of pearl.” Hermione got up and looked at the measuring spoons she used. “We used a pinch of this for that one dose.” Thumbing through her measuring spoons, she noted her smallest measuring spoon was a smidgen, which was half of a pinch.

“Do you have a hint or fleck-sized spoon?” she admitted, holding up her rudimentary measuring set.

“Unfortunately no, but you can make the batch four times larger and use your smidgen.”

As Hermione mixed up this latest batch, she wondered aloud, “Will you be trying any of the potions or am I the only guinea pig for tonight? We should see if it will work on males as equally as females... just to be sure,” she assured him with mock sincerity.

Severus glared as Hermione while letting a knowing smile spread across his lips. “I don't know if that would be wise. I don't know if you're up to resisting my charms even without the addition of a potion.”

Glancing at the clock on the wall, he noted the time and saw that it was still early enough that if they both were lost in the enchantment of the potion, he would get his lover home before midnight. She would be rested enough to make it into work early, considering Hermione was expecting the weekly shipment of boomslang tomorrow.

Hermione made up a quadruple batch using a dosage one-eighth the strength.

“You know, maybe as with the male enhancement potion, we should try various doses of mother of pearl, should this dosage prove to be negligible,” the budding apprentice suggested.

“Let's see how potent this batch is before committing to further testing,” Severus replied.
Upon Hermione draining the vial, she displayed the expected symptoms, and while there was a slight change in the appearance of Hermione's skin and eyes, it was negligible. Severus did feel a small lull from the sound of Hermione's voice, but not enough that he would consider it significant.

To test the potion’s effects, should the imbiber kiss the object of his or her affections, Severus let Hermione kiss him. As their mouths met and her tongue swept over his, he discerned the remnants of the potion mixed with Hermione's natural taste; he let what little he ingested himself through their kiss begin to infuse his senses.

Hermione moaned with release, now that her efforts to kiss Severus all evening were no longer being denied. Clutching him more urgently to her, she blindly ripped the front of his shirt open, the sound of buttons skittering across the floor unheard under the muffle of frantic pants. Neither could say anything coherent as the potion took them both.

Feeling the insistence of his own potion-induced lust, Severus picked up Hermione and sat her on the edge of the counter, hitching her skirt up in the process.

“Now,” she gasped, in between devouring Severus' neck and his shoulder.

And while the reaction was not as instantaneous at the male enhancement potion, the urge to bury himself was no less dire as that moment.

Finding Hermione's knickers to be a hindrance, he was torn between shoving them aside or parting from Hermione momentarily to remove them. The decision was removed from him when Hermione wordlessly spelled them away and then latched her legs around Severus' hips as he quickly undid his trousers.

With one thrust, Severus sank himself into Hermione to the hilt. Her back arched at the sudden and welcome intrusion, while trying to keep her hips tucked under while sitting on the edge of the counter to allow for maximum penetration. Her leg moved in time with Severus' hips, her heels digging into his flanks, encouraging him, spreading herself as wide open as possible.

Both grunted and chanted their wordless songs of pleasure, their movements egged on by the sounds they elicited by the other.

There was something different about this coupling for both of them besides the potion. There was a
lack of reservation from either. Severus felt himself lost in a strange swelling he felt rise from his chest, making him thrust each time with a building earnest intensity. Feeling vulnerable, he buried his face into Hermione's shoulder, should she open her eyes and see his face truly unmasked.

Hermione was experiencing an intensity of her own, feeling uninhibited with her own feelings. As Severus made love to her as if he was pouring his own soul into her, a fleeting thought came to her mind, and it was only the shock of it that kept her from saying it aloud.

’If I only married you instead of Ron...’

She screamed with pleasure to mask her own voice from betraying her own subconscious thoughts aloud. Her wail prompted Severus to orgasm and whimper as he emptied himself while buried deeply inside her.

When Severus finally lifted his head from her shoulder, she wasn't sure if it was the potion affecting her or him, but there was something in Severus' eyes that was unguarded for a transient moment before his usual schooled features covered them up like a shroud.

After removing himself from her, Severus helped Hermione down and they began dressing. Hermione crossed the room to retrieve her knickers that she had spelled away.

There was a slight awkward silence that Severus broke when he asked, “Do you still feel the effects of the potion?”

“No, it seems that once we...” ’Made love?’ They had both thought of it as making love, but never dared call it that before. “… we finished, the effects of the potion greatly waned. I'm still feeling aroused, but the desire to... to couple is not as insistent.”

Both were still catching their breath when Hermione asked, “Are there any ingredients in this that are also included in Veritaserum? I was feeling quite...” Hermione swallowed thickly. “Uninhibited in my thoughts and feelings.”

Severus looked at her warily, and he knew she was feeling the same effects from the potion as he was at the time. As a Potions master teaching an apprentice, one must be as honest as possible when sharing observations, as uncomfortable as those observations were to Severus.
“I too felt a certain...” Severus trailed off and hoped Hermione didn't notice the slight shaking in his hands. “A certain unguardedness.”

She could see the way that the potion unnerved Severus. As they were lovers experimenting with a potion that could cause one to say things that one normally would never deign to say aloud, much less admit consciously, Hermione decided to release Severus from future burdens.

“Then let us agree that anything said under the influence of the potion is not to be taken as anything more than things said under abnormal circumstances,” she said.

He was glad that Hermione could comprehend the gravity of things said under the influence of the potion, even deeply emotional and provocative statements that were true, and that she was prepared to ignore them.

Hermione glanced at the clock, noting the time. “I suppose I should clean up and get going home.”

Marf assisted Hermione in the bottling of the rest of the potion test batches Severus thought worthy for Miss Brown to sample for herself for comparison. Once tubes were labeled and her equipment was cleaned, shrunk, and placed in the pocket of her cloak, Hermione left the kitchen. She found Severus lost in thought on the settee as he stared at the crackling fire.

When she joined him on the couch, Severus announced distractedly, “We should try the potion at stronger doses than this. The change in you from my perspective was nominal. Next time we should try a pinch, the original measurement as before, and the various doses in between that and the fleck-sized dose.”

Hermione wanted to ask if that would be safe, considering how overwhelming the original pinch-sized dose was and how overpowered both felt with the smallest of doses of a fleck.

“We should also do a comparison, together with and without the mother of pearl. Possibly sell it with and without,” Hermione added.

“That's for Miss Brown to decide, but I will forward your suggestion to her.” He would suggest it as his own idea, since he had been thinking the same thing, and his employer seemed to be hostile towards ideas that originated from Hermione.
They sat for a while in quiet contemplation of the fire, holding hands, lost in their own thoughts. When the clock chimed eleven, Hermione rose and Severus placed her cloak about her shoulders.

As they embraced, Severus whispered huskily, “Can you come this weekend?”

Hermione shook her head slowly, her face filled with sadness and longing. She resembled a tragic heroine in a pre-Raphaelite painting with her long hair undone.

“I can't,” she sighed ruefully. “There is a game Saturday. And Sunday there is a family event.”

Severus suddenly remembered how Molly went on the night before about the upcoming Weasley clan gathering when she came to visit “Eduardo” and suppressed a shudder.

They stood, continuing to embrace each other, unable to let go. “And next weekend is...” Hermione started crying silently, her body heaving as she tried to suppress her sobs.

Severus tipped up her chin to look at her. “What?” he gently coaxed her.

“It's my birthday,” she choked out. “Twenty-four and my life is nothing as I imagined it.”

Severus rocked her, empathizing with Hermione as he soothed his distraught lover.

“Life is what happens along the way while we were making plans,” he said, mimicking the same words and tone Albus had used when he would catch Severus wallowing in a pit of self pity. “Sometimes it takes a little longer for some to find their path in life.” He was forty-three and was hoping to finally be on a path of his own choosing before he turned forty-four.

Hermione hated her birthdays. It was not just that she felt as if she was still stuck between adolescence and adulthood. When she was still a child attending Muggle schools, she didn't have many friends, being slightly isolated as the swotty bookworm. In addition, at the beginning of the school year, few enough people knew her to bother celebrating or knowing about her September 19 birthday. Some years, the few friends she did have moved away during the summer. She silently envied those whose birthdays fell in the spring, as they had developed friendships during the school year and usually had the best and largest parties, if she was even invited.
Attending Hogwarts and becoming friends with Harry and Ron assured her that a few dear friends always remembered her birthday, even if it did fall at the beginning of the school year. And since joining the Weasley clan, things had not changed much. Molly had a policy of not throwing birthday parties for her in-laws, only the blood relations, which – considering the size the Weasley clan had expanded to – made perfect financial sense. But still, a melancholy feeling always haunted Hermione regarding her birthdays. She knew she should be grateful she hadn’t had birthdays as a child that were as horrible as what Harry had experienced, but it still didn't take away the lingering feelings imprinted upon her as a child.

“I suppose I should view this as the year that everything could change for me and the chance for new beginnings,” she said, trying to buck up her own spirits. “An apprenticeship on the way. And despite everything else, I am much happier now than I was last year.” She squeezed Severus a little tighter to let him know he was the source of her joy.

That swelling in Severus’ chest that had unnerved him while under the potion's influence returned. It made his head feel a little light and his heart a little elated.

“You should go so you can get a good night's rest,” Severus coaxed her. If she stayed much longer and overslept again, missing the chance to pilfer some boomslang, they’d both kick themselves afterwards.

“Monday, then.”

“Monday,” he replied before she slipped from his arms and reluctantly through the door and into the night.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 55 A/N: A chinois is a conical type of fine mesh sieve that includes a wooden pestle for straining and pressing food though. It can also be called a food mill.

There are several foods that are associated with the reduction of libido, usually involving the slow suppression of testosterone levels, but also folklore and bad science. Here is a list of eleven foods, which include mint, black licorice and cilantro: http://www.11points.com/Food-Drink/11_Foods_That_Just_Might_Kill_Your_Sex_Drive

Some of you, who remember Chapter Three, might remember Ginny being chained up spread-eagle and surmise that Draco used a binding charm on Ginny, but alas, he did not. Just good old-fashioned man-handling her into manacles. So just in case you thought I might be inconsistent on that... And yes, the Ministry does allow the Death
Eaters to still use *Expelliarmus* as a matter of simple self-defense.

My measurements for this fic: A pinch is 1/16th of a teaspoon. A smidgen is 1/32nd. A hint is 1/64th. A fleck is 1/128th of a teaspoon, which is one-eighth of a pinch.
Ron's game passed as a blur to Hermione. She sat there and cheered dutifully in the right spots using the cues of the crowd around her to guide her, but her mind was elsewhere. All she could do was relive in her mind the feelings experienced under the influence of the potion. Thoughts and feelings she was too scared to even consciously acknowledge had bubbled forth during her coupling with Severus.

Severus had been affected by the potion, as she’d noticed changes in him, and she kept recalling time and time again under the September sun the naked expression of what might be considered love on his face. He had openly looked at her with lust, desire, friendship, admiration and even amusement before, but the fleeting moment of what looked like love had crossed Severus' face. It was this look that made Hermione wonder if this potion did more than amplify feelings of arousal. Or was it that both she and Severus were using their physical attractions for one another as a mask for the growing love between each other?

Hermione had already admitted to herself she had fallen in love with Severus, although she would never say it aloud to him. Had he fallen in love with her as well? There were brief moments as if they behaved as a couple in love, but there was always a certain amount of reservation from Severus that made Hermione realize long ago she could never expect him to declare his love for her, if he felt the same way. And she accepted this arrangement.
A Sunday afternoon spent at the Burrow was yet another day Hermione spent going through the motions of life without engaging herself in the moment of her surroundings. One of the Weasley grandchildren was having their birthday, and Hermione didn't even remember to buy a present for her nephew until her husband asked what they were going to give him. A quick trip to Diagon Alley before they left corrected the oversight.

Ron made no mention of Hermione's forgetfulness, as it was uncharacteristic of her to forget such things, usually being on top of the obligations of family.

“So do you want to make another trip to Flourish and Blotts for your birthday?” Ron prompted her.

“Sorry, what?” Hermione replied, her mind lost in memories of time spent with Severus and their recent Potions work.

“Earth to Hermione,” Ron said slightly annoyed. “And you say I never listen to you.”

“My mind was on work,” Hermione truthfully confessed, remembering with disappointment that no shipment of boomslang came into work that Friday, despite her efforts to arrive there at six-thirty in the morning.


As much as the promise of new books usually improved Hermione's mood, the complete lack of effort from Ron to attempt to get her something different, despite his terrible track record for coming up with ideas for presents, annoyed her. At least when Severus gave her one of his books, it was given with great consideration and thought, and with the knowledge that he was giving up one of his own treasures, as if giving a little piece of himself. Hermione and Severus both viewed books as if they were friends to be cherished and parted with great reluctance.

“I guess,” she acquiesced. “Or maybe a day at the spa.” She was ready to admit she didn't care anymore.

“Oh, Ginny's taking you to the spa this Saturday for your birthday,” he replied brightly. “I'll be at a game abroad, so you'd have Saturday free anyway. She says you're really going to look forward to the treat she has in store for you. Some sort of full body treatment, she said. Or if you want to go to that place, Madame Maurelle Mandel's.” It seemed as though it pained Ron to reluctantly suggest...
the place. “I mean, if you really like the type of dresses they sell there,” he added begrudgingly while gritting his teeth. A hint of a sneer disturbed the smooth line of his upper lip.

Hermione had a feeling Ginny put him up to putting forth that suggestion, since he averted his eyes when he mentioned the place.

As much as she could have given up and tell Ron that some books were fine as a present, a small and petty part of Hermione wanted to poke at Ron’s sore spot out of spite. “Why, Ron, dress shopping sounds like it would be fun. I think that would be a lovely birthday present. Thank you.” To rub it in, she stood up on her toes and gave Ron a kiss on the cheek to show her “gratitude” for the suggestion and offer.

“Oh,” Ron added, “Bascom wants me to go with him to some broom convention in Italy after the game Saturday and be there Sunday to introduce me to the press, so I won’t be back until late Sunday. You going to be all right on your birthday weekend without me around?”

“We have dinner Friday night with my parents,” Hermione assured him. “That's fine, don't worry. Go and have fun.” A weekend in a foreign country did sound like it would have been a fine birthday present, but she knew Ron would be busy conducting business with Bascom. Considering how uncomfortable Mr. Nettleton had made her feel the last time they crossed paths, and the way he undressed her with his eyes publicly, she was happy to let Ron have Bascom all to himself. “I have chores to catch up on and errands to run.”

Fleur and Molly were busy playing co-hostesses, running back and forth to the kitchen while periodically sitting down to eat for a while. The party was originally planned to be at Bill and Fleur's home, but a recent infestation of aggressive brownies that had taken residence in a rapidly growing patch of blacksnare brambles caused the party to be relocated. Fleur had tried to get rid of the brownies herself, but it was a job larger than even a witch of her talents could do, especially with the demands of five children.

During dinner, Philippe – Bill and Fleur's second oldest child, who was turning four – got to sit in the place of prominence at the head of the table by asking to sit in his grandfather's lap. The other children also sat by their grandfather and the birthday boy, since all the balloons and decorations were over at that end of the table. This left the adults to occupy the other end of the table, where the twins discussed in quiet tones their latest business venture, using euphemisms should there be a wayward child lurking beneath the table.

“How's that apprenticeship position coming along,” Fred asked Hermione.
“Still contingent upon some unknown factors,” she answered honestly.

“I know how that goes. Even our silent partner seems to have some things waiting upon some unspecified contingencies as well.”

Hermione knew very well to whom the twins were referring. She could have said that Albert Dobmeir, her Potions master, would be working for Lavender Brown, so in some respects they were all working with the same person. However, she didn't want to say anything until after the fluxweed was procured and the Polyjuice Potion was already brewing with certainty of completion. She wondered if the fluxweed was the contingency the business mogul witch was referring to when talking with the twins, but she didn't want to presume.

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In order to see if the arousal potion, with the full pinch of Caprese mother of pearl, was just as effective on men as on women, Severus took the potion Monday night.

Hermione had bound him to the chair and plugged her ears, after Severus' report about her own voice under the potion being quite hypnotic.

It had been a long time since Severus had been rendered immobile in the way Hermione had bound him, and he could feel the fear building inside of himself. He hid his fear, as being a master of Occlumency meant mastering one's emotions, but the sensation brought back memories of being temporarily bound and hexed by Lucius that time that resulted in him winding up in the Hogwarts infirmary for a while. Severus remembered he was in the presence of Hermione, who would never harm him. He was safe with her.

She poured the elixir into Severus' waiting mouth, unaware of the reeling panic Severus was mentally talking himself down from. Hermione admired the rosy iridescent color of the mixture as it drained along the sides of the glass.

Severus rolled his head back languidly, exposing his neck. All fear had now left his body, replaced with growing ardor.

Hermione could feel the effects of the potion herself. Severus' skin took on an enticing quality. She wanted to kiss his neck with long and possessive kisses.

Her hand held the antidote, but it was forgotten, placed on the table so she could caress his skin with both hands. Severus caught her eyes in his own and Hermione felt lost in them, their blackness
calling to her.

“I need you,” were the words she read from his lips.

Stroking his hair, she felt his breath upon her cheek as she kissed his temples, trailing over his eyelids, down his nose, and closer to his mouth.

Severus' eyes were heavy with desire, begging her to release him from his bounds so he could take her – despite him saying no words. She was ready to kiss his mouth when, out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the antidote on the table. The vial was on its side with the liquid dripping across the table top and onto the floor.

Hermione suddenly regained her senses with considerable effort. Rushing over to the table and away from Severus, she grabbed another vial of the antidote that was ready and, while avoiding eye contact with Severus, poured it into his mouth.

Severus shook violently as the antidote countered the potion's effect. He nodded at Hermione that it was safe for her to remove her ear plugs.

Releasing him from his bounds, Hermione said with awe, “That potion makes you quite irresistible. If I had not noticed the antidote dripping onto the floor, I probably would have kissed you and then...”

Both were curious as to how the sex might be while under the enchantment of this particular strength potion, but they still had some experimentation to conduct before they could relax and play around.

Severus marveled at the way the potion had made him feel. He had felt like he was a sex god and Hermione could not refuse him. Though she ultimately had – barely – it was due largely in part to her own willpower, just as his own willpower had prevented him from succumbing to Hermione's charms under the same potion strength.

'**Irresistible. That's the perfect name for it,**' Severus noted to himself.

On Saturday, Ginny had come over to visit Draco. The three of them conducted the experiment where Ginny partook of the potion with the full pinch of mother of pearl. And while Severus noted
with detached objectivity that Ginny did seem to appear slightly more attractive, he was not drawn
to her any more than before, nor her to him. Draco, on the other hand, had become completely
overwhelmed, and the two young lovers began to ravage each other without noticing the lingering
presence of Severus in the room. He excused himself wordlessly, as they would not have even
noticed if the world fell down around them.

Draco gave him a report afterwards that Ginny's kiss imparted some of the potions effects to him to
a much lesser degree, as expected. The full effect of the potion seemed to have lasted a little over
two hours, which was somewhat different from Hermione's report that the effect waned greatly
after coupling with a smaller dose of the integral ingredient. It could be the amount of Caprese
mother of pearl extended the effects of the potion. It would be something to test out without the
antidote to shorten the observable effects.

“Ginny said the potion lasts for two hours. Considering Miss Brown has decided to go with the
sixty-six brewed-hours version of the Male Enhancement potion, which lasts two hours as well,
maybe women will need a couple hours in order to find the fortitude to remain enamored of their
husbands' interests,” he admitted, thinking of the length of time both potions would remain
effective if sold as a pair, packaged as a “Romantic Evening” enhancement.

Severus did not elaborate regarding his declaration of his need for Hermione that it was more of a
confession of his heart than his loins.

Hermione had agreed that nothing would be taken seriously while taken under the potion's power,
but he still found it a disquieting feeling to lay his emotions so openly to another.

As the evening wore on, this time it was Severus who was bound to the chair trying the potions
with various levels of Caprese mother of pearl added and afterwards noting the effects, with
Hermione taking down his remarks on parchment paper and noting her own observations. They
had tried the strongest dose at the beginning of the evening and worked backwards towards weaker
doses, until Hermione gave him the weakest dose – the same one Hermione and Severus had both
tried during their last session of lovemaking the week before.

The back and forth between consuming concupiscence and the abrupt halting of his libido with the
frigid antidote was exhausting to Severus.

“Did you find yourself tired after all this potions testing last week?” he asked, hoping it wasn't a
sign he was getting old.

“Yes, I slept like the dead Thursday night,” she informed him.
“You didn't seem that tired by the end of the night.”

“I was excited to finally get around to doing some Potions work that didn't involve testing ingredients. Something that I can actually apply towards my apprenticeship, but I was dog-tired by the end of the night, now that I think about it,” Hermione recalled.

They ended their Monday night earlier than usual. After cleaning up, Hermione tucked Severus into his bed, noticing how he’d nearly fallen asleep at the kitchen table and definitely had drifted off while partially reclined on the settee. She undressed him and placed a loving kiss upon his temple before letting herself out and locking the door.

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It was Tuesday night, and once again it was time for the trotting out of Hermione's and Ron's grievances with each other with a Muggle playing referee. Their marriage counselor, James Hoover, had noticed the increase in Ron's aggression and the shortening of his temper.

James even remarked, “Ron, I'm quite concerned about this change in behavior since you have begun taking these drugs—”

“Wizards don't do drugs like Muggles,” Ron interrupted. “Us wizards can control ourselves, unlike some of those Muggles I see in dirty alleys out in London and the needles sticking out of their arms. We take potions, and we are able to control ourselves.”

Hermione wanted to crawl off into a hole at that moment. Ron sounded like he was half a step away from being a full-fledged Death Eater to her ears.

“That's not true, Ron,” Hermione retorted. “I've seen some witches and wizards lost in the stupor of some potion hoping to forget the dire situation they are in, seeking an escape.”

“Yeah, but those were Death Eaters living 'al fresco' and they're all dead now,” her husband said, casually throwing the argument back in her face.

“Wait, what?” James interjected, lost on the finer points of Ron's innuendos.

Hermione turned to James to explain how many Death Eaters after the war had lost all their money,
and many had been ejected from their residence after it was seized by the Ministry. In the aftermath, many Death Eaters were homeless, living outdoors and sheltered in alcoves and back alleys until taking poison to end their lives, or taking potions to obscure their bleak reality until wasting away.

James looked horrified that the general wizarding population had such a blatant disregard for life and their fellows’ well-being, despite their being criminals.

“Well, they killed enough witches and wizards – pure-blood, half-blood and Muggleborn – as well as Muggles, that they got what they deserved,” Ron threw out as if it justified their treatment that they were all the same. “Besides, I don't see you Muggles doing much to deal with all those drug users I see out in the Muggle world.”

“We do,” James informed him. “We have laws regarding the manufacture, distribution and consumption of certain drugs, and medical and government programs to help those get help to break free of their addiction.”

“Yeah, well, the rest of us normal witches and wizards don't have a problem.” Ron folded his arms with a certain finality. He clearly wasn't open to any debate that might inform him of the other side's point of view or acknowledge facts.

“Oh, and love potions have never, in the entirety of wizarding history, ever been abused?” Hermione asked rhetorically.

“There is such a thing as love potions that actually exist?” James asked, shocked.

“Yes, James. And Voldemort,” she paused to let the effect of that name wash over Ron, “he was born because his inbred mother used a love potion to seduce and marry a Muggle who left her once the potion wore off. And nothing bad ever happened from that,” she announced sarcastically.

Ron glared at her. “That's because he was a Muggle and didn't understand anything about our wizarding world. Maybe if you were raised in our world you'd understand these things better.”

Hermione felt a chill race down her spine as her back became ramrod straight. “You're a bigot, Ron. I can't believe that after all we went through, and the bias I fought as a Muggle-born, that you would be so callous as to say these things.” She fought the tears that were building behind her eyes.
“Ron,” James stepped in, “do you realize how hurtful your attitude is regarding Hermione's background? You say you have nothing against Muggle-borns, but then you say that if she grew up in 'your' world that she'd understand. Do you comprehend how your choice of words seems contradictory and even hurtful? Hermione has fought against this sort of bias for years within your community, and yet you say these things? Do you see?”

“What's hurtful about the truth?” Ron said.

Hermione could see that Ron's logic had shrunk with the continued use of this muscle-enhancing potion and was now near non-existent. It could have been that his sense of logic was only limited to the chess board and he’d never applied it in any other part of his life, but to Hermione it seemed that Ron was becoming more and more irrational.

“If I'm so fucking clueless about 'our' world,” she asked, using exaggerated air quotes while over-enunciating the choice of her pronoun, “then why the hell did you ask me to marry you?”

“Because my mum told me to!” Ron yelled back.

Hermione was stunned and felt the breath in her chest freeze in place. But before the tears came, her brain latched on to an earlier thread of the conversation. “Well, that truth certainly fucking hurts, you spineless git.”

Determining that this session was over, Hermione Accio’ed her wand and bolted for the door before Ron could see her cry.

James called out to her as she ran to the rear exit that James reserved for his wizarding clients. As he reached the threshold, Hermione Apparated away; the only sound was a pop from the vacuum of space she left behind.

“I don't know why we even bother coming,” Ron muttered, sounding more angry than defeated.

James never suggested divorce for any of this clients unless there was some abuse involved – physical, emotional or mental – but Mr. Weasley's admission of his reasons for proposing certainly changed the dynamics of their marriage and the reasons why they were still together. Given the lack of counseling progress and this latest confession, James Hoover didn't think even he could save this marriage. If it could not be saved, he would try and pave the way for as smooth and clean a separation as possible.
Hermione was glad Ron didn't come home Tuesday night, and she really didn't care that he didn't come home Wednesday either. If they weren't avoiding each other or fucking, they usually were fighting. The time apart from Ron was a relief. She could relax in her own home without being on edge that she would be pounced upon by either Ron's erection or his snide comments. It certainly was a relief she didn't have to go to the market in the middle of the week to restock the cupboard, as Ron's appetite was still in high gear as he continued to gain muscle.

A check of the cupboard showed that nearly all his muscle-enhancing potion was gone, which meant he either hadn't restocked, or he came home while Hermione was asleep or at work and cleared out his supply. Ron's duffle bag and some clothes were gone as well, which meant she might be going to her parents alone for her birthday, which would make for an awkward situation. She might be able to convincingly lie to them that Ron had to travel early for his game in Russia, but her mother was pretty astute in knowing when her daughter was troubled.

Even her Thursday night dinner at Severus' flat was a slightly strained affair. He could see the trouble Hermione was having digesting this latest revelation about her marriage. Since he knew her mind would not be solidly on Potions experimentation, he canceled the work they were going to do and instead had her rest.

They hadn't made love the Monday prior, and he did not initiate any intimacies with his lover other than a long cuddle in front of the fire.

“He married me because his mother told him to,” Hermione said aloud, more as a reiteration to herself to help mentally process the concept than for Severus' knowledge.

“Marriages arranged by the parents are far more common than you'd believe,” Severus said bitterly.

Hermione wondered if his open disgust was more in criticism of society in general, or was there some personal experience of his own he hadn't shared with her; she remembered the name Gabrielle that he'd once murmured in a dream. She curbed her curiosity and decided to let it slip by without further query.

“It makes me wonder if the marriage was more a whole lie to please his parents than his desire to be with me.” Hermione questioned her value to her husband versus the convenience of doing what he was told.
“Friendships and sometimes true love can bloom in such arrangement,” the older wizard expounded further upon his original thought. “And you claim that there was a strong friendship before any romance. Some marriages never develop into friendships. And without the basis of friendship, there can be no trust or deep and truly meaningful love. Maybe yours is a marriage of friendship without the passion and romantic love you expected it would be.”

Hermione was too emotionally worn out to contemplate the philosophical aspects of a marriage based on friendship versus true love, and the many variations of such contractual arrangements. She stared at the fire until she drifted off against Severus’ shoulder, feeling safe in her spiritual sanctuary.

Severus gently woke her with a kiss to her forehead and the soft calling of her name.

As Severus placed her cloak about her shoulders, she noticed him swallow with difficulty as if his throat had gone dry.

“I've had a cancellation Saturday,” Severus said, trying to sound not too eager. “Would you like to stay Saturday night with me? Dinner, dancing, and no need to leave at the end of the night.”

Hermione had informed him earlier in the evening that Ron would be gone for the weekend.

It seemed a bit brazen, given her married status, to stay the night at her lover's flat. Then again, Hermione had no idea where Ron was staying the nights he was gone after their many fights. Ron’s latest marital revelation had certainly severed any loyalty Hermione felt tied to her husband. And while she would not flaunt her infidelities to Ron, she no longer felt any compunction about continuing her affair with Severus, unabated by whatever facade of morals she used to have regarding her husband.

Smiling with as much strength as she could muster, Hermione said, “Yes, I can. I would love to.”

There was a moment of relief on Severus’ face, as if Hermione might reject him. He was very glad Miss Anne had canceled their habitual Saturday appointment earlier in the week, mentioning she was joining a friend in Italy for the weekend, as that meant there was no need for Hermione to rush home from the spa on Saturday. The revelation of Hermione's husband’s business trip fomented the idea in his mind to invite her to stay the night.

“I look forward to seeing you Saturday,” Severus said, as he discreetly pinned a small corsage of
celandine, white clover, and a single purple pansy to the breast of Hermione’s cloak before giving her a lingering farewell kiss.

It was only as she was removing her cloak at home that she observed the corsage that had gone unnoticed until that moment.

’Celandine for ’Joys to come.’ White clover for ’Think of me.’ Purple pansy for ’You occupy my thoughts.’ ’

Hermione laid back on her bed, staring at the ceiling and the corsage clutched to her chest, her heart much lighter and her head feeling a little dizzy.

“Oh, Severus, I think of you far more than I can freely admit,” she confessed to her empty room, unaware her mirror watched her while smiling on.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 56 A/N: Well, now that the Kneazle is out of the bag and Ron has admitted he married Hermione because Molly told him to, how much longer will this marriage last? Stay tuned.
Hermione had mixed emotions when she woke to an empty bed on her twenty-fourth birthday. It was a relief that Ron was not there, but the fact he was still gone cast a pall on her outlook for the day.

As she made her way to the kitchen for a quick morning cup before swinging by the Twenty-Four Blackbird bakery for her habitual scone on the way into work, Pigwidgeon alighted on his perch with a missive for Hermione.

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Hermione,

I will be there with you tonight for your birthday at your parents' house. I don't want to put you on the spot as to why I'm not there.

I'll see you at the flat when you get home from work.
As grateful as she was that Ron would be there to provide a united front, despite how false it was, she was even more glad that she would not have to lie to her parents as to why her husband wasn't there.

The echo of her boots along the cobblestone seemed to mock the isolation Hermione felt within her own world. Even the bakery was empty, except for the sole baker who manned the counter in between shuffling pans of freshly baked goods in and out of the oven until the counter staff arrived later. The fog that had drifted over Diagon Alley veiled Hermione as she continued on her way to work. Behind her, she heard the cadence of a familiar pair of boots – accented with the syncopation of another pair of boots – approaching the bakery she had just left. She knew without looking it was Severus and Draco on the way to their Friday morning parole meeting.

As tempted as she was to turn around, she forged on, not wanting to risk anyone seeing her giving any recognition to the ex-Death Eaters.

It was her birthday, and as a present to herself she hoped for the simple pleasure of a box of boomslang to be waiting for her upon her arrival.

Severus saw the faint silhouette of Hermione march off into the fog.

“Linger any longer, and I'll think you're a man in love,” Draco ribbed Severus half-jokingly.

The older wizard hesitated at the bakery's threshold, gazing onward.

He wanted to argue, asking Draco what he would know of love, but the younger wizard knew far more about the subject than Severus' own limited experience.

Hermione's birthday was proving to be far better than she expected. Upon entering the lab, she saw several boxes of boomslang from three different suppliers. The boxes’ markings showed that some of the shipment took a wrong turn during their transit, explaining why none arrived last Friday for testing.
Trevor showed up at an early time, but it was after Hermione was able to fake a botched test and secret some boomslang skin away in the inner pocket of her robes. He’d brought Hermione a small bouquet of dwarf sunflowers, signaling his admiration for his mentor on her birthday.

Harry showed up to take Hermione out for lunch as a birthday treat. He even presented her with a small gift of some Self-Inking Quills made with pheasant feathers for which she thanked him, pheasant feathers being her preferred choice for quills.

Since it was her special day, she didn't stick around at work, but left at five o'clock. She even encouraged Trevor to go home instead of staying late, though she did have a slight unshakable fear he might burn down the lab yet again if left alone.

As promised, Ron was waiting for her when she came home. Hermione was convinced Ron gained another whole stone of pure muscle since she saw him three days ago. It also could have been the cut of the shirt that gave that impression, since it was tailored to his body, accentuating the strapping physique his body had morphed into recently.

“Let me take a quick shower and change before we head over,” Hermione said, trying to avoid interacting with her husband.

Ron sheepishly shrugged, not knowing what to say.

Emerging from the bathroom, Hermione wore one of her more Muggle-like outfits of a basic blouse and plain black skirt. It was understated and appropriate for a simple family gathering.

“You look nice,” Ron admitted. He was avoiding looking Hermione in the eye.

“If you don't want to go, Ron, I can always say your coach decided last minute to get the team to Russia to acclimatize to the local time zone and climate before the game,” Hermione offered.

“No, I said I'd be here for you, so I'm here.”

Hermione thought that Ron behaving in such a way as to point out the rift between them might prove to be even more awkward, but Hermione figured since he was here there was nothing to do but go ahead and brace for the questions from her parents later.
As they arrived via the Floo, Hermione was greeted by her mother with a welcoming hug and buss upon the cheek.

Ron followed in right behind her with, to Hermione's shock, a believable smile upon his face as he greeted his in-laws. He did a fine job of acting the happy husband to their daughter. It seemed like the Ron she remembered from a time long ago when they were still dating and first married, but she knew his behavior tonight was an act for her benefit. Mrs. Weasley wondered how much of their entire marriage was an act for her benefit to spare her from the truth she now knew.

Aunt Christine and her husband, Tim, showed up about a half hour later. Wendy Granger made sure her sister would show up after Hermione's arrival so she would not have to explain to Christine that she had a magical daughter and son-in-law emerging from a blazing fireplace. As much as the International Code of Wizarding Secrecy (ICWS) allowed Mrs. Granger to tell her sister about Hermione's talents, being a close blood relation, she decided that it was best not to inform her sister of her daughter's unique abilities.

Ron had only met Hermione's Aunt Christine and Uncle Tim once before, and fortunately remembered their names. Hermione had few relatives, so there were not many names to memorize anyway.

As Wallace was pouring drinks before dinner, Wendy Granger took Hermione aside to speak privately.

“I was wondering if you or Ron could do your father and me a favor. It seems the Jaguar is having some sort of difficulty. We've taken it to the shop three times this week as it won't start, but every time we bring it in, they can't seem to find anything wrong with it. We drive it home and then it won't start the next day. I was wondering if you had an idea of what might be wrong with it if it isn't a 'conventional' issue,” Wendy implied, hinting that the problem might be not of the Muggle mechanical kind.

“Erm, sure, Mum. Do you want me to look at it now,” Hermione said, then darted her eyes in the direction of her aunt and uncle, “or we can do it later?” meaning after they have left.

“Later is fine, sweetie. Thanks. Sorry for foisting this on you on your birthday,” her mother apologized.

“It's not a problem,” Hermione said, actually grateful that this would be something to occupy her,
keeping some distance between her and Ron, since her husband knew nothing of cars other than what he learned second-hand through his father, plus that Hogwarts event with the Ford Anglia.

“Mum?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Since you're making my favorite prawn dish, I was wondering if you could teach me how to make it?”

“Absolutely! I'd love it if you helped me in the kitchen. How are your knife skills?” Wendy teased Hermione, knowing her daughter spent most of her workday testing ingredients all day long.

After sharpening her mother’s knives to her level of satisfaction, Hermione began deveining the jumbo prawns with the precision of a surgeon.

Regarding her daughter's knife work, “You would have made an excellent doctor with those knife skills.”

Knowing her aunt and uncle were on the other side of the house, Hermione replied, “Actually, I'll be starting a Potions apprenticeship hopefully before the end of the year. And according to one Potions master, my knife skills have much room for improvement.”

“Really? That's excellent news!” Then Wendy corrected herself as she coarsely chopped the cilantro. “I mean about the position, not the commentary on your handling of a knife.”

“It's been judged fair, but by the time I'm done with my apprenticeship, they are supposed to be much better than this,” Hermione admitted.

“And how long will this apprenticeship last?”

“Depends on how fast I master certain skills, including five foreign languages.”

“Anti-translation spells on certain books,” she informed her mother.

“Ah, trade secrets,” Mrs. Granger correctly surmised.

“Yep.”

“What about trade secrets?” Aunt Christine chimed in, entering the kitchen with a drink in her hand.

“Just dental things, Christine,” Wendy deflected, knowing her sister was not interested in such topics.

“Are you here to help chop the garlic?” asked Hermione knowing her aunt would never deign to ruin a fresh manicure with something as messy as cooking.

“I think I'll leaving the cooking to you two. I'll just freshen up my drink,” she said, scrunching her nose with disgust at the scent, before fleeing to avoid being conscripted into doing something else.

Hermione fetched the butter and olive oil while her mother pulled out her large skillet.

“Where is the Amontillado?” asked Hermione while looking for the sherry.

“Amontillado? Impossible! And in the middle of the carnival!” barked Tim with over-the-top theatrics in the doorway to the kitchen.

Hermione and her mother laughed with Tim's reference to the Edgar Allen Poe story.

“Hello, Uncle Tim!” Hermione went over and gave her uncle a hug while keeping her garlic tainted hands off of his person, before going back to chop the pungent bulb on the cutting board.
“Garlic, and lots of it. I know I’m going to love this dish,” he professed.

Hermione felt little affinity for her maternal aunt, at times wondering how her mother and Christine could be related, but then remembering the great difference in age. Hermione’s mother was already in her early-mid fifties, while Christine was still in her late thirties. Despite the lack of connection to her own blood relative, Hermione was quite fond of her uncle, even though she rarely saw him.

“So you’re what now? Twenty... Help me out here,” Tim begged.

“Twenty-four,” Hermione helped.

“And not looking a day over twenty-four,” he jibed. “Uh oh, I think I’m needed,” he excused himself before bolting off hearing his wife call for him.

Hermione wanted to say something about Christine probably breaking a nail, but decided keeping her mouth shut with a snide comment would be more sensible, considering how her aunt had snuck up on her and her mother a few moments ago.

During dinner, Christine was looking a bit peaked. She picked at her dinner, refusing the aromatic shrimp seasoned with garlic and cilantro, choosing only to nibble on unbuttered bread.

Wallace raised his glass as he cleared his throat. “I’d like to toast to my beautiful and loving daughter on her twenty-fourth birthday. Hermione, may your days be filed with joy and your sorrows be fleeting. To Hermione!”

Everyone around the table clinked glasses, even Aunt Christine who was starting to look a little green around the gills.

“And I don’t meant to steal any of the glory on your day, Hermione, but I’d like to make an announcement. Christine and I are expecting our first child—” Tim began, but stopped as Christine ran off for the loo for another bout of morning sickness that was hitting her during the evening. “Sorry, back soon,” he said as he joined her.

The door muffled most of the sounds of retching, but not all.
“I guess the garlic explains why dinner wasn't agreeing with her.” Hermione looked back at the door and said, “Do you think they'd notice if I spelled the smell away?” She looked over at Christine's place at the table and finally noticed that her aunt was drinking iced water, not her usual white wine.

Wendy nodded, liking the idea, but knowing it would tip her sister and brother-in-law off that something was a bit odd.

“Hang on. Have you got lemon and ginger in the kitchen, Mum?”

“Yes, what are you thinking?” Wendy replied.

“A simple cure, Muggle ingredients only,” Hermione said.

Running off, she brewed a quick cup of ginger and lemon tea for her aunt, and placed a quick cooling spell on it to chill it down.

Hermione tentatively knocked on the door. “Aunt Christine?”

Tim answered the door. “We're sorry for ruining your party, love.”

“No, don't worry. Ron has several sisters-in-law, and this happens all the time when one of them is pregnant. Here is some cold ginger and lemon tea. This always helps them. Hopefully it will help her.”

Christine was barely able to choke out her thanks before the retching started up again.

“When she's done, have her sip some and it will calm her stomach immediately,” Hermione assured him despite Christine’s reluctance to attempt to drink anything.

Once a few sips went down, Christine looked relieved. “Oh, that's much better.”
“Had I known, I would have picked a different entree.” Hermione gave her uncle an apologetic look.

“Well, we wanted to surprise everyone and I guess we did,” Tim confessed sheepishly.

“Congratulations,” Hermione said meekly.

Tim and Christine cut their visit short. Hermione gave her uncle the recipe for ginger and lemon tea, informing him that it should be chilled as it would sit better with his wife's stomach versus being served hot. Ron provided a strong shoulder of support, helping Christine out to the car while Tim brought the car to the front of the house.

Once back in the house, they sat down and realized dinner had gone cold. Now that Christine and Tim were gone, Hermione whipped out her wand and performed a simple warming charm on the food so they could continue their dinner.

Before cake, while dinner settled, Hermione went to the garage with her mother to see if there was a magical cause behind the Jaguar's malfunctioning.

Wendy popped the bonnet and lifted it, propping it up with a support arm.

“Lumos.” Hermione began probing around the engine with the illuminated tip of her wand, peering about.

She saw something moving around behind the air filter before it skittered along the back and ducked underneath the cylinders to hide.

“Did you see that?” Hermione asked her mother.

“See what?”

Her mother’s response confirmed her suspicion that gremlins were invisible to Muggles.
“Did you hear it skittering?”

“Hear what?”

“You've got gremlins, Mum.”

Even Muggles had heard of gremlins, and the mechanic even joked it was gremlins before handing Wendy Granger the bill for probing around her car with no results.

“Gremlins are attracted to grease, and lemons cut grease. Lemon makes an excellent repellent. Go squeeze the rest of the lemons, then mix the juice with water and put it in a spray bottle. Spray down the garage with the lemon water,” she instructed her mother. “Hang a lemon-scented car freshener in the car, and they'll be gone in less than a day. You better get out of the garage while I try and clean out the ones in the car.”

Hermione cast a spell that caused the scent of lemons to perfume the engine compartment area, flushing out three gremlins who tried to find refuge in her father's lawn mower.

“Confringo!”

The gremlin exploded into tiny bits, leaving some small hunks of meat clinging to the side of the car before sliding off onto the floor of the garage. She found the other two in the midst of trying to crawl into her father's hedge trimmer. Since the ventilation slots were too small for them to crawl through easily, she found them stuck half-way in, attracted to the grease fumes.

Hermione used her wand to clean up the area in case her mother could see dead bits of magical creatures, even though she couldn't see them while alive.

Exiting the garage, she found her mother coming back with a spray bottle with lemon water.

“I wonder if the gremlins came in with the Gypsies,” Wendy wondered aloud.

“What Gypsies?”
“You know that empty field around the corner with the big oak tree? Some Gypsies camped there earlier this week, saying some of their vehicles broke down. Since then some of the neighbors have complained about their cars not working either.” Wendy began spraying down the garage.

“They don't like to be called Gypsies, Mum. They prefer the term ‘Roma.’” Hermione had that same gentle lecturing tone in her voice as when she was trying to correct Ron's latest misconception about Muggles.

Hermione asked for pen and paper in order to write up a short letter to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, notifying them that there was an infestation of gremlins in her parents’ neighborhood. She included a list of nearby streets to check, based on her mother's retelling of neighborhood gossip of whose car was working and wasn't. The Ministry would probably send a crew during the day – while the Muggles were at work – to clear out their garages and cars, and visit some of the local mechanics in case some of the infected cars had been towed there.

After fetching Maxwell from the owl box at the back of the yard, her parents’ owl silently took to wing in the dark of the night.

In the meantime, Hermione would visit the Roma camped out around the corner and deal with the possible source of infestation.

The Roma of Europe, particularly Great Britain, not only tended to operate around the fringes of Muggle society, but the fringes of the wizarding world as well. There was a blending of some of the wizarding world into the culture of the Roma in centuries prior, but with the ICWS and the gradual industrialization of England, the Roma tended to drift further away from the wizarding community, since most in the Roma community were squibs or Muggles.

During the summer before Hermione created S.P.E.W., she did a lot of research on disenfranchised members of wizarding society, including the house-elves, Roma, centaurs, and werewolves. While she was no expert, she knew and was aware of the wariness the Roma community had of the wizarding community. There had been a period of time where the Ministry forcibly removed the magical children of the Roma with the purpose of integrating the magical children into the wizarding world. The Ministry had encouraged these children to abandon their Roma families and roots, so they could fully function as adults in the magical world.

Hermione told her mother to tell Ron that she was taking a walk around the old neighborhood, giving her mother a brief explanation as to why Ron would protest vehemently against his wife visiting “a bunch of dirty Gypsies,” as Ron had described them in the past. She knew her husband...
would not approve; he would most probably say something incredibly insulting and offensive in
the process, should he demand to accompany her in some useless exercise to protect her. Hermione
was a witch fully capable of defending herself should the need arise.

As she rounded the corner and saw the open field at the end of the street, Hermione could hear the
rising sound of a guitar gently strumming. Windows were lit from the interior of the caravans, and
there was a communal fire crackling in the center of the circle of vehicles. It was a mish-mash of
modern aluminum-sided caravans with some of the old-fashioned wooden caravan trailers painted
in bright colors with square or rounded profiles, all pulled by modern automobiles of various
vintages. Some of the caravans looked very old and well cared for.

Walking slowly, but with no purpose of stalking, Hermione stopped when someone spotted her.
She was approached by a man who appeared to be his forties, with a slightly weathered face

“Can I help you?” the wary man asked, used to some pesky town council members coming up to
him to tell him that his family group had no business camping in an unused field.

“I understand that you're having some trouble with your cars,” she stated.

“Are you a mechanic?” he asked, looking her up and down and at her hands for any sign that she
was a grease monkey by profession.

“No, but I just rid my mother's car of three gremlins and I think your cars might be infested with
them too, which is why they might not be working,” she explained plainly.

“Bun!” the man hissed, and placed his hands in the shape of a bull, extending the index and pinkie,
his hand placed at his forehead and bowed in a gesture to ward off evil.

Hermione knew the word he’d exclaimed meant “evil witch.”

“I'm here to help expel the gremlins and then leave you alone,” she said. “The Ministry of Magic
will probably be sending people tomorrow to exterminate the gremlins from the Muggle
households around here. I know you have no love for the Ministry, but I can get rid of the gremlins
for you so they won't bother you.” She held her hands up as a sign she meant no harm.

The strumming of guitar had stopped, and a small crowd of people of various ages had gathered at
the edges of the shadows to watch the scene unfold.

Before the older man could say anything further, a wizened elderly woman shuffled forward. “Let me see her.”

The man nodded his head in the direction of the woman who appeared to be the head of the clan. She directed Hermione to move forward while still gazing cautiously at her.

Hermione walked slowly, not wanting to appear to be a threat to the group.

“Let me see your hands,” the Drabarni commanded Hermione.

Hermione held her hands out for inspection.

The elderly woman, with a face tanned like well worn leather, grabbed both of Hermione’s hands and shook them in hers, before flipping them over to inspect the palms and then the back of the hands.

“Stick out your tongue.” The elderly matron of the group was dressed in several layers of tiered floral skirts and a cropped wool jacket, looking every bit the old Gypsy woman.

Hermione did as she was bid.

The old woman gently cupped Hermione's face with both hands and peered into her mouth.

“Your parents are the dentists around the corner.”

“You can tell that by looking at my mouth?” Hermione asked, perplexed she could divine that much from glancing in her mouth.

“No, I saw you coming out of their house,” the old woman answered with a mirthful chuckle. Then she addressed the crowd. “She's a good witch. Let her look at your cars.” She spoke with authority that brooked no argument.
Hermione went around to the dozen or so cars, chasing out the gremlins with the scent of lemon before casting the same Blasting Curse she used at her mother's house.

The children of the group, who screamed with a mix of fear and delight as the gremlins ran from the cars, proceeded to stomp gleefully on the mangled remnants of flesh that remained behind. Once Hermione's work was done, the children used a shovel to pick up the gremlins' remains and throw them into a hastily dug pit to burn. She was surprised at the percentage of children who could see the magical creatures.

After being satisfied that all the gremlins hiding in cars were killed, Hermione made one last round to make sure there was no more random machinery that a gremlin might have hidden in. Hermione informed the people at the camp that the scent of lemons would help deter future infestations of gremlins.

Hermione was about to bid farewell when the Drabarni called out to her.

“Come here,” the older woman said.

Unsure what else the clan leader might want, Hermione went over. She was hoping not to stay too much longer as her husband might get worried and try and find her, and stumble upon his wife surrounded by a bunch of partially magical strangers.

“Sit,” the Drabarni said, pointing Hermione to a chair facing the one the old woman herself was sitting in.

Hermione obliged and sat down across from her.

“We don't have any money to pay you.”

“It's no bother, please. I'm just trying to be helpful,” Hermione began, but was cut off.

“We cannot let you go while we feel indebted to you. No one wants to have you leave and live with an unpaid debt to a witch.”
Hermione was starting to feel a little nervous wondering if she could Apparate if anything funny happened.

“Let me read your palm as payment,” the Drabarni said.

Hermione silently let out a sigh of relief. Of all the magical arts, Hermione felt Divination, including palmistry, was one of the most inexact and unreliable forms of magic. But if this woman wanted to do a bit of palmistry to put her and the rest of the clan’s mind at ease, then she was willing to put up with a bit of silliness.

The woman examined Hermione’s left hand at first, turning it over before flipping it back. The palmist played with the skin on each knuckle a little, peer between fingers, and examined the length of each digit and nail.

“You were in a war,” the old woman began.

Hermione wondered how much this old woman knew of the wizarding world, since Hermione was well known enough, being Harry Potter’s best friend.

“A lot of people were in the war,” Hermione countered.

“Yes, but you were there with the Chosen One. You’re his close friend.”

A lot of people knew Hermione was friends with Harry. It meant nothing.

“You’re in an unhappy marriage,” she continued.

A lot of people were unhappy in their marriage. This was merely a fishing tactic used by some charlatans, Hermione told herself.

“You work with your hands.” Before Hermione could say anything, the woman added, “You have some impressive callouses,” as if sensing the dismissive attitude Hermione was trying to mask in
order to avoid being rude to these people.

Hermione remained silent.

“You’re not happy in your work and you wish there was more accomplishment in your life. A sadness. Many friends lost during the war.”

Another generalization Hermione dismissed, but it hit close to home.

The old woman inspected Hermione’s heart-line on her left hand and gave Hermione a knowing sly smirk, before setting her left hand down to begin her work on Hermione’s right hand.

“The left tells the past on a woman, and the right the future,” the old woman explained.

Hermione knew this, but let the woman ramble on.

“Ah, I see a major career change ahead. But this depends on...” The woman paused and flipped Hermione’s hand over, back and forth a few times, before continuing. “... it is still unclear. I can't see this part of your future.”

Hermione wondered how much longer this would continue.

“Your marriage will not last the rest of the year.”

Hermione's heart began to hammer in her chest. There was no way this old Romani woman would know anything about her problems with Ron, but it was probably another stab in the dark that hit true to the mark. Even a broken clock could be right twice a day.

“Your lover...” She gave Hermione that same sly smirk again. “He has a very dark and troubled past, but he has a good heart. A great bond between you two, very deep. He is...” The old woman trailed off and made a fist with her hand as if to imply Severus' sexual prowess and virility. The others listening in snickered quietly, understanding what her gestures implied sexually.
Hermione was ready to yank her hand out of the old woman's grip when the palmist tightened her grip after sensing the witch's desire to flee.

Gazing deeply into Hermione’s eyes, the Drabarni announced flatly, “Within the next six months, a blood relation will die and another will be in the hospital. If you have the opportunity to leave with your lover, do so. But if you do not leave with him, you will see him again in the future.” She finally let go of Hermione's hand to sit back in her chair, appraising the young woman as if there was nothing left to hide.

Hermione sat there, her mouth agape. She had read about the rare Roma palmist who had “the gift.” They never accepted money, as they felt coin would taint their gift. People who came to them begging for their fortune to be told would be rejected. It was only when it was a reading freely given that these Roma palmists would give true readings of any value. It was the debt the Drabarni had wanted to relieve herself of that caused her to read Hermione's palm in payment for the witch's help.

“Thank you,” Hermione croaked out, finally finding her voice.

“Don't thank me,” she replied, without sorrow. “Some people find knowing the future to be a curse they cannot escape. They change their course of action in order to run away from it, only to find themselves on the path they were trying to flee from in the end.”

With nothing to add to the old woman's words of wisdom, Hermione bowed her head slightly in respect and quietly left the camp deep in thought.

When she got back to her parents’ house, Ron greeted her.

“I was about to go out looking for you. Have a good walk?”

“Yeah,” his wife said distractedly. “Lots of memories,” she said to mask the nervousness that she couldn't shake.

“I think your mum is ready to serve cake.”

Hermione followed Ron inside and sat in her chair as her mother brought out a chocolate cake she had bought at Marks & Spencer. It was delicious, but Hermione could not taste it, still unnerved by
As the evening came towards a close, Wendy took her daughter aside.

“I didn't want to say anything and I didn't want you to worry,” Hermione's mother began, “but next week I'm going in the hospital for a day.”

“What?” Hermione shrieked, suddenly feeling panic rising in her chest.

“It's nothing, just removal of a couple fibroids from my uterus. It's nothing to worry about.” Mrs. Granger seemed to be perfectly fine about her upcoming operation, but the news of this sent Hermione into a tizzy.

“You're going into the hospital?” Hermione was trying not to hyperventilate.

“It's perfectly fine. The receptionist at our office had the same surgery done a few years ago and she's fine. It is a very simple procedure.” Wendy tried her best to calm her distraught daughter.

Despite her mother's assurances, Hermione began recalling the palmist's reading, remembering the prediction that a blood relative would be in the hospital and another dead within six months. Hermione had very few blood relatives, which meant a high probability of her mother or father possibly being the one who might die.

Hermione wanted to tell her mother about the reading of her palm from her trip to the Romani camp, but then decided she would not say anything after remembering the words of warning from the old woman. Despite how she might try to avoid her fate, she might be choosing to run towards her destiny regardless of her actions.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: At this point, I'd like to put out a call for an alternative for my second beta. One of my betas can get quite busy, and my buffer of edited chapters is now gone. I'd like an alternative beta in which to add as either a part time or full time beta (to edit when my second beta can't, or to be included as a third beta), depending on how much you can commit to editing my chapters. Hey, we all have a life. I'm looking for an experienced beta who has done beta work before, mostly for spelling, grammar and
punctuation. Private message me if you are interested.

And of course, thanks to my current betas, JuneW and Rogue_Panda.

In no way am I implying the Roma brought the gremlins into Hermione's neighborhood. They caught a case of them from someone else in the neighborhood when they stopped to camp the night in the field, which is why they suddenly had trouble with their vehicles. Hermione's mother assumed wrongly, it was one of her neighbors who was the source of the infestation, as noted in a follow up memo by the Ministry as to finding the original nest of them three doors down from her parent's home.

“There are four basic types of magicians in Romani tradition; a **Chovani (f) / Chovano (m)**, basically a Sorceress and sorcery, who works with the elements and their energies; a **Drabengro** or **Patrinengri**, a kind of Hedge Witch, or 'Good Witch', who works with herbs and potions mainly; a **Drabarni**, Wise or Cunning Woman, who tells fortunes, heals and answers questions; and finally the **Borsorka**, or 'Evil Witch', who harms people. The names of these varies in the many Romani dialects, for example amongst the Romnichal of England an 'evil' witch is called a Bun, and a Sorceress a Choviar, but these are the names most used in the academic literature and derive from the dominant Balkan tradition (principally of the Kalderas). In addition to these specialists any Romani can learn and use magic, the elders in particular were once said to use it to punish miscreants or protect the community. The popular use of magic amongst ordinary Romanis however is usually a sham, particularly when used to frighten or con the Gadjos.”

Chapter Fifty-Eight

“Testing, Testing, Testing”

Disclaimer: The characters contained herein are not mine. No money is being made from this fiction, which is presented for entertainment purposes only.

Ron had spent the night of Hermione's birthday at their flat, but voluntarily slept on the couch. He had successfully transfigured the slightly worn and definitely lumpy piece of furniture into a bed large enough to fit his entire length.

By the time Hermione woke up on Saturday morning, Ron was gone and the couch changed back, the flat returned to its previous state as if her husband had not been there at all.

Ginny arrived shortly after breakfast, having made their appointment at Madam Hope's Eternal Springs and Day Spa for ten o'clock, and hinting that it would be an all-day treat.

As Hermione handed Ginny the stolen boomslang skin, she mentioned she had plans later that day after the spa.

The red-head replied with a twinkle in her eye that Hermione should just bring everything with her that she would need after the spa, since they were probably going to be there a while.

Hermione didn't want to exactly tell Ginny she had plans to spend the night at Severus', but wondered if Ginny already knew.
As they entered into the foyer of the spa, Hermione inhaled deeply, smelling the mixture of various scents of floral and herbal body scrubs; she already felt herself beginning to relax. She thought about how she would be scrubbed herself within an inch of her life, making her skin soft for Severus. She knew how her face would be exfoliated, and the annoying little blackheads around the corners of her nose would be gone, making herself beautiful for her lover.

They were about to enter the women's side of the spa when Hermione noticed that the men's side was closed again. She wondered if it was always closed, or was it merely coincidence that the men's side was closed when she and Ginny came.

Inside Hermione’s dressing area – or undressing area – the wall had a panorama mosaic of an Italian palazzo amid the Campania countryside, with Mount Vesuvius in the background; it made her wish she could go to another country for real, she thought longingly as she undressed.

“I have a very special treat for you for your birthday,” Ginny spoke through the tapestry divider between the two cubicles. “I think you'll be surprised. Are you ready for me to come over now?”

Hermione had her towel tucked around her to cover herself since she wasn't as confident about her body as her more curvaceous sister-in-law. She pulled the curtain back and was surprised to find her friend fully wrapped in a towel like herself, since Ginny usually walked about the women's side with her upper torso exposed.

Sauntering into Hermione's area, the red-head pulled the curtain closed and gave Hermione a wicked grin. Standing next to the wall, Ginny gave it a gentle rap with her knuckles in a spot where the shape of a key hole was discreetly placed in the middle of the mosaic palazzo.

A door quietly cracked open, exposing a portal large enough for one person to pass through at a time. Cocking her head, Ginny indicated quietly for Hermione to follow.

Passing through the dark and narrow corridors that snaked and turned with the walls, Hermione started to ask questions, but Ginny shushed her as they stealthily padded along. Ginny then nudged her head towards a door adorned with shells, indicating Hermione should enter.

“What about—” Hermione whispered quietly.
“You'll see,” Ginny said with a wink, before slinking off down the passage and around the corner out of sight.

Hesitantly, Hermione pushed the door open and stood agape at the grandeur of the grotto before her. The architecture definitely spoke of time long past, an era of romanticism and embellishment.

“I hope you find Ginny's present a suitable surprise,” said Severus as he emerged from around a screen, startling Hermione in the process.

He was standing there with a smirk upon his lips, dressed in nothing but a towel about his hips.

Hermione quickly rushed over to Severus and threw her arms about him, peppering his face with quick kisses. “This was unexpected, but certainly the best birthday surprise ever,” she said, beaming, when she finally stopped kissing him. “But this place?” she said, still in awe of her surroundings.

“Rebuilt during the Restoration period, with secret passages for royalty, high-level Ministry officials and the crème of wizarding society to rendezvous with paramours and courtesans,” he said, keeping his gaze upon her as she looked about. “We have the grotto from now until just after lunch, while Ginny and Draco go frolic on the men's side.”

“Wait, does this mean that every time I've come to the spa with Ginny, she's gone off for a rendezvous with Draco?” she asked. It would finally explain why every time she came she saw the men's side closed down, and also explain the long periods when Ginny was supposedly getting “treatments.”

“Yes, we have the whole men's side to ourselves.”

“But doesn't that cost a fortune to close down the whole men's side?” Hermione brought up, wondering the price of such a monthly stunt.

“Miss Brown is a silent partner of the spa. She has the men's side shut down monthly so Draco and I can do final testing, in secret, on products before they go to market. I will not go into all the various formulations of no-chip nail polish, dandruff-suppressing shampoo, body scrubs, moisturizers and other products Draco and I have tried over the years,” he confessed, dramatically rolling his eye up to the shell-encrusted ceiling.
Hermione suppressed a small giggle at the image of Severus having to wear pink nail polish. She stopped when she realized that she would be having to do the same things when she finally took her Potions apprenticeship, and she'd be the human guinea pig for Lavender's products.

In the grotto was a large reclining area that could double as an expansive bed or lounging couch, covered with firm pillows of various shapes and sizes, and soft white sheets used by the spa. It reminded Hermione of an extremely large opium bed.

“Do you think between now and lunch we'll have enough time,” Hermione said breathlessly, as the mood changed from admiration of the surroundings to arousal, being in close proximity to her lover.

Severus placed a vial of natural lubrication potion in her hand. “Then we'd better not waste any.” Though he had not taken any potions for his own arousal, his towel was already beginning to tent from his growing erection.

Hermione downed the lubrication potion in one go, as Severus released her towel and watched it slip down her torso, gliding along her hips and legs before falling to the floor. With one hand he guided her to the makeshift bed, encouraging her to lie down.

Propped up on her elbows, Hermione watched as Severus approached the bed with a hungry look in his eyes before discarding his own towel. Crawling on all fours, Severus had the look of a panther about to devour his prey. Positioned above Hermione, they kissed slowly, knowing they had all day to take their time. She noted the slight scruff on his face, which was a different sensation on her skin than the clean-shaven feel she was used to.

Severus kissed his way down Hermione’s neck, stroking the sides of her ribs in the way she taught him, making her gasp and shudder involuntarily.

Giving up on trying to prop herself up, Hermione fully reclined back. She luxuriated in the feel of Severus' hair tickling her skin as he nuzzled and sucked gently at her breasts before he continued his path down her body. He spent a while licking and nipping at her stomach and hip bones before finally settling himself between her legs to delicately kiss the folds of flesh that covered that precious pearl of her sex.

Using his fingers to part her, his tongue tentatively licked her clitoris, at which Hermione's head shot up as she gasped loudly, her body taut with anticipation. Severus dove into her more hungrily, and Hermione shouted wordlessly at the intensity of feeling as his mouth licked and devoured her, lapping at the juices the natural lubrication potion magnified.
Hermione gazed down to see a dark head of hair partially curtaining a pair of black eyes staring back at her. It was all too much for her. She laid her head back and arched her back, her hands grabbing fistfuls of Severus' hair as he continued until he brought Hermione to her first of many orgasms.

Before she could finish catching her breath, Hermione quickly spun around and guided Severus’ cock to her mouth as he faced her feet. Grabbing his hips, she began guiding the pace of his movements and encouraged him to slide into her mouth, indicating a depth and speed that was comfortable. Periodically, Hermione would very slowly guide him to shove all of him into her mouth as she felt the curve of his cock bend around the back of her mouth and down her throat, and then he removed himself slowly before her gag reflexes kicked in. In this position, the curve of Severus’ cock made it much easier for her to deep-throat him.

Severus had had many blow jobs in his days and even given instruction as a gigolo, but what Hermione was doing was quite incredible even for him. Her pacing was languid and nearly torturous in its drawing out of pleasure. He wanted nothing more than to pump himself furiously into her mouth, but knew he should relinquish control to Hermione and he should relish the moment despite his innate urges.

Hermione gently played with his sac with one hand while continuing to guide his hips with her other hand. She could hear from the rasping of Severus’ gasps that he was near.

“I'm...” he cried out, indicating he was about to orgasm and was going to pull himself from her mouth. But then she grasped his hips firmly and slowly shoved him all the way down her throat, wanting to swallow all of Severus' seed. He shuddered violently as he came, his cock throbbing with each pulse, and he spent himself in her.

Hermione swallowed as best as she could – some spilled out of the sides of her mouth – and choked a little bit towards the end. When she sat up finally, some beads of the pearly fluid still dribbling from the corners of her mouth, Severus then reached over and kissed her furiously and deeply. He could taste himself on her lips just as she could taste herself on his tongue.

Finally breaking apart from one another, Severus went to grab a towel to clean away the last of himself from her face, while Hermione fetched a couple glasses of water.

Laying back, entwined in each other's arms, Hermione asked, “So you get this place to yourself once a month, every month?”
“Yes.”

“That explains why Ginny loves coming here so often,” she surmised, not mentioning her observations that Ginny always looked very relaxed at the end of the day.

Hermione rolled over onto her stomach to regard Severus as he laid back, an arm tucked behind his head to he could regard the object of his desire.

Unbidden, the memory of the old Romani woman the night before flashed in Hermione's mind, as vivid as if she was there. *If you have the opportunity to leave with your lover, do so. But if you do not leave with him, you will see him again in the future.*

The sudden change of Hermione's mood did not go unnoticed. One moment she was gazing sweetly at Severus, then as quick as a summer storm, trouble clouded her eyes and she buried her face in his side to hide her distress.

“What's the matter?” her lover coaxed her to unburden herself, lovingly stroking her hair.

She would tell him eventually, so there was no point in waiting. Hermione relayed the story of the trip to her parents’ house and her encounter with the palm reader, omitting the last two lines about fleeing with Severus. He was ready to dismiss it as she had, until Hermione informed him of her mother's trip to the hospital after she returned back to her parents’ house.

Severus stared at the back of her head as he curled up to spoon behind her, unable to form a response. What could one say to comfort Hermione, with the knowledge that a blood relation of hers could die within six months? The hinting at Severus and Draco's flight, and Hermione's new career. With Hermione not telling him the last two lines of her fortune, he took the palm reading to mean that cooperation of the weather for the final ingredient was a nebulous future that she could not see, which frightened him.

They lay curled together on their sides for a while until Severus began tenderly kissing Hermione's shoulders. Hermione arched her back, pressing her bottom into his lap while guiding his hand to cup her breasts. Severus felt the stirrings of his arousal. Wanting to see his face, she turned to lay on her back, throwing her top leg over his hip and settling the other one between his legs for him to grasp with his thighs, as she guided him into her, her body perpendicular to his as their loins met. It was a position that required little effort and allowed for an unhurried movement of hips.

The lovers knew that their time together would not last forever, that eventually he would leave. Hermione held the undisclosed knowledge that she had the option to go with him, but she wanted
to fight her destiny and had already decided to stay behind to spite the Fates.

Severus increased the speed, eventually shifting above Hermione, as he propped up on his hands, with his arms stiff. Her body twisted, one leg still between his, the other leg braced against his torso, her foot just above his shoulder, partially supporting his weight. Gazing up, she marveled at the hypnotic sway of his hair as it framed his face, and the way the muscles on his torso flexed and tightened as he pushed himself deeper into her before withdrawing to return again, like the rhythm of the waves along the shore.

Since Severus had not taken any potions to enhance his virility, it took much longer for him to orgasm a second time. They had changed position many times and Hermione found one where the curve of Severus' cock stroked her just so that she rode him furiously with desperation. He helped bring her over the edge when he moved his thumb to stroke her clit, causing her to shut her eyes tight with an exquisite grimace upon her face. Enthralled with the beauty of her lost on pleasure, Severus surrendered to his own needs and came, growling as he held her tight.

After taking care of her bodily needs, Hermione joined Severus in the pool of hot water in the one corner of the grotto. Sitting on opposite sides of the tub, their feet grazing each other's legs, they sat silently, letting their bodies recuperate. When Hermione started feeling overcome by the heat, she removed herself from the warm tub to sit in the cold plunge tub, squeaking as the chilled water came in contact with her overheated skin.

Severus enjoyed watching her body react to the cold, especially as her flesh goose-pimpled and her nipples puckered tightly in response to the temperature change. Removing himself from the warm tub, he jumped in the cold plunge quickly, reacting little to the shock of temperature change.

“How can you handle that?” asked Hermione, implying the drastic change in temperature without physically cringing.

“Many years having to harvest ingredients from the lake at Hogwarts. Potions to keep the chill off the bones while diving don't last forever, and some people eventually can gain a tolerance to the cold,” he told her.

Hermione gave a shudder while remembering how cold the water was up in Scotland, especially that one time Ron accidentally knocked her into the lake. A drying charm had removed nearly all of the water then, but there was a dampness that chilled her to the bone that she couldn't rid herself of until she got back to Gryffindor Tower to take a hot shower, change clothes and get a cup of hot tea into herself before she was no longer cold.
Removing herself from the cold plunge, the witch went to recline on the bed, laying on her side, propped up on one elbow so she could continue to watch Severus soak.

“Care for a massage?” she offered.

Severus rose from the tub immediately. “Absolutely,” he accepted eagerly.

Lying face down, Hermione began to work on Severus’ back, reciting the various muscles and bones she had been working to memorize from her mother's old copy of *Gray's Anatomy*. There were a few muscle names that she switched, and he corrected her, but for the most part, she identified the parts correctly as she rubbed plain almond oil with care along his skin. By the time she had reached his feet, Hermione noticed he was softly snoring, having dropped off somewhere shortly after she worked on his calves.

Not wanting to disturb him, she grabbed a heavy cotton blanket that was placed along the side of the bed and covered him up; she was lying next to him, her legs touching his, but not cuddling so close as to wake him. Hermione allowed her own mind to drift off and sleep for a while until an unseen house-elf discreetly rang a bell to announce that lunch had been served.

Rising from their brief slumber, Severus and Hermione donned plush cotton bathrobes before padding over to the middle of the grotto, where beneath the skylight a table had been placed, filled with an array of fare.

“I hope you don't mind, but I instructed the spa elves to prepare a light lunch since we still have the pool, sauna, steam room and some latest product testing to look forward to this afternoon,” Severus said, as he helped Hermione into her seat.

“We are testing products?” Hermione asked, curious as to what was involved.

“By this point in the product development cycle, when Draco and I test them, we have worked out most of the kinks, but there is the trial phase to see if they work as planned,” he explained as he lifted the lid from the tureen of soup and ladled a cup of curried pumpkin soup into a small bowl before handing it to his lunch companion. “Be glad I have worked out most of the problems with the temporary hair dye solution and this is the final weekend of testing. It should take only one shampooing to rinse it clean instead of the four shampooings to get rid of the film it originally left behind. This will be part of your job working for Miss Brown as Dobmeir's apprentice. What we've done at my flat is what you'd be doing under a traditional Potions apprenticeship, plus other duties.”
As they sampled an array of sandwiches perched on a tiered stand, and the lightly dressed salad served up on delicate china plates accented with an aquatic theme, they discussed other aspects of the products they'd be testing and the process Severus went through while developing them.

When they were done, Severus extended his hand to help Hermione up, tucking her arm into his as they crossed the grotto before guiding her down the labyrinth of passage ways towards the men's side of the spa. Upon reaching a door, Severus rapped upon it in a particular pattern, signaling it was him.

“Just a moment,” Draco called out from the side of the door.

There was the noise of feet scuffling and the distinct sound of Ginny giggling before the door opened up to reveal Draco and Ginny in matching spa robes.

“Lunch should be ready and waiting by the time you reach the grotto,” Severus informed them as he and Hermione emerged from the secret corridor.

Hermione gave Ginny a brief hug. “Best present ever, thank you,” the older witch beamed.

Ginny returned a kiss upon her friend's cheek. “Happy birthday.”

Draco and his lover quickly passed through the door before it closed behind them to leave Severus and his own lover alone in the expanse of the men's side of the spa.

Severus dropped his robe and dove head first into the vast natatorium. Hermione slipped from her robe and gently toed into the pool, unsure if it was the same cool temperature that it was on the women's side. Sliding fully into the tepid crystal water, Hermione swam out into the middle to meet Severus.

Above the two, as they floated limply on their backs, the stained glass figure of Poseidon was getting rather frisky with the Nereids. His erection grew rather stout before he mounted one of the many coyly frolicking ocean nymphs, who protested before succumbing to her carnal desires in typical Greek mythological rape/comfort fashion. Once done, he would start the cycle over again, chasing after another stained glass Nereid, trapping her, then engaging in some non-consensual canoodling before she succumbed to Poseidon's sexual charms and “enjoyed” it in the end.
“Does Poseidon always behave like a sexual predator when the men's side of the spa is open, or is this mythological rape reenactment for our viewing pleasure alone,” Hermione remarked with little amusement. The whole scene reminded her too much of how she was not that enamored of Ron pouncing and then mounting her, while she pretended to enjoy their coupling for the sake of not raising Ron's suspicions.

“Poseidon usually gets 'inspired' after watching Draco and Ginny frolic, but otherwise he's usually well behaved.”

It was unnerving enough to have the stained glass figures watching, but considering all the things the portraits of Hogwarts watched Hermione engage in, there was little cause for her to be prudish.

They floated for a while in comfortable silence.

“Severus?”

“Hmm.”

“If you didn't go into Potions, what do you think you might have done for a career?”

“I've known from a young age I had always wanted to go into Potions,” Severus confessed. “I can't imagine myself doing anything else. But I suppose something involving Defense Against the Dark Arts. Perhaps an Auror, but considering my background and disposition when younger, that would have never happened.”

Hermione floated for a while, somewhat envious that Severus knew what he wanted to do with his life. She had felt herself drawn in a dozen different directions, pulled by many disciplines with the urge to learn them all. But even when her opportunity to apprentice in Transfiguration and Charms was removed, she had turned her attentions toward other areas of study in her pursuit of an apprenticeship. Perhaps if she was as passionate about one subject as Severus was about Potions, she might have been driven to find some avenue to master an area of study with more determination.

As she floated, she drifted closer to Severus.
“Hermione?”

“Hmm?”

“If you never were a witch, which Muggle profession would you have gone on to study?”

Hermione had recently discussed this with her mother, so it didn't take any time for her to contemplate an answer. “Something in the medical arts. Doctor, possibly. Maybe a dentist like my parents, or a research scientist.”

They floated for a while longer before she added, “I sometimes wonder how different life would have been if there had been no Dark Lord, no first or second war. But wondering and wishing can't change what has already passed.” She refrained from using Voldemort's name in Severus' presence, understanding how greatly it upset him to this day.

Hermione was getting tired of trying to ignore Poseidon and his repeated sexual assaults above her head. She suggested a change of venue.

The sauna on the men's side seemed to run hotter than the women's. It could be that the frequent use by others on the women's side – versus the few occupants using the men's side – allowed the sauna to build up more heat in between the opening and closing of the door. Severus was able to stand the heat longer than Hermione could.

She had chilled down in the cold plunge pool and was ready to visit the steam room by the time Severus emerged, glistening with sweat over his entire body. Hermione decided to rehydrate with some raspberry leaf and lemon-infused water, reclining on a chaise lounge while waiting for Severus. She handed him a glass to sip while in the cold plunge.

As they sat in the steam room enveloped by the sultry mist, Severus noted how much he was enjoying Hermione's company. They spoke periodically about various topics, but Hermione was also very comfortable to let long periods of silence pass without feeling the urge to start chattering in order to fill the void of conversation. In many way, she was a much more companionable partner during his day at the spa than Draco could be. Though Draco was not prone to idle rambling, he was a bit more chatty with a slight sophomoric streak of humor, but Hermione's level of verboseness at times, or lack of it, seemed to be a better match to Severus' own level.

After a few more rounds of the sauna, cold plunge and steam room, Severus was ready to show
“Black? I’m dying my hair black?” Hermione asked, looking at the temporary hair dye solution Severus handed her.

“Draco already tried it, but we need to test it on someone with a different natural color and texture. I already tried various shades of brown and dark- to medium-blond.” Severus was in another stall, so she had no idea what color he got stuck with.

Hermione read the directions on the bottle twice and applied it with little difficulty, glad it would not stain her skin and stick only to her hair. Her mother dyed her hair and she remembered the use of Vaseline, gloves, plus the pungent stench of ammonia that followed with the Muggle mixture.

Emerging from her stall, she went to the nearest mirror to view her changed appearance. While noticing how much paler her skin looked now, she glanced at her reflection over her shoulder as a platinum head appeared behind her. Shrieking and grabbing a towel to cover herself, she thought it was Malfoy who had wandered in on her – only to finally realize it was Severus with a head of platinum locks.

“I thought you were Malfoy for a moment.” Hermione still held a hand to her chest while regaining her breath.

“I should take that admission as a compliment that the hair dye does a good job of covering my natural color completely. Though I’m not sure Draco would find it much of a compliment that you mistook me for him,” he joked lightly.

Hermione examined the coverage of the temporary hair dye with a closer inspection. “Amazing, it looks as if this was your natural color, though your eye brows really should be colored as well as there is such a stark contrast it makes it look like an otherwise very good bleach job,” she noted, as she twisted a hank of Severus’ hair and viewed it in the light of the men's shower area to watch how the highlights shone along the strands.

“You...” Severus began, his eyes alight. “This is a rather stunning color on you. Should you attend the Ministry's masked ball this Halloween, I highly recommend this color on you. It's quite fetching.”

He played with a damp tendril that had fallen forward and along the tops of her breast.
“I thought about dyeing my hair red like Ginny’s once or a much lighter chestnut, but she said with my coloring, and with the latest additions to my wardrobe, I should keep my dark chestnut coloring.” Then Hermione suddenly remembered something. “Damn! Ginny and I were going to go to Madame Maurelle Mandel’s to go dress shopping before we came here.”

“You can always go tomorrow,” he suggested as he slid behind her and dipped his head down to start nibbling on her ear. “And then you can always model for me whatever you purchase.” His breath was hot, and his voice low and rumbling. “Preferably something easy to slip from your body.” Severus’ hand slipped down Hermione's back to caress her hip. “With matching knickers.” His hand slid further down to caress the top of her thigh. “Stockings.” One hand skated up her stomach to cup her breast. “And don't forget the matching bra.”

Leaning her head back against Severus’ shoulder, she caught the sight of two strangers in the middle of a seduction in the mirror behind the sink.

She knew it was her and Severus, but the dramatic change in hair color made them both almost unrecognizable even to her own eyes.

Noticing where Hermione's attention was directed, Severus met her gaze in the reflection. “You want to watch,” he whispered.

“Yes,” she breathed, feeling as if this was something esoteric. She couldn't stand the idea of her own husband watching her masturbate, but the idea of her lover watching while they performed in a mirror turned her on in ways that made a twisting curl in her belly throb in its forbidden allure.

“What else arouses you that you dare not admit,” Severus prompted her. The resonating sound of his voice bid her to confess what she had trouble admitting to herself in her own mind.

“I want...” she began, but stopped when her breath hitched as Severus reached his hand down to start stroking her labia.

“Yes,” he purred, making her reservations melt away.

“I want to be restrained.” She had mentioned this before to Severus, but it was under the spell of the libido-enhancing potion and therefore to be dismissed. This time she admitted it without the influence of the potion. She closed her eyes.
“Open your eyes,” he commanded her.

She obeyed, and she was rewarded with the stroking of her clit in the only was Severus knew how to touch her to slowly build the tension.

“How.” He wanted to know more.

His eyes bored into hers, locking them in place. Everything melted away around them except the vision of each other's eyes and the sensation they were causing in each other's bodies. Hermione reached behind her back and found Severus’ stiffening flesh, and she slowly began to stroke him as he continued on. This was better than the fantasy she had of “Calleo” that first night they met.

“You've captured me. And I resist, but you seduce me, make me unable to resist you, tease me until I beg you to take me,” she confessed.

“Do I whip you?” he asked.

“Would it be painful?” she asked, slightly nervous.

“Not unless you want it to hurt,” he assured her. “You'd be amazed at how the body, in a heightened state of sexual arousal, produces a phenomenal amount of natural painkillers.” He moved his head lower while nipping the top of Hermione's shoulder with his teeth lightly while keeping eye contact. “Imagine the bites I have set upon your neck before in the heat of passion, how those bites would have hurt had you not been aroused, had you not begged me to bite harder, digging my teeth deeper into your flesh.” Severus slipped two fingers into Hermione. “Marking this territory as mine. You liked it when I have claimed you in such a primal fashion, have you not?”

Hermione was finding it hard to keep her eyes open, but she maintained eye contact with Severus as he continued to seduce her. Her hand kept the same slow stroking pace.

“Yes, I have.” Hermione's mind, set loose from its normal confines of self-consciousness ventured on. “And tell me what you want to do to me that you have held back from asking. What do you want me to experience at your hands that I have never known before,” she asked, willing to entertain any idea that Severus put forth in her current state of mind.
Severus removed his hand from Hermione’s folds and brought his hands up to his mouth to lick her essence, before adding more of his own saliva to his fingers to bring down behind and part her cheeks, stroking his finger around her anus.

“This,” Severus professed. “I want you to experience the pleasure of an erogenous zone you have yet to explore.”

Hermione's eyes momentarily flickered wider with surprise. He could see the hesitation.

Ron and Hermione had attempted anal sex once; it was an unmitigated disaster filled with embarrassment, tears, pain and uncomfortable apologies. But this was Severus, the man who had brought her sexuality to bloom as a rose in the warm summer sun.

“I am willing to learn,” she gasped, trying to keep her nervousness tamped down.

In the basket nearby was an assortment of various potions Severus might find useful for his day at the spa with Hermione, besides the product they'd be testing. One of them was a bottle of lubrication he had packed just in case.

Returning behind Hermione, he relaxed her by going back to kissing her neck while gazing into each other’s eyes in the mirror. One hand slid down to return to her folds to rebuild Hermione to the level of prior arousal.

“We'll go slowly, very slowly,” he cooed in her ear.

Hermione began playing with her own nipples, enthralled by the tableau of eroticism she was witnessing.

Sensing she was relaxed, Severus applied the lubrication to one finger and slowly stroked the outer entrance of Hermione's anus. Immediately, he felt her tighten up.

“Shh, slow. Remember to relax,” he reminded her as his fingers on her front slipped into her vagina, making her gasp haltingly.
When he sensed that she had relaxed, he slowly introduced his finger into her anus and watched her face for her reaction. Her eyes went a little wider, but her eyebrow knit in that familiar fashion they did when she was lost in pleasure. Hermione's mouth opened to create a perfect circle.

A long low moan escaped her mouth.

This was nothing like what she had experienced with Ron. The intrusion of Severus’ finger felt strange, but also titillating, even risqué. It was slightly uncomfortable, but she eventually relaxed and no longer found the sensation bothersome, but welcomed.

Convinced that Hermione was now accustomed to the presence of his finger in her, Severus began to slowly move his finger in and out, matched by the rhythm of his other hand which was fingering her vagina.

Hermione found it very hard to continue to stand up straight, so she bent forward to brace herself along the edge of the sink, keeping eye contact with Severus in the large mirror.

Presented with Hermione's sweet backside, Severus removed his fingers from her vagina and replaced it with his cock.

The parallel sensations of Severus inside of her while his finger worked slowly in and out of her arse brought her to a slow but powerful orgasm, resulting in her voice echoing off the tiles as she screamed. Her eyes finally broke contact, shut tight to revel in the new sensations Severus had made her body feel.

Severus tried with all his might to not have his own knees buckle from underneath him. He leaned forward bracing his hands next to Hermione's on the sink, his sweat-bespangled brow resting in the middle of her back.

He knew that if he and Hermione were going to make love again later in the day, he'd need the help of the male enhancement potion to give him the fortitude and strength to perform. One or two orgasms in a day without the potion's assistance was not hard, but a third time was really pressing the bounds of his natural stamina.

Slowly he removed his finger from Hermione and went to wash up, while Hermione took care of her own needs.
They spent the next few hours trying the various formulations of body scrubs in patches on each other's bodies, noting the grittiness of one and the smooth texture of the other. Hermione was not fond of a particular astringent Severus seemed to like, so she suggested it be used for the Valiant Wizard line of products, since it was too intense for her skin, and probably most other women. There was a shaving crème Severus tried on his own face that Hermione used on her legs and raved about how it left her legs smooth, but he didn't care for the cool minty burn afterwards. Hermione was almost a little sad when they had to rinse the temporary hair dye. The blond hair wasn't that complimentary to Severus' color, but it did make for an interesting change.

Hermione finally mentioned her belongings left back in her cubicle on the women's side and her wand, but Severus informed her that the spa elves had already moved them to a cubicle on the men's side.

Severus was going to dress in the same cubicle as Hermione, but she shooed him out telling him it was a surprise. She had packed something a little special for Severus.

Emerging from her cubicle, her three-quarter cloak in place and her other clothes stowed away in her small reticule accented with glass beads, Hermione found Severus waiting for her dressed all in black with a matching cloak. They were all dressed up as if ready to head out on the town for the night to paint it red.

“If you didn't have dinner planned,” she said, “I might have suggested we go out together and hide out in the Muggle Theater District, finding some last-minute tickets to a Shakespeare play or a musical. But given that Draco and Ginny were spotted all those years ago, it's a pity that we can't. You certainly look fashionable enough, though.” Hermione surveyed Severus in his outfit. But all she would need was some witch or wizard wandering around Muggle London who recognized Severus and Hermione, and it would be over faster than you can say, “Rita Skeeter Exclusive.”

Severus' eyes raked over Hermione in her outfit as well, a sly smile spread across his face.

“I thought you said you didn't get a chance to visit Madame Maurelle Mandel's yet,” he said. He admired the dress and cloak combination and the application of make-up, noting it was just enough to accent her eyes and face, but not so much as he'd have the lingering taste of it in his mouth when he would kiss her.

“I didn't,” Hermione replied as she twirled around so Severus could see the outfit better. “This is the dress that Ron hates that caused all that trouble.”
“Ah, the infamous little black dress,” he remembered, his face lighting up as his smile broadened. “May I?” he asked, as he made to temporarily remove her shortened cloak and view the back of the dress.

“How about you wait to unwrap your present until we get back to your place?” she countered.

“Happy birthday to me,” Severus muttered under his breath as he guided Hermione towards the Floo that would take them back to the Red Ginseng.

Fortunately there was a discreet Floo on the men's side of the spa they could use, so Hermione would not be spotted out in the main foyer as they left.

Severus emerged first and made sure that there were no pesky Aurors hiding around the building before Hermione came through the Floo a few minutes later.

As they walked up the stairs together, Severus provided an arm to help Hermione while she walked in high heels.

Arriving at Severus' flat, Marf had set everything in place so they could enjoy the Beef Bourguignon Severus had prepared and placed in the oven before meeting Hermione at the spa. Marf had been left in charge to make sure it was pulled from the oven and kept warm; he also had orders to prepare the rest of the meal, which thrilled Marf to no end that he could finally employ his under-utilized cooking skills.

It was all Severus could do to remember they were about to start dinner when he helped Hermione with her cloak and saw what the fuss was about regarding her dress.

“And you left the party unmolested?”

“Barely. Though I think my conversation skills chased them away,” she said dryly.

“Thereir loss.” His eyes raked up and down her form possessively.

They dined by candlelight as twilight settled over the London skyline visible from Severus' flat.
After the main course, a light salad to cleanse the palate was served by the elf before brandied pear tart with caramel sauce and crème Anglaise finished the meal.

After dessert, Severus presented Hermione with his present to her. It was a difficult-to-find Potions book he had procured for her. It wasn't exactly something to fit into the curriculum of an apprentice, but something for her once she reached her level of mistress, a silent admission that he knew she would succeed. Ron had offered her books for her birthday, but this held so much more meaning in that it was selected just for her.

As they relaxed on the settee, Hermione gave a long and satisfied sigh. Severus gave her shoulder a light squeeze in response, non-verbally signaling he was in agreement.

Hermione's mind drifted. She mentally pictured herself introducing Severus to her parents and how they might react to her having a 'significant other' so many years older than herself. Then her mind remembered what the old fortuneteller said, and then imagined how her parents might react to the news of her divorcing Ron.

Severus’ own mind reflected on this perfect day. He had Hermione with him to satisfy him intellectually, physically and, yes, even emotionally – though he still had trouble coming to terms with that last aspect. Still, a vision of Hermione reclining in a hammock, gently swaying as the evening tropical breezes came in, book propped up on her lap while he was working on a potion in his personal lab painted a very appealing picture in his mind. He knew he couldn't ask her to come with him, but the thought was recurring to him with greater frequency.

“I believe I promised you dancing,” Severus offered. “Unless you'd like to pass.”

“Not a chance,” she replied, anxious to fulfill a fantasy she’d had since purchasing the dress – a fantasy of Severus' hands on her back as they danced.

Severus set the music box to something slow and sultry. “I Left My Heart in San Francisco” played, since it had quickly become one of her favorite requests.

As they danced, their feet barely moving, Severus' hand was placed delicately at Hermione's waist, but didn't remain there long as his hand began stroking along her spine, eliciting shuddering sighs from parted lips.

The next song was a tango, in which there was no restraint of their desires. Severus' hands
possessively skated up Hermione's legs, appreciating the feel of the silk under his hands. He roughly brought her chest to meet his, his eyes burning with need.
Hermione didn't know how much longer she could dance without succumbing to her greater desire
to disrobe and have Severus yet again. She snaked a leg around his, hitching it high up on the back of his thigh, skating it back down with increasing pressure, covetously clutching him to her like a clinging vine.

The song ended and another one began, but neither moved. Severus' hand went to release Hermione's dress from her shoulders, but found it resisting him.

Hermione breathed, “Finite Incantatem,” and the spell holding her dress in place ended.

Severus slipped the dress from her shoulders and watched as it fell to her hips. Gently pushing it past her hips, it finally fell to her feet.

Offering his hand, he helped Hermione step away from the dress, and stepped back to admire her in nothing but her knickers, thigh-high stockings and heels. Her wand was held in a small loop at the top of her stockings.

“Absolutely ravishing,” he breathed with awe.

It was only for the fact they had already made love many times he was able to take his time. Hermione, younger and with more energy, tried to keep the slow pace set by Severus.

She tried not to hurry as she undid his buttons, making sure to take time to suckle and play with his nipples. If it felt so good for her, it must equally feel as good for a man as well. Severus threw his head back and let an exhaustive sigh slowly escape his lips, aroused by the sensation of Hermione's lips on him.

Once his shirt was unbuttoned, Hermione led him over to the settee. She had enjoyed the sight of Severus looking up at her from between her legs earlier in the day, and she wanted to return the favor. After undoing his trousers and then removing his shoes and socks with slow purpose, she guided him to sit down before settling between his knees, kneeling before him.

There was something empowering to Hermione when she would perform fellatio on Severus. The swirl of her tongue around his head, alternating the intensity of suction, the intoxicating look of adoration he would give her as she glanced at him through lowered lashes before she engulfed him entirely in her mouth and watched his brow knit in overwhelming consternation. The way his hands would reverently play with the locks of her hair, sometimes gently guiding her pace with the coaxing of his hands, but never with force.
Severus was feeling his fortitude flagging and summoned two vials: one for himself to restore vigor, and one for Hermione since the lubrication potion had long worn off for her.

The rest of the night was spent making love by the light of the fireplace. Its light struck dramatic shadows against their bodies as they made love on the settee, on the floor, against the wall and in his bed.

After Severus climaxed the final time that night, he was asleep before Hermione could even remove herself from their tangled legs. Hermione walked as quietly as she could, though with great difficulty since she was feeling permanently bow-legged, and she was having trouble walking to the toilet to take care of her needs for the last time that night. Walking back to the bed to climb in along Severus, Hermione braced a hand against the wall for support, not minding the slight tenderness between her legs as she walked.

Feeling equally exhausted as her lover, Hermione slept deeply, but not enough so that she didn't notice the way Severus talked in his sleep or tossed and turned. It was normal for Severus to have a restless subconscious, but he had dealt with this pattern for so long, he was unaware of it, forgetting by morning the troubles that bubbled up as easily as others forgot their dreams.

That night, as Severus and Hermione slept, Hurricane Isabel, which had been threatening the fragile fluxweed crops, dissipated over Ontario, Canada after running roughshod over the southern and mid-Atlantic states. If there was nothing harvested during September's full moon, hopefully Hurricane Isabel did not ruin what might be harvested in October.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I commissioned luxsidius, on DeviantArt, to do a bit of fanart for this chapter featuring Hermione and Severus dancing the tango with her wearing that infamous little black dress. You can view it here: http://luxsidius.deviantart.com/art/Snape-Hermione-567239887

On my Tumblr page, I have the fanart work, along with a GIF of the artwork as it's being created: http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/post/137090218690/fanart-by-luxsidius-commissioned-by-me-for

Hurricane Isabel did dissipate on Saturday, September 20th, 2003, same day Hermione went to the spa with Severus. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Isabel

And once again, thanks to be wonderful betas, JuneW and Rogue_Panda.
Chapter Summary

Hermione is getting rather worn out from her long days at work and long nights at Severus' flat, while she does her best to avoid Ron.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Fifty-Nine: “Dolor Hic Tibi Proderit Olim” (Someday this pain will be useful to you)

Disclaimer:
There once was a writer named J.K. Rowling. She came up with the concept of Harry Potter and wrote a bunch of books from which we borrow her characters, concepts, and ideas. Then came along a scary fanfic writer named Betz who disclaimed ownership of any of the HP universe. After disclaiming, Betz slunk back into her writing hole to write more fanfic, while Rowling turned a forgiving blind eye. And the scary fanfic author didn't make a single dime from this fanfic, though she spent good money on fan art commissions to go along with it. The End.

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While his Wednesday night client, Molly Weasley, rambled on, Severus found his mind drifting back to his weekend with Hermione.

There was the tender hand reaching to seek him out in the dark of night, followed by Hermione snuggling up alongside of him once more, closing the space between them. He remembered the strange sensation of waking up next to a warm body, an experience long forgotten but welcomed. The quiet rustle of the Sunday Daily Prophet in the kitchen as they both read in silence while eating a simple breakfast Severus had prepared, then a lazy morning tussle in the bed before Hermione left to meet Ginny for some dress shopping, and the strangeness of parting by the light of day instead of saying their farewells in the dark of night.

“Eduardo?”

“Qué?” Severus shook his head, acknowledging that his mind was elsewhere, and he was rousing himself from his reverie. “A thousand pardons, Señora. Your description reminded me of my family back home in España. I was lost in remembrance,” he lied convincingly, since Molly did
drone on about domestic issues quite a lot.

“Oh, I am so sorry you miss your family back in Spain,” Molly assumed with sympathy. “Maybe you should visit them. Nothing that a good visit with family doesn't fix.”

The masked wizard was unsure if the senior Mrs. Weasley had no idea that Miss Brown only employed former Death Eaters in her gigolo enterprise or if she was unaware of the travel restrictions of the Death Eater Decree. Either way, Severus just hummed in agreement with her and dropped the subject.

As the evening plodded along, Severus did his best to concentrate on the conversation, lest he slip and speak without his accent, which he nearly did before.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Reinvigorated, Severus was back to researching an edible body paint, much to his employer's delight. The weekend together with Hermione, in addition to their bi-weekly meetings of research and sex, had metaphorically and literally put the pink back in Severus' cheeks.

Draco had given his post-test analysis of the libido enhancing potions, as well as Ginny's own notes, remarking that the potion enhanced feelings that already existed and seemed to remove a lot of inhibition regarding declaration of emotions and physical expression of desire. Indeed, Severus could attest to that, having had Hermione come on to him rather unabashedly in a manner that was not like her usual slightly reserved self. Though even before the development of the potion, Severus was doing a fine job of breaking down those reservations himself.

Hermione and he had agreed that nothing said during their experiments should be taken seriously, but the feedback from Draco confirmed his fears that the things he had exclaimed to Hermione were more than just some potion-induced hysteria. He had not declared his love to Hermione, but he had been rather effusive in his praise of aspects of her he found alluring, and not just of the physical kind, during his short periods under the influence of the elixir.

Miss Brown had given her own feedback, giving a potent dose to some unknown male, exclaiming that it was the most mind-blowing love-making she had experienced. She wanted Severus to put all his efforts into finishing finding the right dosage of the Capresee mother of pearl so he could begin testing length of effectiveness without taking an antidote and its shelf-life potency, when he wasn't working on the edible body paint.

This aspect was somewhat daunting to Severus. Miss Brown wanted him to test what the effects would be if he took the libido- and the male-enhancing potions together. Could a wizard handle such a combination of both, and would there be any side effects? She also wanted to have him and
Hermione both take the libido-enhancing potion to see what happens when both partners take a full dose. The final test would be for Severus to take the male-enhancing potion and, concurrently, he and Hermione would both take the libido-enhancing potion.

So far, he and Hermione had taken the antidote rather quickly after ingesting the test potion in turns. He began to personally understand why so many Potions masters would up marrying their female apprentices, and why married Potions masters rarely took female apprentices on, which explained the dearth of females in his profession – love potions were par for the course to master during an apprenticeship. He knew this beforehand, but only in abstract. It was just the experience of experimentation that opened his eyes to more aspects of the master/apprentice relationship.

Severus didn't worry about Dobmeir making any amorous moves on Hermione after Severus left, knowing that the age difference would be too great and that the aged master had great-grandchildren who were about Hermione's age. Besides, Dobmeir was still very much in love with his recently deceased wife and would probably be mourning her for the next ten years.

Before Severus would have to face such a potent combination of amorous theriacs, he and Hermione would still have to find the right dosage of the enigmatic Italian ingredient.

Every morning Hermione did her best to rouse herself early and get to work before Trevor, presuming that there would eventually be a shipment of fluxweed picked during a full moon. There was a box of fluxweed picked during a new moon that arrived the week before, so that gave her hope that one would be arriving the next week, if there had been a harvest on September 10th. Fluxweed picked during a new moon was in far less demand than picked during a full moon, so that led to her assumption that at least a couple boxes would be coming in soon.

Hunched over her bench, instinctively clutching a hot cup of tea in between sips, the weary Mrs. Weasley rubbed the crust away from the corners of her eyes. Hermione had fled the flat when she heard Ron waking up and wanted to get out of there as fast as possible, trying to ignore her husband as best as she could. She had left her still steeping cup of tea on the kitchen counter back at her flat untouched and was in need of her ritual caffeine fix.

On Tuesday, Hermione and Ron both informed James that they would no longer be seeing him for marriage counseling. After the nasty blow-ups over the succeeding weeks, it seemed like a natural progression. Both had given up on the marriage but were going through the motions, with Ron occasionally trying to claim some of his husbandly rights in the bedroom, which she mostly parried with claims of headaches, the Old Crone, or some gynecological malady of inconvenience she still needed to treat. Hermione, exhausted from her current schedule of work plus her moonlighting as a young Potions apprentice-cum-Severus' lover, was beginning to wear out. If it was just sex, it was nothing she couldn't handle, but it was the potion-testing sessions that were exhausting on the body, followed by the equally taxing antidote reaction. Such drastic changes in the emotional and physical state were tiring, and to do so multiple times in one evening was an even greater stress on
She could have rested up on the two days she wasn't seeing Severus, but she was either at work or hiding out at Flourish and Blotts, reading to kill time until closing, before going home when she was certain that Ron was asleep in bed and wouldn't jump her bones yet again. Then there were the occasional times where Hermione just continued to pretend to be asleep while Ron did his business. If anything, their relationship had devolved into a situation of roommates with fringe benefits who avoided each other, though the “benefits” seemed to be strictly for Ron's sake.

It was times like this that Hermione wondered if Invigoration Draughts were as addictive to witches and wizards as conventional drug-based stimulants were to Muggles. She was unaware of such abuse cases in her world, but then again, the wizarding community was prone to dismiss a lot of problems that Muggles were far more likely admit.

It was Friday and Hermione was secretly hoping to not be invited to lunch with Harry, per their recent ritual. If anything, a nap on the couch in her office was more welcomed than a hot meal in her stomach. She had been stocking the cupboard at home to the gills with all sorts of healthy foods, as Ron requested, so there was plenty for her to eat. She made sure to bring some of that fresh fruit to keep on her desk for a quick snack, in addition to her packing a daily sandwich. Still, if Harry showed up, she would go happily, trying to make no show of a change in her routine that might signal something was amiss. There was no reason to give Harry any more cause into poking into her life, given her current extracurricular activities. Thankfully, he never came around that day.

As the day drew to a close, Hermione dreaded the coming weekend. She and her husband agreed that she would continue to attend Quidditch matches when played within the British Isles to give no rise to suspicion within their families, the team, or the gossip magazines. Ron was a rising star; photographs of the star Chudley Cannons Keeper at the recent Italian broom convention were already circulating, touting him as some international hopping sports star. Fortunately, the gossip magazines had left her alone, since touting the wife seemed to put the kibosh on the sex appeal of a player and hence magazine sales from young adoring female fans. Hermione didn't mind the idea of gaggles of young witches lusting after her husband since she didn't. She ignored the thought of young wizards lusting after Ron, and him taking them up on their offers.

Hermione dragged her arse home, having stayed late again at work again, to find Ron at home, dressed and waiting for her.

“Um, hi.” Ron shuffled his feet a bit and grimaced at the discomfort of it all.

Blinking vacantly, Hermione had to rouse herself from the slight shock of running into her husband before she finally replied. “Hello.”
They stared at each other for a moment before Hermione marched in, closing the door and heading off to the bathroom to disrobe and wash the day's stench from her person.

“Um, I was thinking maybe we could go to dinner tonight,” Ron called out from the bedroom. “That way you don't have to cook.”

Standing under the pounding stream of hot water as it washed over her aching shoulders and back, Mrs. Weasley contemplated just how disastrous this dinner out might be compared with the last few times – the dinner party, their anniversary dinner, and that time with the over-priced rubbery chicken. Still, Ron wasn't much of a cook and Hermione actually welcomed the idea of not having to step into the kitchen. Besides, it wasn’t like their meals at home were that much more pleasant, as it usually involved silence and awkwardness when they would occasionally eat together. Still, the risk was that this would be in a public setting and therefore something a snooping photographer could catch should they have a blow-up.

“Sure, I'd love to,” Hermione called out over the sounds of the water running. It would mean getting dressed instead of throwing on a frumpy yet oh-so-much-more comfortable nightshirt and robe, but it was a sacrifice she was willing to make that night to avoid cooking.

The restaurant was a better class than they usually frequented, on the rare occasion they did go out, barring the Grand Royal Supper Club. Instead of the usual dingy dust-covered iron sconces dripping old wax, and smoke-darkened oil lamps, the place was lit with cream-coloured candles, some back-lit with mirrors to amplify the light that was diffused by frosted glass sconces. It almost looked Muggle in influence, if it weren't for the complete lack of electricity. The linens were crisp and the décor almost Zen-like in its minimalism. Hermione was glad she at least pulled out something decent to wear or she would have felt under-dressed for the occasion.

As they walked to their table, Hermione noticed a few pairs of eyes flash in recognition of her husband, giving him fleeting smiles before focusing their attention back on their own dining companions. It did not escape Hermione's attention that they were seated at a choice table partially screened from the other diners, not in some forgotten corner near the kitchen door.

Husband and wife avoided conversation for a little while longer while glancing at their menus. Once food was ordered and menus collected, there was no more pretense to avoid talking to one another.

Hermione broke the ice to get the talk flowing, since she could see the dismay in Ron's knit brow as he tried to think of something to say. “How are your workouts coming along?” There was little enthusiasm in her question, and it was said more to be polite than out of any real interest in the
“Fine. I've progressed faster than anticipated, so they'll be cutting back on my muscle-gaining potions and we'll start working on sculpting fat away next.” Ron gave a half-shrug as if trying to converse with his wife was as equally exhausting as Hermione found the act herself.

'Thank God,' she internally sighed, hoping that the glassware and dishes would no longer be the victims of Ron's periodic outbursts.

“That's good news, Ron.”

He nodded, a look of disquiet stealing over his face causing his brow to temporarily knit. Neither had anything else to say in response to the other.

There was a lengthy pause before she plodded on. “And any update on your contract negotiation? What does your agent say?”

“Oh!” Ron's face changed quickly from troubled to relieved. “That's going really well. The agent that Viktor recommended is in final negotiations with the Cannons and Bascom Nettleton. We were going to sign in early November when the season ends after the last game, November 1st, but with the big Ministry masked ball on Halloween, we'll be doing it in late October so we can make the announcement during the event when all the press is already there.”

“I saw a photo of you and Bascom in Italy in one of the rags floating around the Ministry staff room while I was making tea. How was that trip?” she prodded him, hoping to avoid talking and happy to let Ron ramble on.

“Rome is just as pigeon-infested as ever, the pasta still as delicious, and the people just as 'friendly' as well,” he quipped. He was making reference to the way that the complete strangers they encountered during their honeymoon, all local Italians, were rather affectionate in greetings and farewells, compared to Ron’s and Hermione's more subdued British dispositions.

Ron's wife laughed in remembrance of seemingly better times.

Hermione wanted to ask about the hotel he stayed at, but was interrupted when the food arrived. Before the waiter excused himself, she asked him, “What is this on my food?”
“It is a cucumber and basil foam on top of your leek and salmon ravioli,” the young wizard replied with the same attitude one would use to placate a small child in order to prevent an impending temper tantrum.

Hermione thought it looked an awful lot like the frog spawn she had tested earlier in the day, but held her tongue. She had decided to scrape it to the side instead of protesting about the incorporation of the Muggle fad of molecular gastronomy, which she had previously heard about from her mother.

Considering how the restaurant looked more at home in Muggle London than wizarding London, it shouldn't have surprised Hermione that some of the culinary fads might have been incorporated into the menu as well.

Ron was dining on some overly dressed plate of offal. The kidneys and heart of some unknown animal were sliced and presented with a variety of sauces used more for decoration than to flavor, topped with a dollop of caviar. Hermione thought it was a bit pretentious when it would probably taste a whole lot better served up in a pie with a good stock gravy.

Both of them began to relax as they dined. It was the most pleasant time spent in each other’s company in a long time.

As they neared finishing up with their entrées, Ron tried to keep his voice in the same light tone, but failed when he asked, “So you mentioned you might be starting a Potions apprenticeship sometime in the future. Any update on when that might happen?”

Hermione nearly dropped her fork, but kept her grip on it before gathering her wits. After taking a sip of wine, she stared at her plate when she answered, “There are some… contingencies that have to be resolved before that can progress any further.”

She tried to make it sound final, hoping Ron would pursue another topic, but he pressed on. “What sort of contingencies? What has to happen?”

Mrs. Weasley had to craft her wording very carefully so that she would belie nothing she didn't intend to.

“There are some legal matters to resolve and other things I am not privy to,” she lied. The legal
matters had been long settled by Lavender's lawyers and, on everything else, she was in the know.

“Well, this current job is just wearing you out. You're there late nearly every night, plus I don't know how you have the energy to go out dancing on Thursday nights.”

Hermione choked on her last bite of ravioli and almost spilled water down her front trying to wash it down.

Ron continued, “I was just wondering how soon you'd be moving out of this job into your position. You did mention that you'd have a chance to earn money while doing your apprenticeship.”

Hermione realized she hadn't worked out with Lavender how much her wages would be. She knew it wasn't going to be much, but certainly hopefully at least as much as what she was earning working at the lab at the Department of Standards & Regulations. There really was no point in negotiating monies until the last ingredient for the Polyjuice Potion had been procured.

“I still have to negotiate how much I'll earn, but as for timing, if things go well I may be starting before the end of the year,” she said, trying to keep from digging herself into hole she'd later regret.

’If anything, this marriage will be ending by the end of this year,’ she thought with resignation.

Hermione wasn't about to start volunteering that she was going to get royalties on two potions she helped develop so far, considering she wasn't even technically working for Lavender yet. How could she explain that? Besides, she was not counting on anything until those Galleons were in her hot little hands, or safely in her and Ron's vault at Gringotts, or – if they divorced – in her own vault.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Ron offered.

'Smuggle some fluxweed picked during the full moon back into England without getting caught, for starters.’

“Thanks for the offer, but there's nothing to be done but wait.” That at least was true.
Back at their flat, Hermione went into the kitchen to make a cup of relaxing herbal tea before bed and noticed something amiss.

“Roooooon?” she called out of the kitchen, the pitch of her voice rising at the end.

“Yeah?” Ron was getting undressed in the bedroom.

“Where did the lemons go?”

Ron came into the kitchen dressed only in his underpants. “You mean those dried up leathery old things? I threw them out. I tried juicing one and there was nothing to juice, just dried pulp.”

Hermione put her hands on her hips and huffed in annoyance.

“What? Don't tell me you wanted to keep rotting fruit? I thought you'd be thankful that I helped cleaned up around here,” Ron began to yell. “You complain I don't do enough around here. Well, I've been helping with trash and cleaning the kitchen a lot more. And since you're at work late, I’ve been making my own dinners more often and cleaning up after myself. I thought you'd at least appreciate that.”

Standing in the kitchen with her head down, Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose and shut her eyes tightly trying to keep her temper, and not encourage Ron to blow up once again since it took little to provoke him into screaming at her.

“I was drying them out because I was going to experiment on them in that state,” she ground out, trying to be patient. To end the confrontation she conceded and gave up. “It doesn't matter, I can get some more at the Hogwarts Cemetery.”

“The cemetery?” Ron shrieked as if confronted with a spider.

“Yes, Ron, the cemetery. Those came from the lemon tree growing from Dumbledore's graveside,” she explained, understanding Ron's fear regarding things taken from graveyards and their usual association with dark and forbidden magic. “Headmistress Sprout gave them to me since it is so unusual for a citrus tree to grow at such a northern latitude, and the fruit it bears is strange as well. I was going to experiment on them to see if there was something magical to the fruit, but you threw them away before I got a chance.”
“Maybe if you weren't at work so late, you'd have the time to get around to it. But I don't think it would have mattered; they were dry as paper, so I chucked the lot. Maybe if you told me I wouldn't have thrown them out.” Ron folded his arms petulantly, which made him appear twice as wide with his muscles budging from his shoulders and arms.

Ron was pouting and Hermione was made to feel the bad guy. The jutting of his lower lip hinted at the ghost of a boy Hermione used to know, but seemed to have faded away since they married. She knew she shouldn't have expected Ron to read her mind, but she wished he would have mentioned something before tossing them. Given how she was avoiding her husband, it's not like there were many chances to ask her, though.

Hermione just wanted to go to bed and get a good night's sleep before having to face another Saturday – playing the dutiful wife in the Quidditch stands, while wondering if Ron was buggering his teammates in the locker room after the game. She had put out of her mind that she caught her husband leaving Blaise Zabini's flat after a boisterous shag, but the vision of her husband in the showers naked with a bunch of other well-built Quidditch players brought that memory fresh into her mind while she waited for him after the games ended.

As she attempted to leave the kitchen, Hermione was faced with a wall of muscle. Ron was standing in the doorway blocking her exit, his arms still crossed. She looked up at him blankly, wondering why he wouldn't move, until he gave her a smile that insinuated that he was in the mood to claim some of his husbandly rights again.

It didn't surprise Hermione that he was in the mood for a shag. Dinner wasn't a painful experience for once, and any night that didn't end in a fight gave Ron the impression that his wife would be in the mood for fucking as well.

Hermione smiled up at Ron coyly. “How about I give you a massage before we begin,” she said, trying to imply that her attitude had thawed somewhat.

He gave her a big, eager grin which was as sincere as the erection now plainly pressing against his underpants.

“Just let me get some oil,” Hermione explained. “Go lie down, I'll be in soon.”

Thankfully Hermione had gone out and purchased some almond oil, lavender oil, and essence of sopophorous bean recently. Remembering Severus' directions, she made a mixture to help her
husband fall asleep, instead of facing another round of sex with him.

“How is it that you can use your hands to spread it on the skin and it wouldn't cause you to fall asleep, yet it works on the person you're applying it to?” Hermione remembered asking Severus.

“That's because the palms of the hands and soles of the feet have a special layer of skin called stratum lucidum that slows the absorption rate of the oil, in addition to calluses. The oil, spread over a large portion of the skin, such as the back, allows for quicker absorption. You may feel a slight relaxation, but as soon as your husband falls asleep and you wash your hands, you should not succumb to the sleeping agent.”

Hermione found her husband lying nude, on his stomach with his chin propped up on his overlapped hands, grinning like some gingered Cheshire cat. Ignoring the knowing smile he gave her, she poured a small amount of the unctuous elixir into her hand, before setting the bottle down on the table next to the bed and straddling Ron's hips.

“You know, 'Mione, this would be a whole lot sexier if you were undressed, too,” he insinuated.

“Patience,” she cooed.

For good measure, he bucked his hips up underneath her to hint at his eagerness and Hermione nearly lost her balance and almost fell off of him and the bed. To keep the mood playful, and to avoid it devolving into a fight if she let her true emotions come forth, she slapped his arse with the hand not cupping the oil and insisted he be good or he wouldn't get any massage.

“I know what I need you to massage after my back,” Ron insinuated with a lustful drawl and a look from the corner of his eye.

“Shhhh. Patience,” she kept insisting, trying not to let her upper lip curl with a sneer.

Finally having a chance to begin, she spread the oil across his back in broad strokes. His back was much wider than the last time she gave him a massage, and she was having trouble recalling the last time she gave him one.

With the heel of her hand, Hermione dug into Ron's longissumus thoracis, beginning from his lower back and moving up before applying pressure to his trapezius, mentally naming the muscles.
With Ron's current physique, it was much easier to see where each muscle was.

Ron gave out a long appreciative sigh and dreamily announced, “That feels fucking amazing.” He stifled a yawn as he muttered something about massaging her breasts before quickly dropping off, and he began snoring in his usual fashion, signaling deep sleep.

Hermione went to wash up and hide the massage oil, lest Ron think it was appropriate for applying to his face for moisturizer – and lest he figure out she put something in the oil after falling asleep face-first on the bathroom tiles. Anything in her arsenal to keep Ron off her was a weapon she was going to keep to herself.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Let's welcome my new beta, Cytherea, and give a round of thanks to her and my other beta, JuneW, for their hard work on this chapter.

The stratum lucidum (Latin for "clear layer") is a thin, clear layer of dead skin cells in the epidermis named for its translucent appearance under a microscope. It is readily visible by light microscopy only in areas of thick skin, which are found on the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. Located between the stratum granulosum and stratum corneum layers, it is composed of three to five layers of dead, flattened keratinocytes. The keratinocytes of the stratum lucidum do not feature distinct boundaries and are filled with eleidin, an intermediate form of keratin.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stratum_lucidum
Chapter Summary

With the trial of Pansy Parkinson's murder over, the tables have turned and now Hermione needs to be there for Severus.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Sixty
“Chicken Soup for the Soul”

Disclaimer: Once upon a fanfic dreary, while I wrote on tired and leery,
Over many a quaint and curious chapter of forgotten woe—
While I wrote a load of crap, suddenly there came a pinging tap,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my instant message window.
“’Tis lawyers,” I muttered, “reminding me to disclaim ownership of Harry Potter for it belongs to
JK Rowling—
Only this and nothing more.”

A/N: Disclaimer a parody of Edgar Allan Poe's “The Raven”

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“Your head's not in the game today, Richard,” Calpurnia gently chastised Severus.

There had been a great many things on the former Head of Slytherin House's mind as of late. Hermione informed him that there was no September shipment of fluxweed picked during a full moon, despite the delivery of some picked during a new moon. The hurricane season along the North American Atlantic coast had stayed away from the growing fields once Hurricane Isabel passed through in mid-September, so there was still hope that a crop might have been picked during October's full moon four days prior on the 10th.

In addition to the Polyjuice Potion weighing heavily on his mind, there was the Amorous Enhancing Potion he and Hermione had been testing. During their last testing session, Hermione confessed about the magical dildos the twins had sent her and suggested that she bring them over sometime for them to incorporate into their sexual repartee. Though they had made a promise to discount anything said under the influence of the potion, Hermione did admit, once she came down off of it, that she was still up for playing around with them if Severus was still interested. His mind
kept drifting back to what fun he was going to have the next time Hermione came over with new toys.

Then there was the recent rush development caused by Miss Brown informing him that several dress makers and couture mavens had asked for the temporary hair dye, but in bright colors to match many of the dresses they were selling. Severus and Draco had to spend many recent evenings coloring their hair in shades of gold, silver, bronze, copper, crimson red, electric blue, peacock green, puce, cerise, forest green, tangerine, turquoise, royal purple, cyan, rose pink, salmon, baby pink, dark coral, aquamarine, mint green, maroon, kelly green, aubergine-plum, lemon yellow, and, of course, lavender. Even Hermione had to help, participating as a test subject of several shades. Severus took pity on her and kept it to three different colors during each visit before they ended the experimentation on her hair and started experimenting with her hormones instead. The metallic colors took three washings to rinse clean, and Severus was still trying to figure out how to fix the solution to wash out in one shampooing.

“I'm quite sorry, but your descriptions of the upcoming Ministry ball have me thinking about what a stellar gala it will be,” Severus said.

Calpurnia knew her chess companion was lying, but out of courtesy, she allowed the lie to pass as if it were truth. Severus knew she was aware of his lie. Neither acknowledged when they knew the other was lying, as it would have been rude to point out the obvious.

Severus forced himself to focus on the rest of his game out of cordiality, even though his lapse of attention had already cost him the game.

Ron was getting wise, or at least starting to put two and two together. When hinting he was interested in sex, he began using vulgar euphemisms and gestures more often, pantomiming that his cock was his wand, swishing and flicking it in an erect state. 'That's not fourteen inches,' Hermione dryly thought to herself. Instead of plainly speaking her mind, she coyly suggested more massages, to which Ron rebuffed and insisted on a massage afterwards instead since he began noticing Hermione's special touch was making him drift off to sleep before his needs were met.

'That defeats the whole fucking purpose of the massage, then.'

Hermione was in no mood to shag her husband. At least she still had the menstrual card to play and begged off by saying it was 'that time,' to which Ron immediately agreed with a slight grimace of disgust and went off to the bedroom for a good wank instead.

As she sat in the kitchen with a cup of raspberry leaf tea, the pensive witch ignored the faint sounds
coming from her bedroom.


"At least Severus isn't repulsed by menstrual flow," she thought, recalling the day before at Severus' flat. She had offered to put off sex if he was bothered by it, to which he replied he wasn't at all. They still experimented with the Arousal Enhancing Potion; the sex that followed was quite surreal with Severus at the end of their coupling unfazed by the sight of her menstrual blood smeared all over his manhood, down his thighs, and clotted in his pubic hair. There was a frothy pink foam still clinging to his sac and base of his cock.

She still couldn't believe she suggested bringing dildos over for sexual play.

After all these years married to Ron, Hermione had never had sex during her menstrual cycle and was a little shocked herself at the sight of it. At least Severus had the good sense from experience to lay down several towels on the bed, or she feared it would have looked like a murder scene where she had lain.

This cycle was proving to be rather taxing on her since she had skipped the previous month. Still, Hermione should be glad, at least, she wasn't pregnant, though with the potion she took every night she had sex with Severus for pregnancy and venereal diseases, per Ministry regulation, there was no chance of that happening.

As she was finishing her tea, she heard her husband call for her from the bedroom.

"Don't tell me you changed your mind," she prayed.

“'Mione? 'Mione! Can I get one of those great massages?” he wheedled, as he was wiping up the dribbles of cum from his stomach and chest with a tissue. “My muscles feel so relaxed afterwards, it really takes all the knots out of my back, especially when I can't get a time slot with the team's masseur.”

Now Hermione's curiosity was piqued.

Coming into the bedroom, she surveyed her husband reclining on the bed and pulling out more tissues. She could have taught Ron that Arabic post-coitus cleaning spell she had learned from Severus, but then there would be the inevitable question of where she had learned a spell like that.
Ron, as a young wizard, had expounded with great authority that all the dark wizards came from Slytherin House. As an adult he also had an equally “profound opinion” about magic regarding things of a sexual nature and “good” witches not knowing those types of spells.

As Ron finished destroying the last of the soiled tissues with his wand, he beckoned her to come in and join him.

“So tell me more about how relaxed your muscles feel?” Hermione questioned her husband.

“When you're massaging my back, it's like wherever you rub with that oil, the next morning all the kinks and knots in my back are gone. Is there something special about that oil?” he asked.

'Bugger!' Hermione kept a sweet smile upon her lips. “Just some stuff that said 'Relaxing Massage Oil.'”

“It certainly does the job. Makes me drop right off,” Ron admitted.

'The jig is up. Double bugger.' Hermione started wondering about slipping a time-delayed sleeping agent into Ron's dinners on the nights when she was home early enough to cook.

“Well?” Ron flopped onto his stomach on his side of the bed. “Can I get another massage?”

Hermione supposed it was better than Ron up half the night wanking away, keeping her up in the process, and it would only take a few moments anyway.

“Sure,” she replied as she went to fetch the elixir.

As during previous applications, Ron was snoring soundly in less than five minutes.

Curious to the muscle-relaxing properties, and given that she was going to go to bed anyway, Hermione tucked herself under the covers and took a small amount and rubbed it across the tops of her shoulders that were tight from work. As Hermione felt the warmth spread across where the simple potion made contact, she could feel her muscles twitch as they began to relax.
‘I should try applying this across my lower abdomen next time I get menstrual cramps,’ she thought just before she dropped off herself, sleeping more soundly than she had recently.

Severus was reading with great interest one of the books Ginny recently bought for him from the same Muggle bookstore Hermione showed her back in July. In order to conceal it, he had a dust jacket from one of his “boring old” potions tomes covering it, fitting it perfectly as if made for it. Should Moody continue to consider Miss Brown not above suspicion and inspect the Potions master’s office, he would merely see a room filled with Miss Brown's research materials and no incriminating books to tell otherwise.

Engrossed with reading about the local weather, rain patterns and temperature variations based on elevation, Severus didn't hear his employer enter his office.

“Severus? Severus!” his employer called out in louder tones, continuing to knock on his door despite having already opened it as she stood in the threshold.

Realizing her presence, he placed a bookmark in his book before setting it down.

“I didn't know a book on exotic fungi could hold your attention so raptly.”

“Quite,” he replied as he leaned back in his chair.

“Could you come to my office? I'd like to discuss a few things with you.” Lavender waited for Severus to nod his head in acceptance of her invite before going back to her office.

Severus could tell that there was something he wouldn't like by the way that Wonkle had already brought the tea service before he arrived. His employer was pouring him a cup before even asking if he wanted any. She even had a heaping pile of jammy thumb biscuits, and those lemon crème sandwich biscuits she rarely served, on a tiered tray with the service. He loved those lemon crème sandwiches as much, possibly more, than the jammy thumb biscuits.

“Will this be our usual Friday status meeting, or is the Minister of Magic stopping by for a visit,” he drawled, as he ran a finger along a freshly washed doily, surveying how she had some of her nicest linens, crispy pressed, laid neatly on the low table before them.
“First of all, I want to thank you for rushing the job of the new hair colors. We're selling them as fast as we can manufacture and get them to the shops.” Lavender took a sip of tea that seemed more perfunctory than enjoyable.

Severus looked about and casually observed, “Won't Draco be joining us for tea?”

“I'll be having a separate meeting with Draco later on. He's busy at the moment.” She didn't elaborate, which was odd since she usually explained what Draco was busy working on at the time to explain his absence.

“I'm more than happy to come back at a later time so you can speak with us both, since I know you have a busy schedule,” Severus offered, trying to show her hand, since he could tell she was trying to soften him up for something.

“No, no. I have time.” She gave a constricted sigh as if trying to not show too much of her hand, though she knew Severus was on to her.

“Then, please, continue.” He leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs with a show of casual relaxation, a counterpoint to his employer's growing agitation.

“As you know, the Ministry's Halloween masked ball is two weeks from today.” She placed her tea cup down and folded her hands on her lap, doing a fair imitation of a much younger and far less confident McGonagall.

Severus held his tongue about that point being obvious, waiting for her prologue to continue unabated.

“And given that, should certain factors of the weather in North America cooperate, you may be retiring from your position. And relocating as well.” She swallowed hard and she could see her struggle as she defiantly jutted her chin in the air and announced, “Which means that given that 'Sebastian Delgado' will be leaving my employ nearly around the same time that one of my 'Death Eater gigolos' flees the country, that may be a bit obvious. So at the Ministry's masked ball, I need you to appear as Sebastian Delgado, Spanish accent and all, in order to give credence to my claim that it is mere coincidence that 'Sebastian Delgado' goes back to Spain at the same time Severus Snape manages to escape.”

Severus glared at her for a moment before simply replying in a quiet, threatening tone, “What?”
His employer had even hinted previously that Severus should attend the recently announced Ministry Halloween Masked Ball, dyeing his hair and employing other simple disguise methods that did not use charms or transfiguration, such as make-up to darken his skin tone, something stuffed down his shirt to give him a pot belly and so on. She even suggested Severus use his “Spanish accent”, having received an owl from Molly Weasley about the “gentleman with the foreign accent” and her now weekly tea and harping bookings with Severus.

“You heard me. I don't like it either, but I have to cover my arse,” she threw back at him.

“And you're not asking Draco—” he began.

“Draco will hopefully be doing this as well.” She looked as nonplussed as Severus. “Draco has a nom de plume for his work, too, seeing how I can't exactly say Draco Malfoy, famous ex-Death Eater, is working in a non-sanctioned capacity.”

Severus was unaware of Draco using a false name and wondered why he never made mention of it before, but dismissed further contemplating on the matter in order to concentrate on the matter at hand.

“I'm speaking to Draco later and making the same request as I am presenting to you.” Lavender got up and began pacing around her office. “I have just as much to lose. Should I not provide any proof that Sebastian Delgado and James White ever walked the earth, then if you succeed in leaving and Moody gets it into his head that I helped you escape, then all this is for nothing. All my money and yours will be confiscated. That's the end of your royalties and my life should I survive a Dementor's Kiss.”

“Draco's false name is James White?” was all that Severus could ask.

“You can ask him about that later, but what I need to know is if you'll come to the ball,” she asked, looking a bit frantic that Severus might balk, which he was considering doing.

Still, he did see the point of her needing him to make an appearance under his alias.

“It's a masked ball and, from all the chatter in social circles, people are showing up masked hoping that between their outfits, the hair dye and the masks, no one will guess who they are,” she offered to convince him. “And we can get a fake padded belly for you, and use hair dye to hide your
signature locks. I'll even pay for dress robes to be fitted with your new 'pot belly.'"

“A pot belly?” He cocked a brow at the thought of himself sporting a less than svelte figure.

“And I'll brew some Ageing Potion for you both,” she added, hoping to convince him to go through with the idea. “Just show up, allow me to introduce you to a few people, shake a few hands, have a cup of punch, and then excuse yourself when the dancing starts.”

Severus contemplated it. If he could get himself back into the graces of the Dark Lord and play the role of faithful Death Eater for years, he could pretend to be Sebastian Delgado for one short evening.

“I'll do it on one condition,” he finally said.

“What,” she asked with hesitation, fearing some unreasonable request.

“That Draco must be older than me.”

His employer erupted into gales of laughter.

Severus didn't understand what was so funny, as it made sense that – to throw Moody and his ilk off Miss Brown's trail – if the Potions master was younger than the marketing executive, it would be harder to assume that young Malfoy and old 'James White' were one and the same.

“Draco is going to hate the fact that he'll be older than you,” she finally choked out.

“Considering that this helps assure him that the money he earned under your employ is safe, you'd be surprised what Draco is willing to put up with,” Severus explained.

Draco was used to the best growing up and reinforcing that vanity, but since having his fortune removed, concern over his finances became more an issue of security of the basic necessities than for flaunting status or strutting like a peacock. And then there was the issue of doing anything to help make sure his escape with Ginny ensured as few complications as possible. Besides, Severus could see the young wizard having some fun at the ball by dancing with Ginny right under Potter's
nose while being disguised as some doddering old wizard.

“But just in case, you'd better bring in some chocolate bonbons for Draco to help put him in the mood to acquiesce,” Severus noted, gesturing with his hand toward the tea service. “This morning, Kingsley informed us that the trial for Pansy's murderer is Monday, and Draco is feeling quite foul, and justifiably so.”

Severus could have sworn a flash of sympathy flickered across Miss Brown's face, despite remembering there was a great deal of animosity between the Gryffindor and Slytherin witches during their school years.

Momentarily relieved that the most awkward part of their conversation had been addressed, Lavender asked, “Now that that's out of the way, tell me about your progress on the Libido Enhancement Potion.”

“It's progressing. I still require a few more weeks for testing since I only see Hermione two nights a week.”

“Well, you can make it three, if Hermione is free on Saturdays. Miss Anne owled me last night to say her current paramour and she have gotten quite serious as of late and she's ready to end her visits to you, especially since she's bowed out of seeing you the past few weeks. She didn't want to say goodbye in person and make things awkward and complicated, so she wrote this note for me to hand to you when next I saw you,” Lavender informed him as she pulled a letter from her desk drawer and handed it over to its recipient.

Severus noted the clean and elegant penmanship on the envelope before tucking it into his robes to read later in private. “I suppose that if I'm back down to two clients a week, you'll have to find a third in order to have a pretense of me 'earning my keep,’” he insinuated with cold detachment.

“If the last ingredient was procured, I would say there would be no need to bother, but considering it is unknown how much longer we remain in limbo, it is best if we did keep up appearances.” Lavender refilled her cup of tea, but not before offering to refresh Severus', which he accepted.

“And the body paint?” she prompted him. “Is there any progress on that front?”

“Actually, yes,” he said plainly. “I think I may have come across a solution that makes it quick-drying, lickable, and peelable, and comes in several different fruity flavors. But I have some more
research to do before I can begin experimentation.”

Severus made no mention this time that Hermione was the one who came up with the idea of using instant jelly after hearing him complain bitterly about being uninspired regarding the edible body paints. She had promised to bring over a couple of boxes purchased from a Muggle market next time she came over. He was keen on trying the black currant and raspberry when she listed off flavors to choose from.

The Potions master silently wondered how much Miss Brown would complain about yet another potion quandary solved with Hermione's help. Though he did have to admit that jelly was an unusual dessert item in the wizarding world, outside of Hogwarts serving it up during Welcoming and Leaving Feasts, and that gelatin-based foods tended to be more of the savory aspic kind than sweet and fruity.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Hermione hoped Severus wasn't too disappointed that she couldn't come over Saturday at the last minute. She wrote in her reply that her husband had a game at home; it was unknown when the game would end and her presence, as Ron's wife, was expected. It was prudent of her to reject Severus' invitation to come over for an evening of potions experimentation, as the Chudley Cannons versus the French Marseilles Manticores Quidditch game didn't end until almost eleven that night. She was thankful at least she'd brought a Potions apprentice-level book Severus had given her several weeks back to study, in order to kill time until that damned elusive Golden Snitch finally turned up and was caught.

One thing Hermione looked forward too, should her marriage to Ron end, was the freeing up of her weekends from Quidditch games and mandatory attendance at all the Weasley gatherings that sucked up her little free time. She was looking to an evening with Severus involving Potions work, sex and a little splashing.

Knocking on the door Monday night, Hermione was greeted by a rather haunted looking Severus. By the look of his being and the half-empty bottle of spirits on the table by the settee, Hermione could tell something was gravely bothering him.

“What is it? What happened?” she asked. Concern was etched deeply in her face as Severus let go of her hand limply and gracelessly threw himself into a chair, indicating he was slightly drunk.

“You do know about the murder of Pansy Parkinson?” Severus asked, sounding bitter and angry.

“Yes, from what I read of the papers,” Hermione admitted, though she did not mention that Ginny had told her that Harry stumbled upon a murder scene that she later surmised was Pansy's murder.
She also recalled that the murder happened the same night as her anniversary, but kept that to herself as well.

“And are you aware of the prior betrothal that Mr. Malfoy and Miss Parkinson had, which was broken upon the fall of the Dark Lord?” Severus said, over-enunciating some of the words to compensate for his drunken state.

“No.” Hermione went to kneel by Severus to hold his hand in comfort and to observe his face more closely. “I was unaware of that fact.”

“Though he had no great love for Miss Parkinson, they did have a sort of friendship, and after beginning working for Miss Brown, he gave Pansy a monthly stipend to help her since, as you are aware…” Severus turned his head and fixed Hermione with a sardonic smile while his eyes became even more distant. “… our job opportunities are few and far between other than selling our arses.” He swept his hand across the room, indicating the room itself as a place where he peddled his own flesh for coin. “Or scrubbing toilets at the Ministry,” he added at the end without disguising his rancor.

He continued snarling at no one in particular, “Though that is what she did, when she wasn't stripping in seedy ‘wizards’ clubs,’ as they call them. ‘Strip clubs,’ if you want to be less euphemistic and more realistic.”

Severus was drunk and angry. Hermione had seen him angry at her once before and that scared her; Severus rambling, drunk and angry was a different beast and possibly more frightening. He had the scent of a cornered animal about him.

“Draco asked me to go with him for moral support to the trial today,” Severus hoarsely croaked as he began to recall, lost in introspection. “We sat in the back with our hoods up like the other witches and wizards who came to watch the circus spectacle, but not be seen, in the highest and darkest rows of the Wizengamot chamber.”

Hermione Summoned a cushion from the settee to make sitting on the floor next to Severus’ chair more comfortable, while holding his hand as he continued to talk.

“Were you aware your friend, Potter, was the one who came upon Miss Parkinson's body?” he asked.
Hermione somberly nodded.

Severus continued on. “All those years I resented the boy for being famous because his mother...” He paused, as he choked on the words. “She loved him more than her own life. He was merely an infant; it was the focus of her love that saved him. Her love was never celebrated. He was. It was the fact that her love that saved him and made him who he was, temporarily destroying...”

Severus shut his eyes tight to fight back the tears as he returned to his previous drunken train of thought.

“When the verdict was read, despite all the obvious evidence short of a Pensieve memory of him slaughtering her himself, he was rendered not guilty and Potter objected. Moody gets to use Veritaserum on me on a whim, yet they would not use it in this trial. The only reason why Potter was able to address the Wizengamot was because of his celebrity. As much as I loathed him for years for his unearned celebrity, as much as I thought he received undue favoritism because of it, he used it to try to change the Wizengamot’s judgment. But to no avail. The murderous bastard walked free in the end. The one time I was glad for Potter’s celebrity to do something worthy, but nothing became of it.”

Hermione and Severus sat there together saying nothing for a long while as the fire slowly burned, casting flickering shadows across the rug and the walls, accentuating the lines in Severus’ haggard visage.

After a while, Severus Summoned the bottle of alcohol. He dispensed with sipping from a glass and drank straight from the bottle. Hermione wondered if this was the type of drunken stupor Marf hinted at when Severus destroyed his previous chess set the night of her anniversary, when she had left him after a misunderstanding.

“Hand me the bottle, Severus,” Hermione gently commanded.

He glared at her up through a hank of hair that fell across his face, giving him a sinister look.

“When was the last time you ate?” she asked.

Severus waved his hand in a noncommittal manner, which could have meant, “I don't know,” “I don't remember,” “I don't care,” or “Go away.”
Hermione marched off to the kitchen.

“Marf? Marf!” she called out.

The house-elf presented himself with a slight bow. “Marf is so glad you are here to... to temper Master Snape's drunken mood.”

“Marf, when is the last time he ate?”

“Lunch time, just before he left for the trial,” the house-elf eagerly informed her.

Glancing at the clock, she noticed it was past nine-thirty.

“Go get a vial of Sobering Potion from his cabinet, and I'll fix something for him to eat.” There was no point in fixing something to put in his stomach if he was going to vomit it right back up, too drunk to keep anything down.

There was the thought of going downstairs and fetching Draco, but Hermione crossed that off the list of possibilities. She wondered if Draco was even more blind, stinking drunk, trying to drown away bad memories like his mentor was currently doing.

Finding the carcass of a partially-carved roasted chicken, Hermione fixed a quick and simple chicken soup with some noodles added, along with some carrots, celery and a small amount of onion. It was very simple fare, but something easy on the stomach, which is what would be the best thing for Severus right now.

She ladled the soup into a bowl and found some bread to go with it before setting it on the kitchen table.

Walking back into the main room, Hermione regarded Severus in his pitiful state. She wondered if it was prudent to take Severus out of his drunken state and sober him up. Remembering how she was just a few months ago, drowning in her own drunken pity, she probably would have fought the idea of someone pulling her out of her despair she’d wallowed in like a pig in the mud. But 'Calleo,' as she knew Severus at the time, would have told her to buck up, get sober, stop pouting and do something instead of lying there in such a state. Now it was time for Hermione to do to Severus what he would have done for her when she drank too much and ate too little.
“Get up,” she commanded.

Severus cracked one eye open to balefully glare at her, in a manner that reminded her a lot of Crookshanks in a foul mood.

“You heard me. Get up!” She grabbed an arm and tried to coax him up.

“Have you got the fluxweed?” Severus slurred mockingly, stumbling over the syllables.

“No, but if I did, it would not have changed what happened today. I am sorry for Pansy's death, I am sorry her murderer got away, I am sorry that a whole lot of shit in your life has not gone as planned. Neither has my fucking world. But we are moving forward to do something about it. So get your drunken arse up out of that chair and come to the kitchen with me,” Hermione barked at Severus in a stern yet motherly tone.

“Fuck. Off.” Severus slurred while crossing his arms and jutting his lower lip out, and nearly fell out of his chair.

Hermione was livid that he used that tone and those words with her. But considering how drunk he was, and that the bottle that had been a third full when she went off to the kitchen was now empty on the floor, she wondered if he was so drunk he would even remember what he said to her.

“Have it your way.”

Hermione sat Severus upright in his chair before binding him to the chair. Then she charmed the piece of furniture to walk into the kitchen and set itself in front of the table with the still hot bowl of soup awaiting Severus.

“What... the...” Severus looked about the kitchen in confusion, wondering why he was in the wingback chair, but he couldn't move, his body too numb to notice his bindings. His confusion was further compounded by the fact he was in the kitchen, but he was still his wingback chair. Why was the wingback chair in the kitchen? He thought he was in front of the fire. Where did the fireplace go?
“Open wide,” Hermione announced before holding Severus by the jaw and pouring a vial of Sobering Potion down his throat. She’d had lots of practice forcing antidote down his throat recently, so this was comparatively easy considering he was too drunk to resist.

Severus sputtered and said in a low and slowly measured voice, signaling his sobriety, “Undo these bindings.”

“Are you done telling me to fuck off?” Hermione stood there with her arms crossed, her brows arched and her mouth set in a thin line.

“I did what?” Realization spread across his face at what he had done. “I am very sorry for speaking to you in such a manner,” he apologized sincerely, then went on to explain, “I am unaccustomed to anyone other than Draco dealing with me when I'm that drunk. I should have sent an Owl that you should stay home so you wouldn’t have to see me in such a state.”

“Severus, I would have come anyway had I known before how upset you were.” Hermione waved her wand and made Severus' bindings disappear.

“I would have preferred that you hadn't,” Severus retorted, unable to look Hermione in the eye at the moment.

“So what, you can suffer alone in pain without any comfort? To brave this... this... tribulation alone? No,” she said with conviction. “Before you came into my life, I suffered alone. And despite being some brave Gryffindor, my bravery did not lessen the pain and disappointment that weighed me down. And when I met you, just having someone to talk with, to share my burden, it didn't make the problems go away, but it made them less unbearable. My life is still full of pain and problems and shit and things that I'm scared of facing, Severus, but right now, you are the only bit of sanity in my life that keeps me going. You have been there for me, and I am here for you now.” During her diatribe, tears began falling down Hermione's cheeks.

Severus got up out of the chair and pulled Hermione into a crushing embrace. It finally dawned on him that Hermione was the one bit of sanity in his own life right now as well, and it scared him how he might fall apart once he left. He was equally frightened to think how Hermione needed him just as much as he needed her. In the past, needing someone this badly usually led to them being taken away from him. The difference now was that in time Hermione would not be taken away from him, he would take himself away from Hermione instead. It would be voluntary, by choice. He’d never had the choice presented to him before.

Hermione eventually pulled away to smile up at him with a tear-streaked face. “Now sit down and
eat something before I bind you again and spoon-feed you,” she laughed weakly as she wiped her tears away.

Severus sat down and gratefully tucked into a simple bowl of chicken noodle soup, which is exactly all his stomach could handle at the moment.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Jelly in Britain is what we would call Jell-O in the States: fruit-flavored gelatin dessert.

As some of you are aware, I am involved with an upcoming Harry Potter conference called Leviosa (http://leviosa.org), being held in Las Vegas, NV July 7-10, 2016. One of the things they are offering right now during the four days of the conference is meet-ups slot times. I would like to poll to know not only of those who might be going, but of those going, who might be interested in a meet-up where I do a reading and hand out printouts of the next unbeta'ed three to five chapters to be published at the time of con (July 7th, 2016). For instance, if I publish chapter 76 by the time Leviosa happens in early July, I would have print outs for chapters 77-79 or maybe chapters 77-81, pre-beta errors included, for you to keep depending on how many are interested. If there are maybe ten people, I've print five chapters, if there were dozens, then three chapters because the cost for printing would come out of my pocket, and printing for three chapters alone on cheap stock and simply stapled would run me about $7.00/copy, based on average chapter length. My chapters tend to run 10-20 pages long, so this would be at least 45 pages (three chapters) of fanfic you'd get an advance read of.

Is anyone interested in coming to Leviosa and coming to a reading and a sneak-peek with handouts? To vote yes, just reply in the comments simply “Aye.” That will let me know how many are interested in coming to Leviosa and want printouts, if any.

Tumblr does not have a polling system and my LiveJournal is f-locked, so this would be the easiest way to count.
“Sex Is Hard Work”

Chapter Summary

Chapter 61 Summary: What happens when Severus is required to take the Male Enhancement Potion and the Arousal Potion at the same time? There is a lesson: More is not always better.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Disclaimer: It was the best of fanfics, it was the worst of fanfics, it was the age of crossovers, it was the age of one-true-pairings, it was the epoch of archives, it was the epoch of social media, it was the season of open canon, it was the season of closed canon, it was the spring of alternate universes, it was the winter of dying fandoms, we had wi-fi, we had no connectivity, we were all going to fandom conventions, we were all too far away to drive to the nearest one — in short, I had to disclaim any ownership of the concepts, characters, and ideas that are in this particular Harry Potter fanfic; they all belonged to Rowling and not me.

A/N: Disclaimer is a parody of A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens.

============= Since they began experimenting with various dosages of the Caprese mother of pearl in the Sexual Arousal Enhancing Potion some weeks prior, they had been increasing the amount of the mother of pearl and timing how long the effects lasted for both Severus and Hermione, and how much the potion's effects abated after coupling, sometimes multiple times. That Saturday, a little less than a week away from Halloween, while Ron was playing his second-to-last game for the season away in Spain, Hermione and Severus had both tried the dosage of a smidgen, and found the effects lasted only an hour. This was not enough time to make it a compatible potion strength if it was to be sold with the Male Enhancement Potion, which had an effectiveness of two hours.

Hermione also brought over the boxes of flavored jelly, in addition to some plain gelatin, pectin, “fruit leathers,” and fruit juice concentrate. Severus found the Muggle commercial brand of jelly not only unpalatable, but chemically inferior in flavor. He discovered through experimentation that by using a biscuit cutter, the fruit leathers could be cut into shapes and pressed onto the body to be eaten. Severus nibbled a star-shaped grape-flavored fruit leather from Hermione's shoulder, while Hermione discovered that sticky fruit leathers and chest hair do not go together. By the end of their first foray into gelatin-based fruit-flavored body paint, they had discovered that a lot of gelatin would be needed and the fruit concentrate reduced even further. A drying agent that would activate, once exposed to oxygen, which Severus did not have on hand, would have to be procured for the next round of testing.
The following Monday they both partook the Libido Enhancing Potion using the full pinch measurement of mother of pearl. It seemed to take their intimacy and concupiscence to a new level they did not think possible before. They finally broke Severus' kitchen table; though it was easily repaired, it was never quite the same afterwards. That night, Hermione discovered just how much Severus enjoyed having a prostate massage, especially during fellatio. In turn, Severus learned that Hermione liked to have her hair pulled roughly like the mane of a horse while being pounded from behind. They were so lost in the heady experience induced from the potion that neither remembered much of what was said during the rare moments when they weren't screaming, begging, or moaning, or had their mouth full of various body parts. Hermione was able to remember how Severus initially giggled (a sound rarely heard before or since) while having his toes sucked, but immensely enjoyed it once the initial ticklishness wore off. Even during their usual post-coitus cuddle, there was a deep sense of connectedness they hadn't felt before; they knew something was different between them, yet neither said anything.

Thursday, the night before Halloween, Severus was getting the last of some custom tailoring done by some of the Lovely Lavender elves who'd had some sewing experience prior to working for Miss Brown.

Severus rushed home from work, just in time for Hermione. Fortunately, he had had the good sense to ask Marf to fix dinner, since he would have no time himself before Hermione came. He enjoyed cooking with Hermione and for her, but – considering the Ministry’s masked ball was the next day – between getting ready for the ball and his Potions research, he'd had little time to cook that week.

Marf, thrilled that he was getting a chance to cook more often for Hermione and his master, whipped up a lovely stuffed and rolled pork loin with roasted potatoes and other root vegetables.

Upon opening the door to welcome Hermione in, Severus was met with a quick gasp of surprise.

“How much of that Ageing Potion did you take?” Hermione asked.


“Like you could be McGonagall's older brother,” she answered truthfully.

“Forty plus years? I wasn't shooting for that much, but anything to throw them off the scent,” he admitted.
Hermione circled around him to gauge how his body had aged. The flash of white at the temples peppered with gray certainly made him look more distinguished, and his back was still straight. Examining his hands, she noticed a few faint spots, more wrinkles, and a moderate loss of muscle mass. His nose was a bit more hawkish and ears were a little larger, considering that cartilage continues to grow throughout one's life. His eyes still carried the same fierce gaze, but the crow’s-feet around his eyes were much more pronounced and added even more authority in the way he looked as he stared back at her. He still fit his button-down frock coat that he had taken to wearing again once the cool weather set in during the autumn.

“Like a good red wine, you age well,” Hermione admitted.

He grabbed her and placed a playful kiss upon her lips, noting the mild twinge in his back as he bent as a slightly odd angle.

“We'll have to wait until this potion wears off before we try the combination of potions tonight,” Severus said, rubbing at his lower back as he guided Hermione to the table for dinner.

“So this last trial, I'll be taking the full dose and you'll be taking the full dose as well as the Male Enhancement Potion?” Hermione wondered how the coupling of two strong sexual potions together might affect him.

“Actually, we have one more trial yet to do,” the Potions master explained as he served up some slices of the pork roast on Hermione's plate before serving himself. “One where I take the Male Enhancement only and you take the Arousal Potion only, since that is the combination they will be sold in. But for tonight's trial, yes, I will be taking both potions. Which is why, considering how they are both rather potent, you'll be binding me to a chair initially. I'll need you unaffected by any potion so you can administer the antidote, should any complications arise initially. I am not sure how much in control of my functions I'll be, and I don't want to... injure you in any way,” which was Severus' delicate way of saying he didn't want to fly into a blind rage of lust and wind up being too brutal.

“Based on your years of experience as a Potions master, what unpleasant effects are you anticipating that I should look out for?” the young apprentice asked.

“Painful erection, hyperventilation, animalistic behavior – and I don't mean the good kind you like – bordering on brutish or worse.” Severus served up some potatoes for his lover and himself as he continued to list possible complications as if reading a shopping list. “Heart palpitations, ruddy cheeks, blurry vision, numbness of extremities, loss of consciousness, cramps, vulgar language, loss of hearing or ringing in the ears, memory problems, and headaches.”
“That's quite a list of possible complications.” She cast him a wary look as speared a bite of food.

“Quite, but I did say possible,” he conceded. “The point is, as Potions master, it is my job to make sure certain combinations of potions will not wind up causing more harm than the good they are supposed to be providing. Miss Brown is concerned that if we sell these two potions as a pair, some wizard will get it into his head that if one potion for him is good, then two potions must make it better. It is my job to see if the pair should come with a warning not to take both together or if it is perfectly safe. Miss Brown does not want a lawsuit and, considering some of the lawyers that came from Slytherin House, she has good cause to be concerned about avoiding going to court.”

“So the best ones come from Slytherin House?”

“Indeed. There is a reason why my House symbol is a snake, and it's not just because Salazar Slytherin was a Parselmouth. Snakes won't bite a member of Slytherin House out of professional courtesy.”

Hermione wasn't sure if Severus was joking about the snakes not biting until she saw him give his iconic arch of the brow that he was having one on her. She still laughed at his dry attempt at humor, despite her better judgment that it would only encourage him.

Over the course of dinner, Hermione noticed the Ageing Potion began to slowly fade as Severus’ hair went back to its normal raven-black and the lines around his face diminished, as well as his form filling out.

“So how long did it last?” she asked, referring to the Ageing Potion.

Glancing at the clock, Severus replied, “About six hours. Enough time to show up, ‘press the flesh’ as Miss Brown likes to call it, and be home before I turn into a pumpkin.”

After dinner, they wasted little time before beginning the experiment.

Due to prior experience with the other iterations of the Arousal Potion, Severus removed his frock coat and unbuttoned his shirt; there was little point in making Marf sew buttons back on unnecessarily. For good measure, he unbuttoned his trousers and adjusted himself, just in case. His apprentice bound him to a chair, making sure he was tied down good and tight. Safety protocols
were in place; Hermione had ear plugs in place and several vials of antidote ready, as well as an open box of bezoars. The agreement was to let the experiment play out unless Severus was at risk of injuries requiring a trip to St. Mungo’s. Should no complications arise the first half hour, Hermione was to take the potion herself and release Severus from his bonds. Remembering what happened when they were reverse engineering Ron's muscle-gaining potions, Hermione took a dose of Natural Lubrication Elixir to avoid any dryness.

“The Arousal Potion first,” Hermione announced as she poured it into Severus' mouth.

Severus' eyes dilated, and his skin began to glow with a slight luminosity and radiated warmth, as was expected. As he nodded at her, with heavily lidded eyes that spoke of his desire for her, Hermione poured the Male Enhancement Potion into Severus' mouth and waited.

Rolling his head back, Severus let out a long, low bestial growl which morphed into a keening wail.

“FUCK! Oh God!” Severus yelled at the top of his lungs, and not in a way that indicated any pleasure whatsoever. “My bollocks are going to fucking pop if you don't fuck me now!”

He grimaced in a way Hermione had only seen on his face once before – when he’d thrust into her once, missed, and bent his erect member nearly in half.

She remembered Severus' detailed instruction to let the experiment run its course unless a bad case of blue balls was going to result in a trip to St. Mungo’s. However, just to be sure, she asked, “Do you want the antidote to end this now?”

“No!” he barked at her. “Just let me loose so I can fuck you until I split you in half!” He glared at her with a feral eye.

“Vulgar language and painful erection: check and check,” the Potions apprentice said with clinical detachment as she checked off the little ticky boxes on a list of symptoms they had drawn up before the experiment began. She was able to hear through the ear plugs because of the volume at which he was yelling at her.

“You can put that mouth to better use by blowing me than talking,” he snarled before another wave of pain seized him. “Oh! Merlin's balls, the pain. DO SOMETHING!” he begged.
Unable to stand the sight of him in pain, she increased the bindings around his feet and chest before removing the bindings from around his hips that held him firmly seated to the chair.

At least he had the foresight to loosen his trousers before I bound him, she thought with some relief, as she pulled his very firm and surprisingly hot-to-the-touch erection free.

Before she could even wrap her hands around him to provide some relief with a hand job, the mere stimulation of Hermione's hands to free him sent him into premature ejaculation. Severus came with a surprised yelp as his semen spurted forth and hit the ceiling above their heads.

Hermione looked in shock as the white substance clung to the ceiling, amazed that he ejaculated that far.

“Powerful ejaculation,” she noted, but before she could wave her wand to clean it up and make a notation on the parchment, Severus began screaming again for relief.

“Just let me loose and let me fuck you!” he demanded, rocking his chair side to side as he strained against his bindings, but the force of his commands were diminished with the pleading in his voice.

Hermione knelt down beside him, as he was still bound to the chair, and began to stroke him out of compassion. It was less than ten seconds before Severus came again with nearly the same force, wrenching a scream from his throat in the process.

“Are you sure you want to continue?” Hermione asked again, as she cleaned up once again with a wave of her wand using the Arabic spell she had learned from her lover.

“If you were truly a Gryffindor, you'd be brave and let me loose to find out what a real fuck is like,” he vituperated, his erection continuing unabated as if he’d never orgasmed in the first place. “Or are you too scared? You could finally let me fuck you up the arse, let me pound you until you wouldn't sit right for a week!”

“Definitely vulgar language,” Hermione dryly remarked as she went back to stroking him.

Severus let out a low moan of appreciation as Hermione continued stroking his length, noting the time between each orgasm lengthened until it was a couple minutes between orgasm and his ejaculate only reached up to his chest.
Aroused by the sight of Severus’ still erect cock, warm and pulsing with the beat of his heart, Hermione bent over and tentatively licked the head. Severus let out another gasp and came immediately.

“Warn me before you do something like that again or I'll fuck your grandiloquent mouth until you gag!” he roared, his eyes winced tight in pain.

Hermione didn't bother to clean his dribbles of cum as they clung to his face while she took her time to grab the piece of parchment. “Memory loss: check.” She used a little extra flair of her quill as she marked the ticky box, then set her quill down with purpose before bothering to clean Severus up.

“Memory loss?” Severus questioned with hostility.

“Yes, you obviously have forgotten that not ten minutes ago you said I could put my mouth to better use by blowing you than talking, then demanded I 'do something'. I did something.” Hermione gave Severus an impudent smirk in return.

“If you don't let me go now, I'll fuck your brains out and you won't be able to tell the difference between this wand,” Severus intoned with a jerk of his head toward his still erect member bobbing in need of more attention, “and the one in your hand.”

“I would think that someone who was tied up, as per your own instructions, would be a bit more...” Hermione knelt down again, this time in front of Severus, grasping his cock at the base firmly, pleased to hear a hiss escape his lips, “… cooperative and...” she added for good measure to add to her point by licking Severus' cock from the base of his balls all the way to the tip in one wet swipe of her tongue, “… appreciative of how I am trying to help relieve your discomfort.”

Severus threw his head back and groaned with relief. “Please.”

“Please what?” she teased, knowing that might just drive him back to be the sexually frustrated beast she was trying to tame.

She looked up to find him glaring murderously at her.
“Please what?” she asked once again while flicking the tip of his head with her tongue while stroking his length.

Severus' eyes rolled up into the back of his head as he ground out, “Please, just fucking please, fuck me.”

She engulfed him in her mouth andbobbed her head up and down, encouraged by the sounds coming from Severus, even muted through the ear plugs. Hermione could tell he was close. She wasn't sure how powerful his ejaculation was going to be this time, so she withdrew, noting that at least if she swallowed next time, he wasn't going to shoot up into her sinuses if he came in her mouth.

Severus' erection finally flagged for the first time and he gave a sigh of relief, but it wasn't long before he was erect and begging for relief from the pressure.

Hermione noted on the parchment that he came nine times before his erection waned for the first time.

Kneeling before him again, her desire building within herself even without the Arousal Potion, she unbuttoned her blouse and removed her bra. Grasping the sides of her breasts, she pushed them together as Severus' cock rested between her cleavage as she moved up and down. Licking Severus' head with a sweep of her tongue, she began using her breasts instead of her hands to stroke his rigid length, each time licking the tip with the rise and fall of her movements.

She had never done anything like this to Severus. Without prompting, she showed creative initiative, which thrilled Severus, making him even more impossibly aroused.

Watching her kneel before him, pressing her breasts together, licking him with relish, Severus came once again, but this time there was nearly nothing left. He choked out a guttural grunt of pain as his balls began to dry heave, having spent everything inside of himself. Sweat began to drip from his brow and sting his eyes.

As his orgasm waned, with just a few paltry drops of semen dribbling from the tip, Severus wondered if he was truly up to seeing this through to the end. This was nearly as bad as the time during his apprenticeship when Chuff made him test the potency and length of a rash-and-boil-inducing potion. Severus had to suffer for six hours until the potion waned and results were recorded for Chuff's research, in which Severus was the test subject.
The seizing of his balls when there was nothing left to ejaculate was bad enough, even aching, but even with the Male Enhancement Potion increasing his stamina and strength, he was ever physically ready to go after countless orgasms. Still, he was a Potions master and Hermione did not exactly have the right equipment to faithfully test this on herself. And there was no way Draco would agree to this phase of testing. He decided to see how much longer he could stand this as a testament of his own resolve.

It was nearly half an hour and Hermione signaled it was almost time for her to take the Arousal Potion herself. Was he truly up to having Hermione shag him when there was nothing left to give? His erection was still there, begging for more than her hands or mouth, but could he delay his orgasm to avoid another dry orgasm?

Severus nodded that she should go ahead and take the Libido Potion, the double dose of his own potions still making him hungry to sink himself into Hermione. Perhaps coupling was the way to relieve himself of this innate desire to bang Hermione senseless; it appeared that masturbation was an ineffective stop gap, given that intercourse seemed to have lessened the Arousal Potion's potency in the end during previous trials.

Upon Hermione drinking the full-potency arousal solution, she didn't bother to release Severus from his bounds as she ditched her shirt and underpants in haste and proceeded to mount Severus in his chair, facing away from him. As she sheathed Severus in her, he gave out a great whimper, more as if in relief from pain than from satisfaction of finally entering her.

Severus cried and begged to be released from his confines, which only seemed to speed up Hermione's movements atop him. Finally, it seemed that Hermione took pity on Severus, as he noticed a flick of her wand and then his bindings were gone.

Grabbing Hermione by the hips, he nearly fell forward out of his chair, his muscles sore from straining against his bonds, and slid out of the chair. Hermione stayed joined with him and sank down onto her knees in front of him as he entered her from behind, his knees finally making contact with the floor.

It was desperate and sloppy. Even after Severus suffered from another dry orgasm, his cry more in pain than in pleasure, he kept on going, his erection still firm and needy. Severus' hips seemed to move out of their own accord with little regard for position or pleasure. Sweat dripped from his nose and chin in heavy drops to fall on Hermione's hips as she bucked back.

Hermione, in her own potion-induced desperation, was unaware of how Severus' condition was deteriorating. She tried arching her back and angling her hips in a way to give her more pleasure, but she could tell that the strain of the two potions in Severus was already taxing him close to the limits of his own strength.
Severus was panting and sweating. His breath was ragged and his lungs hurt as he tried to get more oxygen into his lungs to keep moving in a way his body demanded without reason. He repositioned himself so he was on his back as Hermione remounted him, continuing to face away from him.

The wooden floor was unforgiving to her knees, but she ignored the discomfort, desperate to fuck Severus.

Upon turning around to face him, as she continued to rock and bounce, Hermione saw Severus' face. He was looking like he was ready to collapse from sheer exhaustion. Sweat-soaked hair plastered his face, and his eyes were heavy and unfocused from the exertion. Seeing him in such a state, she felt the effects of the potion quickly wane to the point where she decided to climb off him and check on him. He protested weakly at the removal of his member from her warmth.

Placing a hand at Severus' neck to check his pulse, she noticed it was high and a bit erratic.

Concerned that other complications were arising, Hermione held three fingers aloft and asked, "Severus, how many fingers am I holding up?"

"Four?" he weakly muttered.

"Do you have any ringing in your ears?"

"No," he groaned.

"How is your head feeling?"

"Missing your tightness."

"No, Severus, your other head," she said, her voice becoming more concerned. "Do you have a headache?"

"I don't know. Maybe," he said uncertainly, his eyes squinting.
Hermione pried one eye open to look at his pupils. His eyes were naturally black, but normally she could at least tell where the pupils ended and the irises began upon close inspection. Tonight, it looked like they were nearly all pupil.

Severus lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the brightness of the kitchen light.

As the sweat continued to pour down his forehead and drip down his check, his cock still twitched for attention. His breathing was becoming shallow and more labored.

Hermione, feeling the effects of the arousal potion nearly gone with the adrenaline of Severus in danger, reached for the vial of antidote and announced, "Severus, we're ending this now."

"No," he protested, as he weakly tried to push Hermione's hand away, but failed. His eyes began to roll up into his head.

Not waiting any longer, Hermione poured the antidote down Severus' throat and waited for him to snap out of this state.

A shudder overtook his body and he violently convulsed on the floor, slumping sideways against Hermione. She held onto him, hoping this was just a reaction to the antidote, remembering the involuntary shudder that overtook her body after taking it.

The seizure stopped and Severus continued to lie there panting heavily, his head resting in her lap.

In a voice much closer to his normal tone, versus the strange delirious one he’d spoken with moments before, he croaked, "I wanted to see how this double potion behaved."

Hermione tenderly swept the sweat-soaked tendrils out of Severus' face as she began listing off all the physical signs she’d noted before giving Severus the antidote, including the eyes rolling up into his head.

"I don't remember..."
"Memory loss was something you did list as a side effect," she reminded him.

"That I did indeed," he suddenly recalled. "Then you chose a fine time to end the experiment if I was that far gone."

Severus and Hermione continued to lie on the kitchen floor, both partially clothed and completely disheveled.

"Can you get up and to the bathroom? You're drenched with sweat," his apprentice noted.

"I'm not sure, but we'll find out now, won't we."

Severus had great difficulty getting up and needed to lean on Hermione to get himself to the bathroom. Once there, she helped him disrobe and slip into the bath. After he settled, Hermione began tending to him, washing his hair and soaping him down. Severus was completely worn out.

"Are you still feeling any effects of the potions, or did the one dose of the antidote take care of that?" she asked.

"Completely done and over," he sighed, as he tried to stay awake, feeling the tender ministrations of Hermione lovingly wash him. "Did you take the antidote?"

"No, seeing you in distress seemed to have countered the effects rather suddenly," she remarked, then added, "Much like being rejected by Ron, then running into Alan, tampered down the effects of the Blue Fairy Martini. Fear, anger, or adrenaline of some sort seems to counter the effects."

"Interesting," Severus replied drowsily. "Include it in your report. I don't remember much except the pain, ceaseless orgasms, dry orgasms, mindless need to hump anything, and only snippets of the delirium. Your report will be the one Miss Brown needs to read carefully."

"I'll write it up just as soon as I've got you tucked into bed," she answered him, but noted that he had suddenly fallen asleep in the bath.

Hermione rinsed him off and cast a Mobilicorpus to lift and carry his body back to bed, drying him
off with a towel before lowering him into bed, tucking him in for the night.

Once put to bed, Hermione went off to the kitchen to set the room to rights. She cleared out her equipment that she brought, and marked any remaining potion for Severus to have delivered back to his work. Then she began writing her report for her future boss.

Recalling events clearly, Hermione wrote down the sequence of events, the order in which they occurred, and their approximate time. After she had filled out three scrolls with all necessary details, she rolled them up and left them for Severus to find in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 61 A/N: Some of the side effects of Severus taking the Male and Libido Enhancing Potions are side effects of Viagra, the little blue pill for erectile dysfunction.

As for Severus’ joke about snakes not biting members of Slytherin House, it a play on the old joke about the lawyers and sharks:

“Why won’t a shark attack a lawyer swimming in the ocean?
Professional courtesy.”

And let's give a round of thanks to my betas, JuneW and Cytherea, for their work on this chapter and the previous one, Chapter 60.
Chapter Summary

Hermione and Ron go to the ball, and what a fete it is. Come meet Severus and Draco's nom de guerres, and sample the fare such as “sandwiches” and tainted punch.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Sixty-Two
“The Ministry's Halloween Masked Ball”

Disclaimer: It is a truth universally acknowledged, that JK Rowling, in possession of a good story, must own Harry Potter and all its concepts. However little known the feelings or views of such a writer may be on her first encountering fanfic, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding fanfic writers and readers of Harry Potter fanfic, that it is considered polite and a legal necessity to claim that Harry Potter is the rightful property of Rowling.

A/N: Disclaimer is a parody of Jane Austen's *Pride & Prejudice*.

Severus awoke to Draco shaking him firmly by the shoulder.

"Testing went that well last night?" Draco chuckled, a wry smile upon his lips.

Lifting his head from his pillow, Severus looked about in confusion, his hair heavily mussed from having been put to bed still slightly damp. He couldn't remember how he had made it to the bed last night. The last thing he remembered was Hermione washing the sweat from his body in the bath before exhaustion overtook him.

"Better get up; it's time for our parole meeting," Draco reminded Severus before going to his armoire to yank out his friend's clothes, chucking underpants, shirt, trousers and socks at his head, while Severus was trying to rouse himself, still feeling disoriented.

His body ached.
Last night was a partial blur once he took the second potion. Severus would definitely be recommending a strong warning on the box that no one should ever take both potions.

Before Severus left with Draco for his weekly meeting with Kingsley, Marf informed him that Hermione had left some marked vials and scrolls for him on the kitchen table. Severus directed the house-elf to deliver them to his office for review later.

At the Twenty-Four Blackbird Bakery, Draco had to order something for Severus, since the older wizard was still out of sorts.

"So what happened to you last night that has you more wankered than a house-elf drunk on butterbeer?" Draco prompted the Potions master.

Severus was still rubbing his face, noting he forgot to shave that morning. "I took both the Male Enhancement Potion and the Arousal Enhancing Potion last night." He paused for effect before adding, "At the same time."

Draco gave him an amusedly surprised look. "One of those is enough to wear any wizard out, but both at the same time? That intense?"

"That bad," Severus morosely answered, blinking owlishly as he was still trying to gather his scattered wits. "My 'assistant' had to give me the antidote after about the first forty minutes," he said, eluding to Hermione without naming her, should there be anyone overhearing them that early Friday morning in Diagon Alley. "I can barely remember what happened, but it will be interesting to read her account."

"Eww, glad I didn't try it myself. Which I was considering, until you said to wait," Draco added.

Once seated in Kingsley's office, Draco's mood began to turn for the worse, having been reminded of the recent events of Pansy's murderer's trial.

"I can't believe he got off, either," Kingsley said, in response to the look he got from Draco when the topic came up.

"How is it that despite the clear and damning evidence, he got off?" Severus asked, still upset over the verdict.
"Friends in high places. Bribes. The Ministry swinging in the complete other direction where attacks against Muggles were tolerated more during the last war, so showing tolerance for unjustly killing a Death Eater to somehow balance a previous injustice. Who knows," Kingsley said with dismay, perplexed himself as to what he thought was a simple open-and-shut case. "Some of us in the department have taken a keener interest in watching the bastard who got off scot-free." He nervously ran a hand over his bald pate.

This gave Draco little comfort, knowing the wizard who had killed his former fiancée would never be punished for her murder, but it was better than nothing. Kingsley was one in a very small circle of friends Severus and Draco could trust, but given that Kingsley was an Auror under the watch of Mad-Eye Moody, that trust could only extend so far.

"Now, today we'll have to keep this brief. As I'm sure you're aware, the Ministry’s Halloween ball is tonight, and I have a great deal of work to do to prepare for it. Moody is in quite a state regarding security, as this is open to everyone and no invitation is required, so he's rather concerned about who might show up," Kingsley further explained, giving a pointed glare at both of them.

"As if Moody would be able to tell. From what I've heard, it's a masked ball and the whole point in that everyone is to remain anonymous and unknown." Severus cast about a bored glance.

"Which is why Moody is certain this will be a chance for someone – under the guise of invisibility in a throng of other masked individuals – to come and create a security hazard."

"Please," Draco drawled, as he rolled his eyes dramatically. "I wouldn't be caught dead at such an event, if Moody thinks I'm going."

"I didn't think so," Kingsley replied, regarding Severus as well to gauge the level of disdain he had marked upon his face at the idea of going to such a thing as a ball that would involve dancing, socializing and merriment. "Then I'll see you next week, gentlemen," he announced as he rose, seeing the pair out as he began his long day of preparations.

Hermione was up bright and early, arriving at work even before the Twenty-Four Blackbird Bakery had opened at six that morning.

The Ministry had sent a memorandum around to all the departments that they were closing every department down at noon so that people could go home and prepare for the ball. Also, they wanted the preparations to commence for transforming the Ministry for the ball without employees getting
Knowing that she would be expected to keep up with the inflow of shipments, despite having her work day shortened, Hermione got there extra early. She was pleased when Trevor showed up twenty minutes after her, having taken her suggestion to come early since they were closing down early.

As they both worked quickly and diligently to test the ingredients that had come overnight and kept arriving, since a lot of ingredients were harvested in the autumn and this was near the peak of season, Hermione kept a keen eye for an elusive box of fluxweed picked at full moon.

Watching the clock, Hermione noticed the time was coming close to wrap everything up for the day and week. Trevor and his mentor began cleaning up the lab and were about to head out the door when another shipment of boxes came in, followed immediately by Madam Dushka.

"All right. Time to get going. Thank you for having everything finished by noon," their supervisor said as she tried to rush the pair out of the lab.

"Hang on a second," Hermione said, pretending to leave something behind while checking the side of the boxes. Obscured by the boxes, she pretended to pick up a dropped quill as her eyes scanned the labels.

For a moment, Hermione knelt there, frozen, eye-to-label with a large and sturdy looking box of fluxweed picked at full moon, the large printing staring right back at her.

"Mrs. Weasley!" Madam Dushka bellowed. "Preferably today?" she said sarcastically in order to hurry her employee out so they could lock the lab, per Head Auror Mad-Eye Moody's instructions.

There were going to be thousands of witches and wizards packed into the Ministry tonight, and security was to be extra tight for areas not only in the Atrium, but other places in the Ministry where the public would not be allowed. As Hermione, Trevor and their boss walked along the corridor, Kingsley Shacklebolt walked in the opposite direction towards them.

"All locked up," Madam Dushka announced.

"Thank you. I'll just make one last check since I need to be sure," the Auror said and continued on
his way, but not before giving Hermione a brief nod in greeting, acknowledging the fellow Order of the Phoenix member.

Trevor and Madam Dushka missed the subtle exchange, which was fine with Hermione.

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Severus' morning was no less busy. He was pleased by the detailed account that Hermione had left for him and Miss Brown, yet equally appalled at the results of the previous night's experiment which he could scarcely remember. He surmised that Hermione had finished bathing him and moved him to bed.

Pansy's murder trial and last night after testing. He did not like to rely on anyone, but it touched him that Hermione had been there when he had needed someone.

Lavender was too busy to read his short report of what he could remember, much less Hermione's more lengthy and accurate detailed account. She was busy sending last-minute owls to the press about her impending announcements at the masked ball, which seemed to have turned from a celebration into a platform for various people and organizations to make their announcements to the press since they would be there en masse, including many foreign journalists.

While Severus reviewed a Muggle cookbook Hermione had recently purchased for him that had recipes for fruit leathers and other "fun foods for children," Draco came over to knock on Severus' office door.

"Deciding on opening a kindergarten in your next life?" the blond wizard joked.

"Hardly. Research for that elusive edible body paint that seems to be an ongoing process," Severus informed him.

"Why not get one of those Muggle edible body paint kits and reverse engineer from that?"

"Because we already did that, and half of the ingredients required a doctorate in Muggle Chemistry to pronounce, besides tasting worse than the French onion soup at the Three Broomsticks," Severus replied. "Even experimenting with Muggle jelly was rather unpleasant, flavor-wise."

Severus flipped over to a page featuring children's edible finger paints and felt the beginnings of inspiration unfurl in his mind.
"Well, don't take too much longer. Lav wants us to start getting ready for the ball soon. She's made up a batch of facial hair growth potion, and she wants your final opinion on it before letting us both use it for tonight," Draco said, before leaving to start his own preparations.

Hermione didn't want to get ready for the ball. She was too excited that the fluxweed had finally arrived. She hoped Trevor would come in around his normal time Monday morning so she could pilfer some before he arrived and fill out another false report.

Ron was busy getting a haircut at the stylist's salon, as Bascom wanted him to visit a particular hairdresser to make him look sharp tonight, especially for the press. Of course, Ron would show up with a mask, but when it came time for the Mercury Broom Company to make some announcements, Ron would be unmasked.

Hermione hadn't shown Ron the latest dress she had purchased from Madam Mandel. Not that she needed his approval, even if he did disagree with some of her choices.

Going into the bathroom, she applied the temporary black hair dye. Fortunately, Madam Mandel had helped Hermione pick a color for her dress that would suit her temporary black locks for the ball, as well as her natural dark chestnut tresses.

Once applied, she set her hair to fall about her shoulders in smooth waves, since her gown was very reminiscent of the old Hollywood glamour style. She even affixed a large blue rose, in full bloom, to the side of her head, just above and behind her left ear as suggested. Madam Mandel had recently been looking to some of the vintage Muggle glamour looks for new inspiration for some of her designs. At the Yule Ball, during Hermione's fourth year at Hogwarts, teenagers were more likely to adopt the more modern fashion of Muggles, with wizarding flair of course, but the adults in the wizarding world seemed perpetually stuck in Victorian and Edwardian fashion. When Hermione purchased the matte silk charmeuse dress with the deep halter neckline, she was assured that no one would have a dress even remotely like hers, since many in wizarding society were still insisting on buying the full-skirt ball gowns, some proclaiming that it wasn't a proper ball gown unless they had the hoop petticoat or bustle to go with it.

Hermione liked the fact she'd have a sleek profile in which to slip through the crowds she expected, versus fighting with yards and yards of a ruffled and tiered skirt with its own postal code. Her dress could also work for an evening out in Muggle London, since retro fashion had come back into style for even her old world.

This was yet another dress that required that she not wear a bra, but Hermione knew the charms to hold herself in place, plus the charms for her black seamed stockings.
Slipping the dress on, she really liked the plunging halter neckline. It certainly dipped down far enough to give anyone glancing her way a peek at her cleavage since it dipped to the bottom of her chest line. She wasn't well endowed like Ginny was, but she still felt comfortable with what this neckline revealed. And though the back did not plunge nearly as far down as her black dress that Ron loathed, everything above her waist was exposed. At least she had a matching cloak to go with it. The opera length gloves in the same color put the final touch to the elegant and understated outfit.

Once dressed, she admired herself in the mirror, whose reflection kept breaking into broad smiles. The reflection even felt brave enough to speak this time and comment, "You are gonna knock them dead tonight, sweetheart."

Ron finally came home looking smart, freshly styled and shaved, before he ran off to the bedroom to change into his new dress robes for the evening. As he was buttoning his white shirt, he called out, "You dressed and ready to go, 'Mione?"

Ron's hair remained in its natural state, since he was going to do photos for the press at the event.

"Yes," she answered and appeared in the doorway, her cloak hanging over her arm still.

"That's your slip, right?" Ron asked.

"No, this is my dress," Hermione corrected him, fearing another blow-up over her choice of clothes.

"But ball gowns are supposed to..." he trailed off, his hands making gestures indicating to the voluminous skirt he expected Hermione to be sporting for the ball, his nose scrunching up, unable to articulate with words.

In order to cut him off before it turned into another row, Hermione said, "Just imagine how easy it will be to navigate the crowds if I don't have a skirt as big as a Quidditch hoop around my ankles."

Ron stopped and pondered that for a moment. Hermione could see the gears grinding furiously, and she nearly expected smoke to start coming out of his ears.
"You know, that's a lovely dress, Hermione. Good choice. Nice color, too," he remarked of the electric royal blue that complimented her hair and skin just so.

Once Ron was dressed in a set of black formal robes Bascom had had tailored just that week, they affixed their color-coordinated masks matching their outfits before Apparating to the Ministry.

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The Atrium of the Ministry was already packed when Mr. and Mrs. Ron Weasley arrived at a quarter past six. The event was not fifteen minutes underway, yet it looked like everyone was already there.

Just as Madam Mandel predicted, most of the witches there wore voluminous ball gowns, some looking as if they fit in better during the mid-nineteenth century than in the early twenty-first century. Ron immediately saw the wisdom in Hermione's choice of apparel, even though he thought a bit too much skin was exposed for his liking. Despite any reservations he may have had, he mostly kept his opinions to himself for once.

Near the recently installed statue, a band played music suitable for the socializing part of the evening while drinks and hors d'oeuvres were being served.

Ron was supposed to meet up with Bascom first thing upon arriving. They had agreed to meet near the elevators, which just also happened to be right by one of the seven bars set up at the ball.

After wading through the crowds and ducking trays of floating savories and nibbles, Ron finally spotted his sponsor and his wife, Mrs. Dagmar Nettleton. He waved at them as they approached.

"Ronny!" Bascom greeted his rising star before swiveling his gaze upon Hermione. "Hermione," he purred like a cat about to pounce on a bird.

Hermione stiffly offered her arm out to formally shake his hand at arm’s length. "Mr. Nettleton," she said sweetly, but with little warmth.

Instead of shaking, he bent down and kissed the top of her gloved hand, Hermione did her best to keep a sweet and detached smile upon her lips, while refraining a shudder of revulsion.

"Let me introduce you to my wife, Dagmar," Bascom announced to the pair. "Dagmar, this is Ron and Hermione Weasley. Ron will be our new 2004 calendar model."
"I'll bet he is," Dagmar agreed a little too wholeheartedly as she detached herself from her husband's side; the heavy silk taffeta of her red and black bustled skirt rustled as she sashayed over. Sidling up to Ron, she grasped his upper arm possessively as her eyes raked over Ron's form with the same appraisal Bascom was using on Hermione.

The older witch turned to view Hermione. "Ron, Bascom never told me what a lovely wife you have. Such a darling figure shown off in such a slinky dress!" Mrs. Weasley would have been initially flattered by such a compliment by another witch, but found the hungry look Dagmar gave her a bit disquieting.

Dagmar slipped a chummy arm into both Ron's and Hermione's before saying, "You two really should come over for dinner some time while Bascom is busy on one of his business trips. It would be lovely to get to know both of you so much better."

Hermione's eyes opened wide with the sudden knowledge of what the woman's remark implied as Mrs. Nettleton's hand had discreetly slipped from Hermione's arm, to gently goose Hermione's young and firm arse through the smooth silk. At that moment, Hermione could see the advantages of a hoop skirt or bustle.

"I think I see Albert Dobmeir over there; I really should go say hello to him," Hermione said suddenly, trying not to be too flustered, her eyes nearly bulging with urgency to escape.

"Okay, I'll catch up with you later," Ron said blithely unaware that another witch had just come on to his wife.

Hermione beat a quick path away from the older couple and her husband in order to catch her breath and process just what happened. Glancing behind her shoulder, Hermione noticed Dagmar's hands were still fondling her husband's biceps. Ron seemed to be enjoying the attention and was flexing his biceps for her admiration, unaware that he was being appraised like a piece of meat by the older witch. Ron could really be a bit thick at times.

Leaning up against a pillar to survey the scene, Hermione looked about before spotting the twins, in matching outfits, with their hair still in its natural red state, standing near the punch bowl. She recognized them instantly, even with their masks. As she slid past the other guests, thankful for Madam Mandel's recommendation for formal wear as she slipped between hoop skirts like a fish swimming around rocks in a stream, she saw the twins peer about before doing something that she could not view from her current vantage point. As she got closer, she saw the twins look about once more before quickly walking away from the punch bowl, unaware that Hermione noticed them acting suspiciously. Glancing at the punch bowl, she saw the liquid swirl about as if it had
just been hastily stirred, much like when an ingredient had just been quickly whisked into a cauldron.

Looking about, she spotted other witches and wizards imbibing in glasses of punch, procured before the new secret ingredient had been added. Discreetly scrutinizing the color and comparing with the punch in the bowl now, she noticed the iridescent pearl color and knew immediately the twins had put mother of pearl – and who knows what else – into the punch. It was one of the few non-alcoholic drinks available at the ball. Hermione was tempted to use her wand and "accidentally" cause the punch bowl to tip over, but before she could take any course of action, she heard someone call out her name.

"Hermione?"

She spun around to see a tall wizard with broad shoulders and a slender muscular frame, smiling at her with a warm and disarming smile.

"It's me," he said, before removing his mask to reveal himself. "Neville."

"Neville?" Hermione said in shock. She didn't remember Neville ever looking this good. He had been a bit of a pudgy boy during his early years at Hogwarts, but he certainly grew up to be quite a handsome young wizard. Even at the statue’s dedication ceremony and Harry's birthday party, she hadn't noticed how much he had changed from her old impressions that she still had of him in her mind.

"You look fantastic," Hermione said in earnest. 'Really fantastic; he cleans up very well. Stop staring, Hermione.'

"Well, look at you," Neville offered. "You were lovely at the Yule Ball, but this..." he trailed off. "Ron is quite a lucky wizard." He smiled at her in such a way that she knew he’d meant that in all sincerity, and not in a covetous manner, but as an old friend remarking how well she looked.

"Listen," she said, interrupting their reunion. "I just saw the twins put something in the punch."

"Not again," Neville complained. "They did that at the Yule Ball as well."

"They did?" Hermione was surprised she didn't know that.
"Oh, yeah. Told McGonagall, and she had the house-elves discreetly swap it out before anything got out of hand. Doesn't surprise me." Neville shook his head, not surprised that the twins still were up to the same old high jinks.

Hermione's admiration for Neville just went up several notches.

"Just a moment," he said as he excused himself momentarily.

Hermione watched as he went over to the bar and whispered something into a bartender's ear before joining Hermione once more.

"Taken care of," he said casually.

Glancing back over to the bowl, she suddenly noticed it was empty and one of the bartenders was bringing a new punch bowl over with fresh punch, this time with a closed glass lid charmed shut so nothing could be clandestinely added.

"I have a friend I'd like you to meet," Neville said to Hermione.

Hermione wondered if Neville had a new girlfriend he wanted to introduce. It had been almost a year since Luna called off the engagement. She had even returned his ring and they had remained friends, but Hermione wondered if he was seeing someone new.

As they came around a gaggle of witches with tall hair-dos and even taller feathers in their hair to match their masks, Hermione spied Lavender Brown amid a gathering of older wizards.

'Oh, my God, is Neville dating Lavender?' was the first thing that came to her mind.

Leading the way, Neville said, "Hermione, I'd like to introduce Albert Dobmeir."

Upon hearing his name, an older wizard, who looked like he was slightly over a hundred years old, turned around. He was a tall, slightly portly gentleman with salt-and-pepper colored hair – mostly salt – bright brown eyes, a ski-slope nose that was slightly bulbous at the end, and a distinct double chin.
"Albert, I'd like to introduce a long time and dear friend of mine, Hermione Granger."

Hermione finally had a face to go with the Potions master she would be apprenticing under. Severus had mentioned that she might have a chance to finally meet him at the ball. Her face brightened as she smiled openly at the older wizard who would be her mentor for the next few years at least.

"Mr. Dobmeir," she began with her hand outstretched to shake his, but was cut off.

"Call me Albert," he insisted, shaking her hand enthusiastically. "And you're the indomitable Mrs. Hermione Weasley." Off behind Albert, next to Lavender, an elderly wizard with silvery hair and an elaborate mustache began choking on his drink. "I'm so glad I've finally have had the chance to meet you, Hermione."

"And I, you."

"I'm sorry I haven't owled beforehand to meet with you in person, but there have been a lot of family and legal matters to deal with, I'm sure you understand," Albert apologized.

"I certainly can understand." Hermione assured him with a wave of her hand that it was no bother.

"I was just mentioning to Neville here about taking on a new apprentice, but I had no idea he knew whom it was, since I didn't mention it to him. But since you're such dear friends, that doesn't surprise me."

Neville swiveled his head between Albert and Hermione. "You mean," he interjected into their conversation, "that Hermione is your new apprentice?"

Hermione noticed a slight flash of surprise that she was the one, along with that familiar look she was accustomed to when people saw a witch of her age applying for an apprenticeship.

"Yes, that is why I thought that, since you're friends..." the elderly Potions master assumed.
"Neville and I haven't had a chance to catch up in a long while," Hermione offered, as a way to smooth over any possible embarrassment.

"So you're his new apprentice? That's fantastic, Hermione." Neville shook his friend's hand lightly in congratulations, before turning back to Albert. "I can't tell you how many times Hermione saved my neck in Potions."

Next to the elderly wizard with fancy waxed mustache and Lavender, a tall wizard dressed entirely in gold began to cough.

"Really now?" Albert said with keen interest behind some of those stories. "But since Neville speaks so highly of you, I can only feel better knowing I've taken on such a talented apprentice."

Hermione hoped she wasn't blushing.

"So, this is excellent, since as part of your apprenticeship, you'll be studying under Neville for some of your more advanced Herbology and taking care of my garden," Albert went on.

Hermione finally figured out how Albert Dobmeir and Neville were friends, at least.

Over Albert's shoulder, Hermione spied Lavender approaching.

"Hermione," Lavender said sweetly and gently hugged her, as if greeting an old friend, though they weren't that close despite having been dorm mates for seven years.

Lavender Brown was dressed head to toe in her signature color that matched her name, with even her hair matching her gown and mask.

"You know each other as well?" Albert asked.

Before Hermione could answer, Lavender began, "We were both in Gryffindor in the same year."

Hermione made a valiant effort not to react unfavorably to Lavender, knowing this was the same
witch who set her husband up with one of her stable of "boys," Blaise Zabini, for a shag, not to mention arranged her initial meetings with her own paramour, Severus.

"My goodness, but you all know each other so well, this is like a reunion," Albert replied to the news of them being well acquainted.

"Hermione," Lavender said, her smile as perfectly cool and flawless as her appearance, "I'll like to introduce you to James White, my head of Marketing and Advertising."

The elderly wizard with the elaborate waxed mustache came forward and enthusiastically and warmly shook her hand. "Mrs. Weasley," the wizard drawled with an American southern accent that seemed familiar somehow.

Comprehension dawned behind her eyes briefly – before she schooled her features – that this much, much older wizard with the silvery-gray hair was Draco Malfoy. She had finally remembered Severus mentioning what Draco did for his unsanctioned work for the Lovely Lavender company. If it wasn't for her knowledge about Malfoy beforehand, she would have never guessed it was him.

"Mr. White," Hermione replied, shaking his hand back, a convincing smile upon her lips. "Please, call me Hermione."

"Why certainly. And you can call me Jim, though some friends call me Jimmy. Just don't call me late to dinner!" he laughed at his own joke and slapped his knee before resting his hands back on his cane.

Neville, Lavender and Hermione all laughed politely at "Jim's" corny and very old joke.

Hermione was stunned at how Draco looked nothing like his old self, and at his very good American accent, though the accent was so familiar in some way that she couldn't quite place it. His back was bent from age, and he had lost so much muscle mass, it was hard to believe that not hours before he was a tall well-built wizard beneath that old frame due to the Ageing Potion. In addition to that, he had a very prominent smile as if his teeth were almost too large for his mouth; when he smiled, it appeared to be all teeth that were somewhat askew, different from Draco's normally straight teeth. His hair was shorter and a silvery gray and up-swept, as if caught in a strong gust. He wore a simple black mask, so she could not tell if he had even changed his eye color or not. The waxed mustache was ridiculous, but quite appropriate for a wizard of his supposed age, as it had a very late Victorian quality about it, which suited the time period Draco was trying to impress for age. He was wearing a rather old-fashioned style set of dress robes, even
though they were new and neatly pressed. And his cane had a rather large and obnoxious head of an American bald eagle cast in silver with one ruby eye and one blue sapphire eye.

Well, if anything, between the cane head, bad jokes and his accent alone, Draco was going to do a very good job of convincing everyone he was American. Hermione was sure of that.

"And this is Sebastian Delgado," Lavender continued, introducing the wizard who looked like a strutting gold peacock, "my Potions master. But you already are acquainted through correspondence."

Hermione blinked twice in surprise at the vision before her.
Severus had taken the Ageing Potion and his frame indicated he was older as she had seen him before, but the outfit was just so uncharacteristic, the word “ostentatious” would not have accurately described it. Granted, he was supposed to be a Spaniard, and Spanish wizards were known to be a bit over the top in their manner of dress compared to British fashion, but even Hermione was having trouble believing Severus willingly put on this outfit of his own volition.

The Potions master was wearing a pair of tasseled boots with what must have been a three-inch heel, for he was a couple inches taller than normal. He was wearing what looked like high-waisted gold breeches and a gold matador's jacket with puffed sleeves, heavily embroidered with ornate beadwork. His very frilly shirt was the only thing that wasn't gold on his whole being. And then
there was the gold hat, which looked like it would have been better suited to be on one of the Three
Musketeers than on a puffed-up matador peacock in head-to-toe gold. His "paunch" protruded
slightly past the opening of his bolero-style jacket. And then there was the hair – very short, and
also gold to match the gold pointed goatee he sported on his face. Even his eyebrows were gold,
which blended into his gold mask.

Never in a million years would Hermione ever guess this Midas monstrosity, now giving a courtly
bow before her, was Severus.

Hermione finally registered that Lavender mentioned that "Delgado" and she were acquainted
through correspondence.

"Oh, you already know each other," Neville chimed in, to Hermione's dismay. "How did you
meet?"

Even she and Severus had not quite worked out how they were going to justify Hermione's
royalties on Potions when she and "Delgado" had never met, though Lavender just dropped the first
hint.

"I'd love to hear the story behind that," Draco chirped, his eyes twinkling behind his mask, his grin
broad and toothy.

"Oh, yes, though this is the first time we've met in person," Severus trilled, speaking with a
Castilian accent; his voice was much higher than what Hermione was used to, more like a tenor; it
had a sing-song cadence to it. "Mrs. Weasley owled me some years ago regarding an Potions
apprenticeship, but at the time I was not taking any applications. But I remembered her application.
So thorough, so thoughtful and well written," he said effusively, using his hands expressively, very
uncharacteristically of the Severus she knew.

"So when I was stuck regarding the mass brewing of a certain potion Miss Brown here will be
introducing later this year, I owled her for ideas. I had already asked a few other of my fellow
Potion masters for ideas. They were stuck. Nada. So at my wits’ end, I thought I would owl this
brilliant witch here who might have some new ideas. And indeed she did!" he exclaimed, grasping
her hand and patting it affectionately, in gratitude.

"Really, that's amazing, Hermione," Neville remarked.
"And I when I decided to go back to Spain, I thought I would recommend her for an apprenticeship with Albert here, if she was still interested, which she was," Severus finished, having covered all the areas of question of how Hermione and Sebastian Delgado knew each other, should questions arise after Delgado and Snape left England around the same time.

Hermione did her best to play the humble witch who just had a simple idea, casting her eyes down in embarrassment of the bubbly praise of this Spanish wizard. In her mind, she was reeling, processing and committing to memory the story that was now public record with Albert, Neville and who knew who else as witnesses. She wondered if Severus had already worked out that story beforehand or had he made that up on the fly. The best lies are the ones based on a thread of truth, and in truth, Severus had been stumped as to how to brew the Male Enhancement Potion in large batches and Hermione was the one who’d offered the solution with brewer's kettles.

"I'm parched," Hermione said brightly. "How can a witch get a drink around here?"

"Let me show you the way to the bar, little lady," Draco offered, taking Hermione hand and tucking it into his arm, as if he was escorting his granddaughter. "That is a lovely color on you," he complimented her. "And is that your natural hair color or did you dye it like most of the witches here tonight? If you don't mind me asking. Hope it's not too forward of me."

"Not at all. It's dyed for the ball," Hermione answered him as she let herself be led off to the bar by a very graciously behaving Draco.

Now it struck Hermione: Draco sounded like that cartoon character, Foghorn Leghorn. But then again, that's how most English thought all Americans from the south sounded anyway.

Once they had put some distance between them and the group, Hermione let out a long breath.

Patting her hand, Draco assured her under his breath, "Just keep breathing, sugar." He maintained his southern accent.

"So, Jim. Or do you want me to call you Jimmy?" Hermione said, pretending this was truly the first time they had met.

"Whichever one you feel more comfortable with, my dear." He gave her another one of those overly toothy smiles.
While they waited in line at the bar, they kept up a believable patter of conversation befitting two people who just met and were becoming acquainted with each other.

Just as they were nearing the front of the line, Hermione heard her name called once again. Turning around, Hermione spotted Ginny, whom she recognized since they had gone dress shopping together and recognized each other by their outfits.

Ginny was wearing an emerald green sleeveless dress with a sweetheart neckline; the dress hugged her voluptuous curves until the mermaid skirt flared out dramatically just above the knee. She had also opted to wear something with a slimmer profile versus the other witches who looked like they would fit in with a Victorian ball. Together, Hermione and Ginny would have blended in perfectly with the glamorous golden days of Hollywood long past. Ginny kept her signature red locks, since so many others were going to dye their hair and hers was naturally striking, her hair complimented by the vivid green hue of her dress, mask and gloves.

"Ginny!" Hermione called out, glad to see another familiar face among the thousands that had packed the halls of the Ministry.

"Harry, Ginny, I'd like to introduce you to James White. He works for Lavender doing marketing," Hermione said, introducing the older wizard who was escorting her as the Potters approached.

"And advertising," Draco chimed in.

"Yes, I'm sorry, Jim. And advertising." Hermione tried to put on a performance as believable as the one Draco was putting on.

"Jim, these are my dearest friends, Ginny Potter and her husband, Harry," Hermione said, her hand gesturing for introduction.

Draco’s face brightened. "Harry? Harry Potter?" His face busted out into a broad and vibrant grin. "Well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit! Why, we've heard of you back in the States, even." Draco stuck out his hand and began vigorously shaking it, as if he was Harry's biggest fan. "My great-granddaughter, Tallulah, will just be so thrilled when I tell her I met you."

Harry started looking uncomfortable in the way he always did when treated as a celebrity, meeting strangers who were more familiar with the name and deeds than the person.
Draco went right on prattling in an excited fashion, "Can I get an autograph for my great-granddaughter, if you don't mind?"

Looking about nervously, Harry suddenly said, "Can I get back to you on that? I think my boss, Kingsley, is looking for me."

"Not a problem, Mr. Potter. Or can I call you Harry?" Draco asked with believable sincerity.

"Harry is fine," he said before slipping away off into the crowd to get away from yet another admirer.

Just then, it was Draco and Hermione's turn at the bar.

"I'll have a bourbon and butterbeer," Draco said firmly, slapping his hand on the counter.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we don't have bourbon," the bartender informed him, a bit put off by the brashness of this American. "We have Ogden's Old Firewhisky and Ogden's Single Malt Whisky."

"Fine. Two fingers of your strongest with ice cold butterbeer on top," Draco said heartily. "And you young ladies?"

"Two champagnes," Hermione replied, knowing what Ginny was going to ask for already.

Once they had their drinks, they meandered off to the side to let a group of wizards behind them "belly up to the bar," as Draco phrased it.

"What shall we toast to?" Draco asked.

Inspired, Hermione offered, "To all our hopes and dreams coming true, and sooner than we think."

Ginny looked at Hermione, to which Hermione nodded minisculely indicating that the fluxweed was a sure thing.
Glasses clinked and they drank.

Leaning forward, Ginny whispered in Hermione's ear, "Did you get it?"

"No, but the box came in right when they were closing up the lab. Monday, it will be done."

Wearing a smile as bright as the sun, Ginny said, "So Jim, you work for Lavender? How long have you been doing that?"

"Little over three years, but I'm missing family back home. So I'll be retiring soon anyway, time to head back. As lovely as my stay here in England has been, I'm itching to go," he said as he played with the twisted end of his heavily waxed mustache.

Hermione caught some of the double meaning behind Draco's words. She wondered where this new home for the trio would be. Severus had not divulged that to her, despite her guess that it might be Greece.

As the evening wore on, Hermione excused herself from the conversation Draco and Ginny were engaged in, noting they kept it very cordial. Hermione even introduced Draco's personality of James White to a few other people who had come over to talk with her, including Trevor, who was dressed in a rather vibrant set of plaid robes. Draco remarked he had a pair of curtains in his study back on his plantation in that exact pattern as Trevor's outfit. Trevor seemed to find no offense as Draco's underhanded slight at his choice of fashion, and began a lively discussion with the "elderly American" wizard about opportunities for Potions apprenticeships in America.

Besides Draco, Severus was putting on his very own stellar performance that evening. At one point, Mad-Eye Moody came over to greet Miss Brown, sizing up Severus in his full Delgado ensemble.

The two wizards shook hands briefly. Knowing what a gruff and paranoid person Moody was, Severus began a full court press of trying to engage in conversation with the Head Auror, asking him all sorts of questions about his work, his part in the war, and other topics that would seem normal for a complete stranger.
"So I've never seen you at Miss Brown's headquarters," Moody mentioned.

"That is because I spend most of my time at home, taking care of my lovely garden. I grow so many of my own ingredients, it requires a lot of my time, so I mostly owl Miss Brown and come in when she needs me. She's so gifted, I rarely need to come in," Severus explained with more gesticulation of his hands, which seemed to quell any further questions in the Auror's mind, especially when Severus put a friendly hand upon the Auror's shoulder, an action that would be completely in character for a Spaniard.

The physical contact by a relative stranger made Moody jump a bit and nearly pull out his wand.

"I am sorry," Severus said, his hands put up in surrender. "Have I offended you?"

Feeling a bit foolish for over-reacting, Moody explained, "No, it's just that here in England, we're a bit more reserved than you foreign folk. That's all."

To further avoid any further contact, accidental or intentional, with the strange, foreign wizard, Moody quickly excused himself with a curt farewell to Lavender, not bothering to acknowledge "Delgado."

Severus wanted to excuse himself and find Hermione, but considering that Miss Brown was using this opportunity to lay the foundation of witnesses who had met and talked with Sebastian Delgado, he stuck by her side for a while longer, letting her introduce him some of her other business associates. Even her silent partners, the twins, swung by to talk shop for a bit and meet Delgado. They even asked Severus about how their brand of British jokes and humor might translate to the Spanish youth back home in his country, since they were considering expanding their Treble W shop internationally.

As much as Hermione was looking forward to eating some of the scrumptious comestibles on the floating trays that circulated, magically refilling as the savory bite-sized treats were snapped up by hungry witches and wizards at the ball, Hermione's nervousness that Draco and Severus were to be discovered somehow suppressed her appetite. The alcohol on her empty stomach was beginning to make her head a little light, so in order to keep her wits about her, and to prevent any accidental slip of the tongue, Hermione stuck with pumpkin juice and water for the rest of the night. Despite how much as she wanted to eat and drink the night away, this was no time for mistakes to happen.

Making her way back towards where she last saw Ron, Hermione saw Harry talking with her
husband. Joining them, she slipped her arm into her husband's, putting on a pretty believable façade that their marriage was great, given that Ron had recently confessed that he'd married Hermione out of pressure from his mother, rather than out of love.

Harry kept his mask down over his face, hoping it would give him a little anonymity for the night, though his signature scar was still visible through his black hair that framed his forehead. Ron had already taken his mask off, saying it was going to mess up his hair for the upcoming photo op later. After chatting for a little while, Harry excused himself, this time truly in need of speaking with Kingsley.

Once Harry left, Ron leaned over and confessed with befuddled surprise, "I had to escape Dagmar. She propositioned me, right under her husband's nose, though I'm not sure he noticed. God, I hope he didn't. I don't want anything to mess up this sponsorship."

"At least she didn't goose your arse, like she did mine," Hermione confessed, much to Ron's shock.

"She didn't."

"She did," Hermione confirmed darkly. "Though it's only a matter of time before Bascom comes right out and propositions me outright as well."

"He wouldn't," Ron countered, unable to believe his newest friend would cheat on Dagmar by propositioning his wife.

"For a keeper who can catch a Quaffle, you're pretty blind. My guess is, if we didn't both get away in time, Dagmar would have suggested we make her into a Dagmar sandwich," Hermione quipped blandly, and fairly accurately, too. "And if Bascom does know about his wife's dalliances, and she his, they might have suggested swapping as well."

Ron's face fell in disgust at the suggestion that a witch, who was old enough to be his mother, would have asked him and his wife for a three-way, much less trade his wife off to a man old enough to be Hermione's father or possibly grandfather. Ron was about to ask where Hermione learned about such things, wondering how she could even conceive of such ideas, when Minister Fudge appeared on a floating platform above the crowd gathered for the night.

Casting the Sonorus Charm, he spoke, "Ladies and gentlemen. Thank you all for attending the Ministry's Halloween Masked Ball. This gala, suggested by my beautiful and talented wife,
Calpurnia, is a celebration that we have recovered fully from the dark times of our recent past, and there is a bright future for our society. So let us raise our glasses and toast to the bright future ahead. Cheers!

Nearly everyone had a drink in their hand, and those that did raised them in salute to the Minister's words, Draco and Severus especially.

"And now, it's time to dance!" Fudge announced before guiding the platform back down and ending the charm for his voice.

The band, which had been playing quietly in the background, struck up a waltz, the noise amplified louder. On an easel next to the band was a sign signifying the next type of song that they would play after the current song, which was going to be a foxtrot.

Hermione nudged her head towards the dance floor, wondering if Ron would at least have one go-round on the floor with his wife, but he begged it off, saying, "Later," above the loudness of the notes played.

Bascom came back over to Ron and Hermione. Shouting above the music, he indicated it was time for Ron to do his appearance for the press and photographers. Bascom promised to return Ron back to her later, speaking more to her chest than to her face as he leered down her front, glimpsing the swell of her breasts.

As Hermione was left alone amid a crowd, she began to look around for a familiar face. The problem was that nearly everyone was wearing a mask, and many had their hair dyed strange colors, making it harder to recognize anyone she knew.

There were times she thought she spotted Tonks, but it was just a witch who had dyed her hair pink for the night. And Luna was hard to spot as well, as many had dyed their hair a very similar light golden ash blonde as the Editrix of The Quibbler.

Meandering amongst the throng of people crowded around the edges of the dance floor full of witches and wizards, twirling in pairs like apple blossom petals falling from a tree in spring, Hermione spied Trevor with two other people. From the mincing gait, she could only assume that it was Madam Dushka who was the witch next to him. The wizard, who was shorter than her, flanked the other side of Trevor. Hermione didn't know who he was, but he was quite possibly Madam Dushka's husband, though she had never met him before. However, based on the photo of the married couple on Madam Dushka's desk, the size and build looked to be about right.
Curiosity piqued, given that the only thing down that hallway the trio strolled was stairs to the basement level where Hermione worked, she walked as inconspicuously as possible toward where they had gone. She checked to make sure that the trio had turned the corner before venturing down the hallway.

After peering back, looking to see if she would slip away unnoticed, Hermione turned the corner and saw the door to the lab swing shut. Madam Dushka had locked the lab earlier that day and Kingsley had double-checked it, but why were Trevor, their cunt boss, and Mr. Dushka going into the lab?

Slowly skulking up to the door, she was about to press her ear up to it, wishing she had a pair of Extendable Eyes or at least Extendable Ears, when a hand clamped around her mouth from behind, muffling any scream that might have escaped her lips.

"I would have thought a witch like you would have retained more of your stealth abilities, after all those years of sneaking around Hogwarts after hours," a familiar Castilian Spanish-accented voice whispered into her ear.

Hermione gave Severus a look that was a mixture of anger for momentarily frightening her and relief that it was him and not someone else.

"Maybe if I had Harry's Invisibility Cloak, this would be easier and I wouldn't have been noticed," she whispered back peevishly.

"I only noticed you because I was watching you, not the people dancing."

"Let's hope you're the only one who was watching me," she prayed.

"In a dress like this? Not likely," he murmured sweetly, a finger running delicately up her spine along bare flesh, his voice still holding an accent.

Hermione stifled a shuddering sigh, thinking this was not the best place for them to get caught together.
"Really? Now?" she said with an impatient whisper. "Trevor, Dushka and her husband just went in there. Just as I was being rushed out the door at noon today by her, a box of fluxweed picked at full moon came in," she hissed, trying to impart her lack of interest in Severus' attentions right now and why she was keenly interested as to why the unlikely trio were in there. Should anything happen to that box while those three were in there, that might mean a delay of nearly another year before Severus, Draco and Ginny could escape, if that was truly the only and last shipment of the year.

Understanding why Hermione was so terse with him, Severus suddenly became equally serious and grave. Now he was very curious as to why those three were in the lab as well.

"You think they might steal some and sell it on the black market?" asked Severus, his Castilian accent giving him a slight lisp.

"I don't think so, but I can't think of why they might be in there all alone."

Hermione and Severus leaned in and pressed their ear to the door, comprehension dawning on their faces.

Cracking the door open a smidgen, just enough to peer in, their suspicions were confirmed and further elaborated with visual sighting of Madam Dushka lying back on the sturdy testing bench while Trevor was plugging away at her, bent over her while his mouth was firmly latched onto one nipple. Madam Dushka was wailing rather loudly, masking any noise Hermione and Severus might have made cracking the door open or whispering amongst themselves. Behind Trevor was Mr. Dushka, buggering Trevor from behind, making a Trevor sandwich. The older wizard was making a whole lot of noise himself as well.

Hermione threw her hand over her mouth to stifle a gasp of shock when she realized what the short wizard was standing atop of in order to make himself tall enough to penetrate Trevor from behind. Under Mr. Dushka's black shiny shoes – and bright yellow trousers and polka dot underpants hanging about his ankles – was the box of fluxweed.

Severus understood what Hermione was frantically pointing at, and saw her shoulders seize up, violently cringing as the box suddenly buckled and a corner broke upon, spilling fluxweed all over the floor. Hermione clamped her hand over her mouth tighter to keep from gasping aloud.

There was a shout from Mr. Dushka as he pulled himself free from Trevor, kicking the box aside in frustration, spilling even more fluxweed all over the lab floor, before going to grab a sturdy stool on which to mount Trevor from behind once more.
Reeling, Hermione fell back against the wall, panting in panic that all that fluxweed was strewn about all over the place so carelessly. If anything, this would make it very easy for Hermione to sneak away plenty of the Polyjuice Potion ingredient without having to write up that she botched an experiment. She just hoped the box would not be patched up and reweighed before she came in Monday morning. Still, for the past two months she and Severus had been praying for a delivery of the scarce ingredient, only to watch so much of it casually wasted.

Severus was looking equally pained at what he just witnessed.

Before they could say anything, Severus heard the approach of footsteps before Hermione could register the sound.

"Slap me," he quickly whispered in his Castilian accent before he pinned Hermione up against the wall and planted a deep tongue kiss upon her mouth.

Finally hearing the footsteps and grasping the implication of his suggestion, she shoved back against his form and slapped him soundly across the face, just as Kinglsey Shacklebolt rounded the corner.

"I'm a married woman. How dare you!" Hermione yelled hotly, before storming off past Kingsley back towards the ball and the rest of the guests.

Severus looked at Kingsley sheepishly and gave a cavalier shrug before saying, "You can't blame a wizard for trying. Am I right?" He gently rubbed the side of his face where Hermione's hand made contact and added, lipstick still freshly smudged across his mouth, "But it was worth it."

Kingsley approached Severus, looking him up and down with a disapproving glare. "This area is closed off. What are you doing down here?"

"The young witch and I were discussing Potions, someplace where we didn't have to shout above the band, when we noticed some people going into her lab." Severus tilted his head in the direction of the door he was standing next to. "I was rather inspired by the moment, if you know what I mean." Severus sauntered off, whistling a jaunty tune.

As Severus was rounding the corner, heading back towards the ball, he heard a small choir of voices from inside the lab react in shock to being caught in flagrante delicto.
At some point, Severus would have to make a public apology to Hermione for acting so forward and presuming too much, seeing as how Kingsley was a witness. Given how stunning she looked that night, Severus wouldn't be surprised if he wasn't the last whose advances she would spurn.

Making sure she was looking properly reassembled after that sudden ravishing by Severus' mouth, fixing her smeared lipstick as well, Hermione rejoined the party. She wondered who else was making use of unused offices for a quick tryst.

Not surprisingly, she finally spotted the Weasley clan grouped together over by one of the few corners that didn't have a bar. Just like during Victory Day, they had congregated together. Fortunately, there were enough house-elves available for temporary hire to take care of all the Weasley grandchildren back at various homes, as this was a function meant for adults that went far past the bedtime of many little witches and wizards.

Penelope looked like she was long past overdue to pop, and she was sitting down, fanning herself with her mask that she had already removed, oppressed by the heat of so many bodies within a confined space. Even Hermione had long checked her cloak with the cloak girl for the evening, glad she had a cool dress on.

All the Weasley women, with the exception of Fleur, had dressed in the more traditional ball gown with huge skirts that required a lot of space in which to maneuver. Fleur was wearing something more sleek like Hermione, looking lovely in an empire-waisted silk column, having regained her slender shape shortly after the birth of her and Bill's latest child the night of Harry's birthday party. Fleur praised Hermione's choice of attire, remarking how chic it looked and the color was so lovely. Molly gave her a look up and down, Hermione noting that her mother-in-law didn't exactly care for the style, but then had quickly plastered on a sweet face, saying her daughter-in-law looked "nice." Molly was in her own champagne-coloured wedding cake confection, with tiers and tiers of ruffles down the skirt, taking up a fair bit of real estate herself. Bill returned with drinks for Fleur and himself.

Hermione spent a fair amount of time chatting with her in-laws, not wanting to join Ron and deal with Dagmar or Bascom coming on to her again. She could have rejoined Lavender, "Jim" and "Sebastian," but considering how she just slapped Severus across the face for show, it would not make much sense for her to seek their company if she was pretending to be upset with the Spanish peacock, though only Kingsley was the only witness so far that they knew of. She talked with the twins about their business, and they mentioned meeting some "Dago bloke" to which Hermione acted slightly aggrieved at the mention of his name, keeping up the pretense.

Looking about, she saw over in one corner Ron coming back from his time with the press. The
flashes of light signified someone else was right now the center of attention for the journalists in attendance.

Ron looked quite relieved to be back within the sanctuary of his family, even amid the crowd of people. Hermione could only guess how difficult Dagmar was to deal with. Though Hermione and her husband had drifted apart in their marriage, they still kept up the pretense of a happy marriage for the benefit of his family, even with much of the bad blood and recent revelations that had passed between them recently. If anything, it gave the believable front of a happy marriage to the rest of the Weasley clan. Hermione wondered how Molly would react if the old fortuneteller's prediction came true and their marriage was indeed going to be over before the end of the year.

As the chatter and flashes from the press area died down, and started up anew once more, Hermione spotted a witch and wizard making a direct line towards her and Ron. When the pair came closer, she suddenly recognized that gait.

"Viktor!" Hermione said warmly, and greeted her old friend with a kiss upon his cheek.

"Ron! Her-my-nee!" he greeted the pair, returning Hermione's kiss upon her cheek and clapping Ron heartily on the back in a great hug.

"Did you just come over from the press area?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Yes, I just made the announcement I mentioned to you before." The former Quidditch World Cup player was beaming with joy. "And not only that, I have just announced that I am engaged."

Hermione and Ron's eyes turned to the voluptuous strawberry blonde witch next to Viktor.

"May I introduce to you Lady Anne Battenberg, my fiancée," Viktor announced with pride. "Anne, these are old friends I met during the Tri-vizard Tournament at Hogvarts."

Ron and Hermione took turns congratulating the newly engaged couple.

"When did you propose?" Hermione asked.
"Last night. It's all been so sudden. The same night I saw you the Grand Royal Supper Club, we met for the first time," Viktor confessed. "But I am positively in love with this divine creature. So we agreed that when I made my announcement that I would be Puddlemere United's new coach starting next season, we would also announce our engagement."

"Really? That's fantastic, mate," Ron exclaimed and gave Viktor an even bigger hug.

While the wizards began chatting about Quidditch, Hermione talked with Lady Anne. "I had no idea Viktor was seeing anyone. I'm so thrilled for you both, I wish you both all the happiness in the world."

"Thank you, Her-my-nee," Anne said with her very polished British upper crust accent.

"Actually, it's Hermione. Viktor always had a little trouble pronouncing it," she clarified.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I'm used to him referring to you with that particular pronunciation."

Hermione assured her it was not a problem. As they talked, Hermione made sure not to bring up her royal lineage, since it seemed the press was rather fixated on the fact that the Muggle royal family had finally produced a witch, so she was the closest thing to royalty in wizarding society, even though she was third or fourth cousin to Prince Phillip, removed once or twice possibly – Hermione couldn't remember. Hermione understood, along with Harry, the pressures of celebrity. Even that damning snapshot of Hermione giving Harry a hug just before the first Tri-wizard event haunted her for a long time, then there was the post N.E.W.T. drunken binge reported in the papers as well that added to her "reputation." Instead they talked about safe and innocuous matters, such as wedding details. It was a safe subject to discuss, considering that the couple had just announced their engagement.

Just as Hermione was beginning to relax, she spied Severus approaching her. As much as she would have enjoyed spending more time with Severus, his Delgado personality was certainly a bit off-putting, as per his plan.

Pulling his gold hat off and sweeping it with a grand gesture, bowing before Hermione, he said, "I am so sorry if I have offended you, a thousand pardons, Señora Weasley."

All Hermione could think was, 'Really, Severus? Right here, right now? In front of my husband, family, Viktor and his fiancée?' but she decided to play along. Severus, after all, was a long time
spy with a fantastic head for strategy and playing a believable part. She had to trust him that there was a purpose to him coming over and publicly apologizing to her in front of everyone she knew.

Hoping she was going to say the right thing, she replied with a look of disdain, "Of course I was offended."

"My deepest apologies, Mrs. Weasley. I took your enthusiasm for Potions as something else," Severus said with plausible deep remorse. "Back in Spain, when a witch speaks to another wizard with such passion one could only assume such things. I am ignorant of British customs and mistook your academic excitement for something else." Bowing once more, this time even more deeply, "As I said, a thousand pardons. I am a fool."

Ron started looking over this puffed-up Spanish version of Gilderoy Lockhart with an accusatory eye. Before Ron could confront "Delgado," Hermione said begrudgingly, "I guess I could accept your apology, as it seems it was a cultural miscommunication."

Hermione held her nose in the air and gave him a slightly haughty look that made Severus proud that she had acted so well the part.

To Severus' delight, Molly seemed to have overheard his Spanish accent and had quietly moved as far away from him as possible, to the far side of the Weasley clan, making small excuses as she tried to navigate with her huge hoop skirt. Even Lady Anne, the witch standing next to Viktor Krum, that "Eduardo" had shagged in ways that even "Miss Anne’s" fiancée could never imagine, was looking at him with dislike.

It all worked beautifully. Hermione was made to look like the faithful wife, securing her reputation from the possible onslaught of accusations if her marriage did end soon; Molly seemed to be rather nervous around him, which might lead her to reconsider her weekly bookings with "Eduardo" and freedom from hearing her prattle on once a week. Then there was a certain amount of smug satisfaction that Lady Anne was no wiser that the same man whom she had begged to violate her any and every which way was the same man she was looking at like he was completely beneath her.

Severus bowed dramatically several times as he moved backwards, away from the Weasley clan and Hermione, even clumsily bumping into another wizard on purpose, in which he apologized even more as he removed himself from the scene.

"As if he thought he was of your caliber," Lady Anne sniffed haughtily to Hermione, the witch's lip set into a curl of disgust at the idea of that wizard pawing her new friend.
"Just how do you know that pompous arse anyway?" Ron asked.

"He was one of the wizards I owled regarding an apprenticeship over the years," Hermione explained, remembering the public backstory.

"Glad he didn't take you as his apprentice," Ron snorted, looking indignant.

"Well, I am grateful to him, since he was the one who helped arrange my apprenticeship with Albert Dobmeir," Hermione explained.

"Why did he do that?" asked Viktor, now interested in hearing how his friend and that Spanish berk had crossed paths.

"Probably thought it would let him get into her knickers," one of the twins interjected, to Ron's dismay.

"It's not like that," Hermione insisted.

Hermione recalled the story Severus had related earlier about being stuck and most of the rest of the relevant story, which seemed to placate Ron, Lady Anne, Viktor and the rest of the Weasley clan that had gathered around her for support and to hear the tale.

"And to think I asked that Dago twat about helping us with contacts in Spain to set up a new store," George said aloud.

"Well, from what I understand, he's going back to Spain soon, so he wouldn't be a problem, which I don't think he'll be anymore after tonight," Hermione said with some finality, hoping everyone else would go back to focusing on other topics of conversation.

Viktor turned to his fiancée and asked, "I hope you don't mind, but I'd like to ask my old friend for a spin on the dance floor. For old time sake."
"Not at all," Lady Anne said sweetly. "I remember you telling me about the Yule Ball. As long as Hermione doesn't mind me asking her husband for a dance as well?"

Hermione smiled. "As long as Ron is willing to venture on the floor, I don't see why not."

Ron suddenly found Lady Anne taking his arm as the pair followed Viktor and Hermione to the floor before beginning a Viennese wizarding waltz.

As Hermione was spun about the floor in Viktor's arms, Hermione said, "Anne seems like a lovely person."

"She is," Viktor replied. "Being a celebrity, she understands about the problems it can cause, so we initially bonded over that. But we've since found we have much in common. It just feels right, like it is the most natural thing in the world. I can truly see myself growing old with her. Is that strange?"

"Not at all, Viktor," Hermione replied, thinking about how naturally that feeling had developed between her and Severus and had bloomed into a love they could not admit to each other. It made her realize that though she had trouble imagining herself growing old with Ron, the idea of spending the rest of her life with Severus seemed natural and even something she could look forward to. Suddenly, Hermione was feeling very melancholy as the realization that Viktor had found the happiness that had eluded her and Ron, and that she was denied with Severus based on circumstances.

"I think I need to sit down," Hermione said, as a way to excuse herself so she could be alone with her thoughts. "I'm feeling a bit warm."

Hermione made her way to the ladies' loo and bolted the stall door in order to let herself cry. After she had let her emotions run their course, she went to the sink to make herself presentable once more. Even though she had a mask to hide the redness and puffiness around her eyes, she hoped no one would notice.

"Here," offered some random witch who was touching up her make-up in the mirror. Standing next to Hermione, she handed the teary witch a small tube of Lovely Lavender's Puffy Poof Eye Crème. "You look like you need this as badly as I did earlier."

"Thanks," Hermione said, dabbing some around her eyes before returning it to the kind anonymous
Hermione stared at her reflection in the mirror in which to brace herself for the rest of the evening, since she had no idea what else lay in store.

Severus was getting tired prancing about in these high heels. His feet ached, and he felt a great deal more empathy towards witches who ran around in heels all day and begged him for a foot massage when they came to visit him at his flat.

Speaking under his breath, his Spanish accent still in use, he said to his employer, "You did your announcement, the press did photos with you and Albert, I've completed all the arranged scenarios and even the twins will not bother to follow up with me later on. Can I at least leave?"

"Yes, Sebastian. I think your evening is complete if you choose to leave now," Lavender acquiesced.

"I do choose. I've made myself the fool and covered your arse in the process. My feet are killing me," he complained, his voice lilting with a sweet tone as if he was discussing some lovely holiday he had recently.

Making a dramatic bow for show, he said in a normal volume, "It was a pleasure to see you again, Miss Brown." He bent over and kissed her hand softly.

"And it was so good to see you, Sebastian. We must have tea one last time before you leave," she added for good measure, should anyone observe their exchange.

"But of course, Señorita."

Severus would have liked to see Hermione just one last time, if only from across the room, but he had already made his farewell and was heading towards the Floo. As he crossed the Atrium, Draco and he did exchange glances, in which Severus gave a discreet nod that Draco could make his exit any time he wanted if he wished.

Currently, Draco was dancing a Scottish ceilidh with Madam Agatha, his elderly Saturday client.
who came to visit Draco as his younger self for a sympathetic ear and a bit of companionship. Draco did like Madam Agatha, as one would like their grandmother, and decided to give the old witch a thrill by offering to dance with her as an elderly gentleman, which he knew he would be hearing about tomorrow night when she would come to visit him at the Red Ginseng next. Young Malfoy did have a sweet streak about him that few understood, though Severus saw flashes of it periodically, glad that the Dark Lord had not burned out this aspect of the boy.

Ginny had helped bring some of that sweetness back to his disposition, making it bloom once more as a neglected rosebush blooms once tended to regularly. One could say that Hermione had been tending to Severus and made long forgotten parts of him flourish once more, as well.

He wondered if Hermione had brought out the hidden part of himself he had buried long ago in an attempt to keep his inner self and thoughts from the Dark Lord. Draco hadn’t spent nearly two decades hiding away part of his soul, like what Severus had done.

As he approached the Floo to take home, he spied Hermione seeking some solitude away from the crowds in a dark corner. She spotted him as well, and for a brief moment, they exchanged glances that were hidden from others by their masks. Hermione didn't need to have Severus remove his mask to understand the fleeting glance he gave her, nor did he for her. He knew she wanted to leave with him, but had an obligation to stay. He didn't have to be close to her to know that she had been crying earlier, he had come to know her well enough that he didn't even have to ask. Severus knew from her body language alone. And as much as he wished he could place his cloak around her protectively and take her home to his flat, they could not even truly acknowledge each other.

Hermione was the first to look away and Severus felt his heart ache at seeing her this way; alone in a crowd, much like he had felt for most of his life.

With a green flash of Floo powder, that was the last Hermione ever saw of Sebastian Delgado.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Viking Carrot graciously accepted my commission to do the scene where Hermione first meets “Delgado.”
You can view the fanart work here with the emoji: http://atdlheabetz.tumblr.com/post/141823175330/fan-art-by-vikingcarrot-hermione-meets-severus
And the same fan art without the emoji here: http://40.media.tumblr.com/b138fcf78c91b89d9c86a3de9d3ab147/tumblr_o4r7xg6HHk1ugsuuho1
Her Tumblr page is here: http://vikingcarrot.tumblr.com/
As for the inspiration behind Hermione's dress? Imagine this dress in a matte electric
royal blue silk charmeuse, without the embroidery. This was Hermione's dress for the ball:


And a most wonderful round of thanks to my betas for this very large chapter: JuneW and Cytherea.
At the last Chudley Cannons’ game of the season, they played the Tutshill Tornadoes, which had become somewhat of a rival over the past few years. Hermione was thrilled that she would have all her Saturdays back, until the next season began in mid-February. If what the old Roma fortuneteller said would come to pass – that her marriage would not last the rest of the year – she wouldn’t even have to worry about that ever again.

It was a mostly cloudy day with a light breeze and a slight chill. It reminded her of the weather during a lot of school Quidditch games back at Hogwarts.

After the game, there would be the big post-season party, and she hoped Ron did not want to linger too long, though she knew he would probably stay until the bitter end. However, given his rather strict diet for his upcoming calendar shoot, she thought he might want to avoid the temptation of too much drink and rich fatty foods that were usually served up at these affairs. Even last night at the Ministry’s Halloween Masked Ball, shortly after Severus left, Ron had asked if Hermione wanted to go home as he wanted to go to bed early and get a good night's rest before the last game of the year. Hermione was more than happy to cut her night short as well. Ron had even limited himself to one alcoholic drink last night and tried to avoid the more butter-laden fare.

Up on his broom, she noticed he was flying particularly well that day. He exuded confidence and caught the Quaffle every time. His workouts seemed to give him better balance and strength on his
broom, which was a good thing, considering this was his career after all.

After a few hours, the Snitch showed up and was promptly caught by the Cannons' Seeker, Wally Bristol. Glad to have the game finally over, Hermione meandered down to the club room for the party.

As the wives were waiting for their husbands to come out of the club's locker room, Hermione noticed Christie Kidd and Nicole Stewart glancing over towards her as they stood near the ice sculpture of a set of Quidditch goals, miniature versions of Quidditch players rendered in ice flying about the hoops. She was tempted to look at them and shout uncharacteristically, "What the fuck are you two cunts staring at," but held her tongue. It was out of character to be too confrontational, but it was exactly how she was feeling at the moment.

Finally, Christie sauntered over and said, "That was quite a dress you wore last night. It was the talk of the ball."

Hermione wanted to roll her eyes. She didn't know where this conversation was going to head, nor did she care. She wasn't even sure if Christie was being sincere or not, not that it mattered to her either way. She had bigger things to deal with in her life than a couple of witches who had made a point of taunting her over the past several years.

"I didn't notice," Hermione honestly replied. She wasn't sure if her dress was a hit or not, but Fleur and many other witches she trusted and knew seemed to like it. Most of all, she did not need or want this witch's approval.

"Well, it was," Christie insisted. Nicole came up next to Christie to join in the conversation, if you could call it that.

"So we saw you talking with Lady Anne Battenberg," Nicole piped up.

'Ah, here we go. Now I know why they are bothering to acknowledge me,' Hermione accurately surmised.

Tired at the prospect of bothering to engage these two, Hermione turned to face them, putting her drink down to stare Christie right in the face and blandly replied, "And?" She didn't even bother to hide the boredom plainly written on her face.

"We were just wondering--" Christie continued, but stopped when Hermione turned around and walked away from the pair.

"What? What the..." Christie said in confusion to Hermione's abrupt departure from the conversation without even some excuse as to why she walked away.

Hermione left the club room before the men had even emerged. She wanted to go sit in the stands and be away from the noise of a crowded room with cheerful faces and loud talking.

A cheer arose as the men came out, and eventually Ron went outside to find his wife.

"I don't feel like going back in," Hermione began, knowing he would ask her why she was outside in the cold instead of inside enjoying the free food and drink.

"Any particular reason?" he asked.

It surprised her that her husband had asked a simple question for an explanation instead of jumping on her back, accusing her of being unfriendly to the other wives – a claim she had countered with
her own tales of how horribly they had behaved towards her over the years – or wheedling on about how he needed her to put up a good front and be a good sport, suffering them for just a bit, for his sake.

Hermione wanted to recount her encounter with Kidd and Stewart, but just wearily shook her head.

Instead of launching into a tirade about her attitude, he said, "I'll just explain that you're worn out from the ball last night and you have a headache."

Hermione looked at her husband and smiled weakly. "Thanks, Ron. I appreciate it."

It saddened Hermione to admit it, but ever since Ron admitted he’d married her after being pressured by Molly, and since they both had silently acknowledged their marriage was over, they had been behaving much more civilly towards each other than they had over the last few years. Though Ron had not suggested divorce or even a separation, she could sense it was coming, if she didn't suggest it first.

Before leaving her to rejoin the party, Ron said, "Bascom has changed some aspects of the calendar shoot. I was informed just last night, and you looked tired so I thought I'd wait until today to tell you."

Hermione held her breath wondering what bomb Ron was going to drop in her lap.

"Instead of shooting all around the United Kingdom, Bascom wants to go all over the world," Ron elaborated. "India, Tanzania, Japan, the Americas. He wants to make the calendar more internationally appealing by including more exotic locales to boost sales abroad. So that means I'll be gone for three weeks."

She nodded, indicating she understood.

"I can't take you with me, though that might have been nice for you, I suppose. A real holiday, a chance to relax since you deserve one so much – though I'll be busy with the photography. But that means I'll be gone three weeks, leaving Wednesday. Is that okay?"

It was sweet that Ron was asking if it was alright if he up and took off for three weeks. It wasn't like she had much of a choice either, since Ron had to go as part of his contract, but it seemed he was trying to be accommodating for once.

Placing her hand along the cheek of the man before her, she said with a bittersweet smile, "Go, Ron. Have fun, see the sights, and owl me a postcard. I'll be fine," she assured him.

"Thanks, 'Mione." He leaned over and gave her a gentle peck on the cheek before going back into the clubhouse once more.

Hermione Apparated home, feeling a little bit more hollow inside.

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Arriving at work at seven in the morning, Hermione unlocked the lab and found the box of fluxweed still sitting in the corner where Mr. Dushka had kicked it in a fit during his shag fest with his wife and their mutual paramour the other night during the Ministry's masked ball.

It was a twenty-pound box, but it looked like at least a good pound of it had fallen out of the box and spilled onto the floor.
Hermione was tempted to pick through the fluxweed strewn on the floor, but all that Severus and Draco needed was to have fluxweed contaminated with someone's hair from the floor, be it Trevor's, the Dushkas', Kingsley's, or even a rat’s hair, and the whole thing would be for naught. Not even a Summoning Charm for impurities could assure with 100% certainty that the fluxweed wasn't contaminated.

After quickly putting aside enough uncontaminated fluxweed for two batches of potion and storing it in the pocket of her robes, Hermione began sweeping up the ruined fluxweed and discarding it in the trash. Just as she was dumping a dustpan full of the botanical into the dustbin, Madam Dushka burst into the lab, surprised to find Hermione already there and at work.

Knowing what had happened, but pretending she had no clue, Hermione said, "I was just about to call the Aurors. I think someone broke into the lab during the ball and tried to steal a highly regulated Potion ingredient."

Madam Dushka paled upon realizing what box her husband had busted open during their three-way tryst. "No need. Aurors have already taken care of the matter. Nothing was stolen. Just write up a report and make your best guess how much was ruined," she said nervously before leaving quickly.

This suited Hermione just fine. Kingsley had seen the lab, and – should it be recalled in a Pensieve memory – the box of fluxweed was already busted open with the plant material most probably clinging to the trousers and underpants of Mr. Dushka, since it was his feet and weight that broke it open.

Of all the ingredients, the fluxweed was the most scarce, yet easiest to steal from the lab.

'How ironic,' she mused.

For lunch, Hermione met Ginny at a Muggle restaurant on the outskirts of London. Hermione had heard from her mother about this place with fabulous curry she had tried recently. Mrs. Weasley suggested it as a place where she could discreetly pass off the fluxweed to Mrs. Potter with little possibility of a witch or wizard being around. Hermione even went to Gringotts and got some Muggle money with which to pay for the meal, insisting this once that she should treat Ginny instead of their usual split check.

Ginny's hands nearly shook as she took the ingredient and carefully placed it in a pocket of her Muggle-style jacket, zipping the inside pocket closed for good measure.

Over lunch, they avoided mentioning Draco and Severus, or any interaction they had with them during the masked ball in their alternate personas. Instead, Hermione updated Ginny on her encounter with Christie and Nicole after the game, and on Ron's upcoming three-week trip.

"That sounds like such a good idea," Ginny said in response to Ron's trip. "I really should book one for Harry and me. In fact, I think I'll insist on it. It's been far too long since Harry and I went on holiday."

This was Hermione's Pensieve memory to use should one be asked for regarding the sudden disappearance of one Ginny Potter. The red-haired witch didn't say as much, but it was understood.

It finally struck Hermione that not only would Severus be gone soon, but that her dear friend, Ginny, would be as well.
Hermione felt the pricking of tears behind her eyes, but held them back, knowing that it might ruin the memory and indicate foreknowledge of Ginny and the Death Eaters' flight.

They spent the rest of Hermione's lunch hour discussing innocuous topics. Hermione noted how the time flew and it was far too soon before she had to return to work.

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In the afternoon, Miss Brown had taken Draco and Severus to the fourth floor office space of The Sirens' Secret, which was its own little secret since Lavender cast the Fidelius Charm and she was its Secret-Keeper. She had already Obliviated the workers downstairs as to the location above their heads. They were busy working away, preparing the shop for its grand opening on first Saturday in December, just in time for the Christmas shopping season.

Miss Brown had procured a new cauldron according to Severus' directions. It sat in the middle of the room, calling to him. Severus could scarcely believe it, but in approximately one month's time, he would be able to brew anything he wanted and cast any spell without the risk of a Dementor's Kiss. He could almost taste the freedom that was yet to come.

Just as they were about to leave, the fireplace over in the corner roared to life and Ginny stepped out of it, still wearing her short black leather Muggle jacket.

"I got it!" she crowed triumphantly as she unzipped her inner pocket and held aloft the package.

Ginny handed it over to Lavender as Severus rushed over to look over the last ingredient needed for their freedom.

In the light of the attic space, he examined the fluxweed without touching it, looking for its quality and any hint of contamination, given that a short wizard had been buggering a boy while standing atop of the fluxweed box. He knew Hermione would make sure she hadn't given them anything contaminated, but he wanted to make sure to put his own mind at rest, observing that Hermione had provided enough for two batches.

The quality and consistency was good. Satisfied, he let Draco examine the fluxweed before Lavender placed it on a table that included all the other ingredients.

Severus then began to give very specific and detailed instructions to Ginny on how to begin stewing the lacewing flies for twenty-one days. One could not exactly purchase pre-stewed lacewing flies, and even if one could, Severus would not trust the quality of the product. If anything, the twenty-one days required to stew them would give Ginny time to purchase Portkeys for the three of them and convince her husband that they should go on holiday, should anyone from the Portkey office mention anything about his upcoming trip to his face.

All Ginny needed was for some idiot to ask Harry, "So, looking forward to your big trip?" where everyone could hear and for Harry to reply, "What trip?" Then all their plans would go pear-shaped.

Severus, Draco, and Ginny had carefully planned for every contingency so far, and with a whole lot of preparation and a little luck, it would go off without a hitch.

Once the lacewing flies were slowly simmering, there would be little to do since the rest of the ingredients were added either the day before or the day of the potion's completion. Of course Severus would make a trip every day to check on the status of the stewing lacewing flies, or Draco, should he not be able to check himself.
As they all left by Floo, Ginny for home, and the rest back to Lovely Lavender's headquarters, Severus couldn't help but look over his shoulder one more time to see the cauldron sitting there with a small fire beneath it, his key to freedom simmering away.

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When Hermione arrived at Severus' door for their ritual Monday night rendezvous, no words were spoken.

Hermione threw herself into Severus’ arms and they began kissing with urgency. As they moved towards the bed, they spun around each other, trying to make their way to the bed as they disrobed each other and themselves at the same time.

She downed a vial of Lubrication Potion as Severus was settling himself on the bed. Once on the bed, Severus sat with his back against the headboard and Hermione quickly mounted him, neither in need of foreplay as they were both ready.

What was first a dire need for each other, the need to consume each other in haste, lessened. Hermione rode Severus with purposefully languid movements as they gazed intently into each other’s eyes. Eyes locked onto each other, Hermione rose and fell, Severus' hands guiding her hips up and down, rocking his hips in time to her movements. The emotional intensity between them was visceral and burned brightly.

As Severus' hands moved up to palm her breasts, Hermione finally let her eyes close shut, overwhelmed by the feeling of love for Severus. Pulling his head to her chest, he responded by grasping her tightly to his own chest and thrust up from underneath her with fierce intent, lost in the moment of his own love for this witch he had fallen for.

Had he already declared his love to her openly, he would have exclaimed it once more in that moment.

Severus came knowing Hermione had not reached her own orgasm yet. There was no hesitation or shame in his seizing of the moment for his own needs. They still had one more test batch of the Arousal Potion and Male Enhancement Potion to test later that night.

Hermione remained still, reveling in the sensation of Severus clutching her so possessively, his length filling her, his scent of sweat and musk filling her nostrils, the softness of his hair tickling her breasts and arms, and the feel of their lightly sweating skin sticking to each other. When he was gone, she wanted to remember how she felt in his arms, needed so much by this one man.

Finally, she spoke. Hermione wanted to cut the tension, since if she didn't lighten the mood she would start to cry, and she didn't want to cry tonight.

"Who was that obnoxiously loud buffoon at the ball?" Hermione asked, expressing incredulity that Severus and Delgado were the same man. "There is no way that anyone would ever believe that the golden arse you behaved as and Severus Snape could ever be the same person!"

She began laughing at the thought of recalling this strange alternate personality Severus displayed.

"That was the whole point of the exercise," the former spy pointed out. "Should anyone even suggest that Sebastian Delgado going back to Spain shortly before I leave England are more than mere coincidence they will be laughed at. My natural personality is so ingrained into the minds of so many, no one would believe – I hope – that it could have ever been me in disguise."

"Well, I certainly wasn't prepared. You didn't tell me you'd have that silly accent and that
ridiculous outfit. And your hair. It was short and gold," Hermione remarked, playing with several strands of Severus' hair which was once again long, black, and straight. "Why didn't you warn me?"

"Because it's more believable that you'd be shocked by my appearance as opposed to having to manufacture a false initial impression."

"Well, that performance you gave, had it been on the film screen, would have earned you a BAFTA award," Hermione said dryly.

Severus didn't know what BAFTA was, but he understood her implied remark regardless.

As suggested by Severus during the previous week, Hermione came over early enough for them to dine together before they began more experimentation. At the end of the night, they were both in agreement that the full pinch of Caprese mother of pearl had the right length of potency to complement the Male Enhancement Potion, both wearing off about the same time.

Sitting on the settee in front of the fire, after a nice relaxing post-shag shower, Hermione mentioned Ron's upcoming three-week trip.

"He even said he wanted to bring me along, but couldn't. Even so, if he could bring me along, I still would have refused." Hermione snuggled up closer to Severus and squeezed him lightly about the chest to let him know he was the reason why she would have stayed behind if invited. "Still, a holiday did sound awfully nice. It's been ages since I've even had a weekend away."

An idea suddenly formed in Hermione's mind.

"Are you free this weekend, Severus?"

Pulling his head back a little to gaze down at the top of her head firmly planted on his chest, he mused, "I could always cancel Sunday evening. I suppose I am available. What do you have in mind?"

"I have a credit card and a driver's license. I even know how to drive. I could rent a car and we can go away somewhere this weekend. Get away from this flat, for a change of pace. As much as this place has become a sanctuary for me, it would be nice to get away for once, someplace different."

"And we would need two days to drive because England is so vast?" he joked, giving a sarcastic arch of his brow.

"I was thinking we could find a little out of the way bed and breakfast," she suggested.

"Muggle accommodations?"

"As opposed to wizard accommodations where everyone knows your name and face, and many know mine as well. What better way to have a little anonymity than to go somewhere witches and wizards would never deign to go," she reasoned.

"You do recall that being out in public together is what tipped Lavender off about Ginny and Draco being together," he countered.

"And the soaps he ordered from Lavender especially for Ginny didn't help matters either. Besides, that was out in London where there are thousands of wizards walking about anywhere at any time."

"And what about us being seen together in a car in Muggle London, running the risk of being seen
together while we're stopped at a zebra crossing, waiting for some little old lady to cross the road?" Severus pointed out.

"I'll get a wig, you wear a hat, and we'll both wear sunglasses," she offered.

Hermione sat up and regarded Severus. She could see him considering it and weighing the possibilities of a snag hindering his plans in the near future.

"Severus, you have cooked for me, listened to me, nursed my soul from the brink of despair, and have been my friend and lover. Let me treat you to this one thing before you leave. As my indulgence for you since you have been a sole source of solace for me since the day I stepped foot into this flat." Hermione placed her hand softly upon his chest above his heart.

Severus’ initial inclination and instinct was to say no, but he wondered if he would regret this one splurge at the insistence of his lover. Women had only ever come to him to demand their pleasure be served. Hermione was taking care of him this time, seeking to bring him some joy, as she had been doing more and more as their time together passed. Against his better judgment, he agreed.

As they sat together in front of the fire, they discussed possible destinations to drive to while considering the locales of many villages populated with multitudes of wizards and Quidditch pitches around the country. In the end, they agreed that if they drove out towards Norwich, there would be little chance of them coming across others in their community. Hermione assured Severus that they would easily find a bed and breakfast in the region with a room available at the last minute, since November was definitely not the high season.

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Severus was actually feeling chipper. He had come up with an initial formulation for the body paint that Miss Brown whipped up earlier in the day, and both were pleased with the initial results. It was a simple mixture of cornflour, gelatin, sugar, various flavoring, a few common magical ingredients, and coloring agents; it even changed colors based on body temperature. Most of the ingredients were things even available to Muggles with no chance of seasonal fluctuations, since many of the flavoring agents were dried and powdered forms of different fruits, which were stocked year-round.

The Potions master found this mixture much easier to lick clean from his arm hair than the other mixtures he and Hermione had experimented with. He would have worked with Hermione on this, but she had work during the day and time was now limited. Still, he suggested to Lavender that Hermione at least get a small percentage in royalties since she did help with some of the research and did buy him the book that put him on the path towards an edible body paint that was palatable in pleasing colors.

He couldn't wait to try it out on Hermione Thursday night.

Miss Brown was thrilled that he had finally come up with something that met her expectations, since this one particular product seemed so difficult to create, given all the dead ends Severus had reached.

On top of progress on that front, Lavender agreed that she would owl Mrs. Paxton that his company for Sunday evening was unavailable due to a case of Troll Flu, which freed up Severus for a weekend with Hermione without any worry about getting back for any particular time. And the cherry on top was a last-minute missive from Molly Weasley saying she had something come up last-minute and would be unable to join "Eduardo" that evening for her usual tea and bitching.
Lavender asked Severus if he did anything while disguised as Delgado to Molly, and he truthfully answered in the negative. But he did not volunteer that he made his very public and clumsy apology to Hermione at the ball right under Molly's nose, which may have made her skittish about being in close proximity to another Spaniard for some time, despite the fact that "Eduardo" had been nothing but gracious and genteel in her company. She had proven, through her various conversations during her visits, to lump all foreigners together; her assumption of one badly behaving Spaniard could easily be projected upon all Spanish wizards.

Severus, Draco and Lavender still had to work out when exactly each of their nom de guerres would "resign" from their respective positions, as it would be highly suspicious if both quit the same day. But that was to be hammered out at their weekly Friday meeting, over tea and biscuits.

Having just checked on the condition of the stewing lacewing flies after dinner, he found that Ginny had been there earlier in the day and added the correct amount of water to avoid the lacewing flies boiling dry overnight, even if it was a very low and slow simmer.

Not wanting to go back to his empty flat, and eager to read some more books Ginny had found on their final destination that he kept back at his office, Severus decided to Floo back to work and read there for the evening.

The house-elf at the front desk was surprised to see Severus at the office so late. Severus had spent many a late night there at work researching, but he supposed it had been a while since he stayed there late.

As he reached the top floor where their offices were, he heard a shriek come from his employer's office, and it didn't sound like the sort of angry scream she had let loose when he caught her having a temper tantrum before. Nor did it sound like the argument he'd briefly eavesdropped on a few months ago when Padma Patil came to have yet another screaming match with Miss Brown regarding her sister, Parvati, who was a permanent resident at St. Mungo's. There was a crash of something hitting the floor, which made Severus certain Miss Brown was in danger this time, in addition to a more piteous wail.

Wand drawn, he burst through the door to find Miss Brown lying on her desk on her back, blouse undone, one breast pulled free of her brassiere, her skirt hitched up about her waist, one shoe on the verge of slipping from her stocking covered feet, and her legs spread wide open while Ron Weasley was plugging away between her legs, savagely grunting and thrusting with wild abandon as he grasped her ankles. A piece of broken crockery that had fallen off her desk and onto the floor indicated the crash he had heard.

"Weasley," Severus snarled with utter loathing.

Ron stopped pumping his hips into Lavender, aghast at seeing his old Potions master in the doorway while the Gryffindor was shagging his paramour.

"Severus!" Lavender squealed in shock before clutching her undone blouse to her chest for modesty, viewing him from her upside down vantage point.

"Snape!" Ron bit out. Suddenly realizing how Lavender addressed the greasy git, Ron then looked down at his lover, whom he was still inside of, and asked with growing confusion, "Severus?" wondering why she was on a first-name basis with the intruder to their farewell shag.

Still taking in the scene, Severus kept his wand pointed at Weasley and drawled bemusedly, "Miss Brown?" waiting to see how she would explain her way out of this one.
Looking up at her lover pleadingly that he shouldn't jump to conclusions, she said sweetly, "Ron."

Ron immediately withdrew from Lavender, his cock now instantly deflated upon this surprise, and attempted to pull his trousers up. Lavender quickly got up and yanked her skirt down with one hand while still trying to clasp her blouse shut with the other.

"Do you know this... this... Death Eater personally?" Ron bellowed with umbrage as he fumbled with his buttons and zipper. Granted, the intruder was once their professor, but at no time during their school years were they ever on a first-name basis with the Potions master.

"It's not what you think, Ron," she began, panic in her voice as she turned her back to Severus, slipping her breast back into her brassiere and buttoning up her blouse.

"Then why are you addressing him like he's some friend or something?" he asked, his voice rising in pitch and volume. He finally had his own wand out and was pointing it at Snape.

"And here I was thinking you were shagging Kingsley," Severus added with mock befuddlement to the conversation, just to add some grease to the fire for his amusement and to add greatly to Miss Brown's discomfort since everything suddenly made perfect sense to him.

Swiveling to face Lavender, his face turning a deep red from sudden rage, Ron screamed, "You're fucking Snape and Kingsley?!?"

Lavender placed herself between Severus and Ron and screamed back at him, "I've been fucking no one but you for the past three and half years!"

Now Severus could place when they first got together. He knew for certain when Hermione would talk of Ron taking off where he was staying for sure, but there was one other thing.

"And you, Weasley," Severus said, interrupting their screaming match, "I thought you were shagging Blaise Zabini."

Both Miss Brown and Ron stopped to fix Severus with a look of confusion mixed with disgust – the disgust mostly coming from Ron.

"What?!?" they shrieked in unison.

"I would never–" Ron began.

"What makes you think Ron is shagging Blaise?" Miss Brown asked, talking at the same time as her lover.

"– if that isn't the most disgusting thing I've ever heard," Ron continued.

"How in the world did you ever come to that conclusion?" Miss Brown went on.

Severus was upset at discovering that his employer was the one who was fucking his own paramour's husband. And with this new knowledge, it explained Miss Brown's short temper when it came to the topic of Hermione and Potions work he was doing with her, and why she was irrational in her behavior when the topic of Mrs. Weasley came up. It also explained why she offered to drop Hermione's gigolo fees, if anything to ensure she would continue to see Severus and possibly draw attention away from the fact that her husband was fucking around on her. Then there was the pained look Miss Brown gave Severus when he cornered her into offering Hermione an apprenticeship position with pay as a condition of lining up Albert Dobmeir as his replacement.
It was such an ironically cozy circle of dalliances between them. Severus was fucking Hermione; Hermione was fucking Ron; Ron was fucking Lavender; Lavender employed Severus, who used to fuck Miss Anne, who was now marrying Viktor Krum, Hermione's old boyfriend; Severus used to fuck Mrs. Nettleton, who is the wife of the man sponsoring Ron; and soon Hermione would work for her husband's mistress. It was almost comically incestuous and convoluted. Severus even wondered if Mrs. Nettleton had tried to fuck Ron yet.

Ron made the first aggressive move when he advanced towards Severus with his wand drawn and threatened, "How dare you. I'm going to do what Harry should have done to you."

Before Severus, who was quick as lightening in a duel, could react to Weasley, Lavender shouted, "STUPIFY!"

Ron fell to the ground, stunned with a look of shock on his face, still clutching his wand.

Turning to face Severus, Miss Brown commanded him with a pointed finger towards a door, "Go hide in the loo. I'll Obliviate Ron and tell him something from the shelf above fell on his head. We'll talk after I get him out the door, which he was going to do soon anyway."

Taking direction from his employer, Severus did as he was told without hesitation for once. From inside Lavender's toilet, he could hear through the door Miss Brown cast the spell and start feeding Ron a new set of memories.

"Poor thing, that nasty poltergeist knocked that jar on top of your head. Let me see that. Oh, it's not too bad, at least your handsome face was untouched. And it looks like it's almost time for you to leave if you're going to make your Portkey with Bascom to Morocco tonight. You had better get going. Here's your duffel bag, sweetie. I'll miss you. I can't wait to see you when you get back. Have fun and owl me a postcard."

Severus heard Miss Brown shuffle Weasley towards the door and shut it behind him. She then pulled the door open to see Severus glowering at her with a stare that could freeze brimstone.

He was well aware of her quick wand skills and kept his own wand drawn, should she choose to change some of Severus' memories as well.


The Potions master and gigolo was in no mood for tea. Something much stronger was called for, but he wanted to stay stone cold sober for this little talk.

"Sit. Talk," he ordered her, once she had a cup of tea in hand to calm her nerves.

Miss Brown divulged everything. There was no need for Veritaserum or spells to compel her to disclose the truth.

She began with how she and Weasley crossed paths during Hermione and Ron's first big fight, shortly after the Potters' wedding, just as Severus suspected. Miss Brown had found Ron drinking himself nearly blind, morose over the fact he was stuck in a marriage he'd never wanted from the start. Hermione and Ron's personalities clashed when forced to live in close quarters with one another. Miss Brown, naturally drawn to despondent souls, had played his confessor and they'd talked through the night. Eventually Ron had mostly sobered up when Lavender, moved by the moment, leaned forward and kissed him. He kissed back, followed by going back to her place to spend the next several days shagging their brains out before Ron felt guilty and compelled to return to his wife. He felt honor- and duty-bound to stay married to Hermione, despite the fact they had
no children to bind the magic of their marriage yet.

Severus thought back and noted how Miss Brown had become a bit more secretive about her personal life at that point. He had already been working for her as a Potions master for seven months when this all transpired.

"And setting me up with Hermione," he prompted her.

Lavender then went on to confess that she knew at some point, Hermione would become vulnerable herself, and Lavender would most probably come across her in the same way she had found Severus, Ron and Ginny beforehand. And it seemed like the perfect fit that someone who worked in the Department of Standards & Regulations testing Potions ingredients could help provide Severus, and Draco and Ginny later on, a way out of England.

She did admit that as the relationship between Hermione and Severus developed, Lavender did begin to hope that perhaps Severus would take Hermione with him, given that Ron was going to leave her eventually. Lavender even confessed that Ron promised to ask for a divorce when he got back from his three-week trip, and the three weeks apart might help make Hermione realize that they were happier apart than staying married to one another.

If anything, Hermione leaving Ron to be with Severus would save a lot of hassle regarding the divorce if she decided to leave her husband first and the country as well. But with the apprenticeship that Severus had forced Lavender into agreeing to, that option was no longer on the table and they would have to deal with each other, face to face, and Hermione would be working for the witch her husband would leave her for.

"And just what in the world made you think Ron was shagging Zabini?" she asked, wondering where that idea came from.

"Because Hermione came over to my flat the night after her anniversary dinner, and we heard him howling that Zabini should 'take it like a dirty bitch.' Then as Hermione was about to leave, we spied him coming down the stairs from Zabini's flat and tucking his shirt in with a very self-satisfied smirk upon that freckled mug of his," Severus elaborated, gritting his teeth in anger.

Lavender buried her face in her hands before removing them once she could speak. "That was me. We were on the roof having a sunset picnic since the view is so nice from up there. Ron was shagging me, not Zabini." She was suddenly mortified that she and Ron had both forgotten to put up a Silencing Spell and that Severus, and evidently half of Diagon Alley, had overheard them.

Severus threw a hand over his face, pained by the suffering Hermione had had to endure over the past few months thinking her husband was buggering other wizards instead of having a plain old heterosexual affair with another witch. "Hermione is under the mistaken impression that boy plays both sides of the Quidditch pitch. She thinks he's been fucking around with Merlin knows how many other wizards."

"Then maybe it will be a relief that he was only shagging me instead of half of the wizards in London," Lavender sarcastically threw out. Now she knew why Hermione was so cool towards her at the ball, thinking she had set her husband up with a gigolo.

Neither said anything for a while as they digested the night's events and revelations.

"So wait," Lavender suddenly spoke up. "Where did you get the idea Kingsley and I were intimate?"
"Because I saw you hugging him as he left your office once, and then Kingsley told Draco and me that he was separated from his wife," Severus explained.

"No," Lavender replied, somewhat exasperated. "That was the time I heard the good news, that the healers at St. Mungo's might be able to reverse some of the damage Macnair did to Parvati's mind. Macnair agreed to a deal: to avoid getting a Dementor's Kiss and to live the rest of the time in Azkaban, they could use his memories and his wand to try to fix some of the damage he's done." Lavender began to cry. "It hasn't done much, but a month ago she said my name for the first time in years. Anyone's name. And the screaming has lessened somewhat. She'll never be able to leave St. Mungo's, but she seems to be in less mental pain than before."

Severus sat there recalling Miss Brown's Pensieve memory and restrained a shudder, his stomach twisting in sickened knots as the visions came flooding back.

"She'll never be the same witch, but she was my best friend. If it wasn't her, it would be me at St. Mungo's as a permanent resident. Because of Zabini, I was able to escape." She sighed, worn out from the long day. "As much as I would prefer Macnair dead, I'm willing to let him live if Parvati is in less pain, even if he was the one who caused her this anguish."

They sat in contemplative silence for a while longer.

"Monday evening, I will bring Hermione here and you will confess everything," Severus demanded. "You will tell her everything: your scheming, your plotting, your ongoing affair with her husband, your plan that she would leave with me and leave Weasley behind for you to snatch up for your convenience. All of it."

"Why not tomorrow night, since you'll be conducting more Potions experiments," she sarcastically carped, using her fingers to make air quotes indicating exactly what Hermione and Severus got up to during their sex potions trails.

Severus stood up from his chair and leapt across the office to put his face dangerously close to hers, glaring daggers at her, his lip set into a sneer. "You're the one who engineered Hermione to fall into my bed as part of your machinations. Don't get flippant with me, Miss Brown."

"So fine, bring her here tomorrow and let's clear the air then," Miss Brown said cavalierly, waving her hand above her desk with a flip as if swatting away some offending gnat.

"No," he snapped at her brusquely. "Hermione and I are planning a quiet weekend."

"Ah, that's why you asked me to lie to Mrs. Paxton about you and the Troll Flu this weekend," she bit back.

"Don't talk to me about lies and cover stories. You're the last to throw that back at me right now," he warned her. "Let Hermione have this one weekend of peace and quiet before you rip her world and her preconceived notions apart," he insisted. "Perhaps if she's angry enough, she just may fulfill your desires and decide to quickly follow after me, and she won't be around to remind you of what you've accomplished with all your scheming."

"My scheming is leading to your and Draco's freedom, which you have wanted far longer than you have loved Hermione," she reminded him, "or did you forget that?"

He did not refute Miss Brown’s correct assessment regarding his feelings for Hermione.

Severus hated the fact that Hermione, whom he had come to care for greatly, even love, had become a useful pawn in this web of deception, infidelity, crisis of conscience, and loss of faith.
Granted, she had admitted that she had never been happier than when she was with him, even with everything else in her world living far below her hopes and expectations, but that she was used in this complex game made his heart ache in empathy. Severus had been used by The Dark Lord and Dumbledore towards end goals in both wars, and he had been a pawn as long as Hermione had been alive. He knew what it was like to feel used and moved about for the amusement and by the whims of others with cold calculation. It still didn't make the feeling of being used and betrayed any less painful.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: A big round of thanks to my betas, JuneW and Hope for cleaning up my writing and making it bearable. I may write this fic, but they make it readable.

Title and disclaimer a parody inspired by the show tune, “The Trolley Song,” featured in the 1944 movie Meet Me In St. Louis, which includes the lyrics, “Clang, clang, clang went the trolley.” Written by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane.

I hope this chapter answered some of the questions and suspicions you readers have had for a while. Of course Lavender was fucking Ron, but what fun would it have been if it was straightforward and no red herrings to distract you? And what was the first big hint that Lavender’s lover was Ron? Chapter ten, “Dead Men Walking.”

Hermione's letter that she wants to see the gigolo with the incredibly sexy voice arrives at Lavender's office:

The landing of a small owl on her desk distracted Lavender's attention.

Reaching out for the small bird, she smiled. "Well, I wasn't expecting you today. Got something for me?"

Pigwidgeon held out his little leg with the note still attached.

Lavender recognized Ron's owl, thinking it was a missive from him instead.

And then there is the part from chapter 15, “Knowledge Is Power”:

"So it was a guess? The luck of the draw that the situation presented itself?" Severus asked.

"Partially. However, I have my own plans afoot. I have certain goals where Hermione is concerned. It was as time went by that I thought of how to use her to help you, Draco, and Ginny."

... 

"I assure you, Mr. Snape, what plans I have concerning Hermione will not stop you three from fleeing. As a matter of fact, your flight from the country just may serve my ultimate purpose," Lavender said with a smug smile. "If that answer still does not meet with your satisfaction, then I will eventually tell you what you want to know. Until then, I prefer to keep my own counsel on the matter."
There you go. For those of you still clinging to the notion Ron and Lavender were having an affair, despite my Zabini red herring, ten points to the House of your choice.
Chapter Summary

Chapter Sixty-Four: "Come Away With Me" Hermione and Severus get away for a quiet weekend together. Unfortunately, the perfect weekend doesn't end so perfectly.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: NC-17 fan art embedded into story chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Sixty-Four
"Come Away With Me"

Disclaimer: (Sung to the song “When I'm Sixty-four”)
When I began this really long fic
Many years ago
Will you still be reading my disclaimers
Rowling owns this, that you all know
If I’d been writing ‘til quarter to three
Would you still get bored?
Will you still read me, will you still review me
Disclaimer sixty-four...

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Having Ron gone was actually quite a relief to Hermione. She found she could come home after work at a reasonable time and not fear dealing with him, either with a fight or his sexual demands. The fighting had been less as of late, but they still battled.

Even facing a quiet and desolate flat was preferable to having him there.

Maybe this three-week business trip was just the thing Hermione needed to test if she was truly mentally ready to deal with the possibility of divorce. If at the end of three weeks she dreaded his return more than welcomed it, that was surely a sign that it was time to ask for one. And even if he didn't grant it, based on her recent readings, she could still obtain one without his permission. She just had to make sure she didn't get pregnant – at least not with Ron's child.
Her book on wizarding marriage and divorce covered the socially delicate issue of impregnation by someone other than the husband for the first child, in which the marriage was still not magically binding until husband and wife had produced a child between them, thus making the marriage inescapable. It was a matter of shared blood through children that cemented the magical bond that was the key issue to remember.

Knowing now that Molly had pressured Ron into marrying Hermione, and connived Harry into proposing to Ginny, she better understood Molly's insistence to bind their failing marriages with children, ensuring they everyone would be miserably stuck with each other, unhappy ever after. There was the possibility of living apart and separate lives, but the marriage was a magical contract set literally until death do they part.

As much as she was certain she wasn't pregnant, she was still looking forward to her cycle starting, though she hoped it would not come until after her weekend with Severus. Hermione had packed a few vials of A Little Witch's Best Friend to help with her cramps, just in case.

After picking up the car, she affixed the short blond wig to her head, looking into the rear view mirror in order to be sure she’d tucked away all the telltale signs of her brunette locks. It was a cheap wig, but it would do the job to partially conceal her identity. With sticking charms in place to hold the wig during the drive, given that Hermione had rented a convertible so that they could both enjoy the wind on their faces as if they were flying on brooms, imparting a sense of freedom. For the finishing touches, to not arouse too much suspicion with her disguise, she also tied a scarf around her head, as she had seen done by other women to keep the windblown look to a minimum when driving a convertible; once they were on the open road, she would remove the wig but keep the scarf. A large pair of sunglasses finished her disguise.

Checking the weather reports, she was pleased that there would be no chance of rain until late Sunday. It would be easier to drive around if she didn't have to stop and pull up the car’s top, since the model she got did not have an automatic top.

They had arranged for Hermione to pick Severus up five blocks from Diagon Alley in front of a hotel, so he would blend in among everyone else getting in and out of cars. She had given Severus a black wool fedora she’d picked up for him and his own pair of sunglasses Thursday night. He had a large black Muggle-style overcoat he still had from his spy days when he needed to go about with Muggles and blend in. instead of sticking out in his usual cloak. It was from the early 1980s, and it still fit him. It was vintage, which was the cool look among Muggles, making him appear to be stylish instead of off and dated.

As she pulled up, Severus threw his own bag into the back seat and hopped in. With a squeal of the tires, Hermione took off, driving as if she was maneuvering the Knight Bus.
Severus didn't seem to mind her style of driving, unlike her mothers’ reaction to her driving techniques. Once out on the M11, Hermione drove around the same speed as the other drivers. She didn't want to draw unwanted attention to herself on the open road, despite how aggressive her driving style was in the city.

Pulling off his hat and glasses on the open road, Severus let the wind fly through his hair, reveling in the feeling he had missed so much. With the Death Eater Decree, he was not barred from flying a broom, but taking a broom with you through a Floo was damned inconvenient and awkward. Portkeys were a pain to procure last minute for a quick afternoon of flying, not to mention he would be heavily scrutinized considering his status as a former Death Eater and the decree, and his Apparition license was revoked. Taking the train via Muggle methods to some place where he could fly unobserved by Muggles was nigh impossible. Short of being on a broom himself, this – driving in an open convertible at high speed – was the closest thing he’d felt to flying in ages, especially since he sold his broom for money after the Death Eater Decree, before he began working for Miss Brown. He would have to thank Hermione for this wonderful suggestion of a drive, since it momentarily made him forget his troubles.

After a couple hours, they reached Norwich. Neither was ready to stop for lunch quite yet, so they decided to let the road take them wherever they fancied, taking turns on roundabouts in directions towards the coast. Once they reached Great Yarmouth, they turned north and drove up the small back roads, passing through Caister-On-Sea, Hemsby, and finally stopping for lunch at a pub in Horsey. Hermione promised him this weekend was her treat and she would take care of everything, since she was the one with Muggle money and a credit card. This made it a sort of early present, since he would be gone by the time Christmas and his birthday rolled around.

Severus still felt a bit odd letting a witch pay for a meal, since it was the custom of the more old-fashioned mindset of the wizarding world that paying was a wizard's duty. Still, this was the Muggle world, and they were a bit more liberated when it came to such customs.

Hermione had a hot cup of tea and Severus had a pint of ale with their lunch. The menu offered classic pub fare, plus a few international dishes and, to Severus' dismay, burgers as well; Severus enjoyed the steak pie, and Hermione tucked into some bangers and mash. It was quite surreal to dine together with others around, since they were used to eating alone in Severus' flat with no one to observe, much less notice them.

During their lunch, the waitress asked if they were there to observe the seals, as the females had come back recently to birth their pups. After some directions, they drove over near where the rookery was to observe a bit of wildlife. They hadn't planned it, and they took the opportunity as it presented itself.
They stood next to each other, hand in hand, watching one pregnant seal lope along the sand, while another nursed a pup. It was still early in the season and only a couple pups had been born so far. Had Hermione's and Severus' relationship been like a normal one, the scene before them might have been a salvo to begin talking about their feelings about children or a life together, but theirs was anything but a normal relationship.

Once their curiosity was satisfied and they had their fill of watching wildlife and walking about the chilly windblown coast, they headed back to the car to continue their meandering drive about the Norfolk Broads, continuing northwards.

It was already dark and Hermione had not arranged accommodations ahead of time, given they had no real plan of where they wanted to go or end up. As they drove into Weybourne, they stopped at yet another pub for dinner.

After ordering, Hermione asked the waitress, who just also happened to be the pub owner, if there were any places locally they could stay the night.

"Hang on a second, dearie. Let me check," she said as she walked back around the bar picked up the phone and made a few calls.

"I found a spot round the corner, ensuite and all for £65 a night. Will you just be needing one night?" the pub owner asked, her hand over the receiver of the phone as she called out to them across the small pub.

"Yes, one night will be perfect," Hermione assured her.

"Right, and your name?"

"Granger."

Severus gave Hermione a look, and she said quietly so as not to be overheard by others, "It's the name on my credit card and license."

"Right, Mr. and Mrs. Granger," the pub owner said into the phone before hanging up and coming back over with a pint for Severus and a half pint for Hermione.
Neither of them commented on the pub owner’s assumption that they were married. They figured it was because Hermione was wearing her wedding ring and the pub owner assumed Severus was her husband, given how chummy they were together as a couple.

As they supped in the dimly lit pub, they talked. No one was sitting next to them at the moment, and they used quiet voices to avoid being overheard. They discussed some of the work they had been doing recently, and the ways they could improve the edible body paint. There was some discussion over the latest Potions journal Hermione had read, but Severus had not gotten around to reading it yet. They talked about some of the new regulations that would be going into effect with the new year regarding the importation of certain goods. Severus told Hermione a little more about his time at Hogwarts as a student and some of the changes between when he attended and when she was a student, giving her a little recent historical perspective.

Hermione was glad Severus did not ask about her maiden name on her credit card and license. No one knew of the “escape box” she kept secret from Harry and even her husband.

Once dinner was over, they drove to the bed and breakfast a few hundred yards down a side road from the A149, the “Coast Road” they’d used to drive into town.

Checking in, the bed and breakfast owner took down information from Hermione's driver’s license and charged her card. Her parents would get a statement at their address, and Hermione would owl them money to cover the bill. She rarely used her credit card, and she was sure she would get questions the next time she saw them about her weekend get-away and if the place was nice.

The owner invited "the Grangers" to the parlor for sherry and board games, which they politely declined.

The owner sighed and merely said, "Ah, newlyweds."

Hermione and Severus didn't think they acted overly affectionate with each other in public, and they were not, but something about the way they leaned towards each other or gazed at each other must have led the pub and bed and breakfast owners to assume otherwise.

Severus surveyed their accommodations for the night, pulling out his wand and doing a sweep of the room. Years of being a spy meant old habits died hard.
Bags on the floor, curtains drawn and door locked, Severus stood behind Hermione and rubbed her arms tenderly. Away from their habitual environs, it felt like they had all the time in the world. Hermione had no husband waiting for her at home, Severus had no obligations that weekend either.

"Thank you," he whispered into her hair.

"So I guess this wasn't such a terrible idea then," she tried to lightly joke, but it came out as more of a whisper, the air tense with the realization they were out for a romantic weekend together like normal lovers.

"Almost as perfect as you," Severus murmured sweetly into her hair.

"I'm a fairly flawed individual, as you are well aware, so that doesn't say much," she admitted demurely.

"You're perfect for me," he confessed before bending his head down and gently kissing the side of her neck.

Hermione craned her neck to let Severus trail his mouth slowly along her skin. Her heart felt like it would burst with love for Severus for his admission.

Severus' hands slid over her sweater before grabbing the hem of it to pull over her head.

As her sweater was carelessly discarded on the floor, Hermione turned around and began to kiss Severus back, pulling at his clothes, leisurely undoing his belt, buttons, and various clasps.

Once disrobed, Hermione crawled onto the bed only to discover that the bed squeaked, and comically so. Bouncing up and down on the bed a few times, to hear the springs and brass bed frame protest against the movement of the mattress, Hermione burst into fits of giggles.

Seeing her sitting there nude and laughing, Severus said, "So you think that's funny?"

Hermione began laughing even more, caught in the jovial mood.
Jumping onto the bed, Severus said with a waggle of his brows, "Then I'll give you something to really laugh about." He pushed her backwards on the bed and began to ravish her, their legs trying to find a comfortable position in which to intertwine.

All the movement made the bed lightly rock and squeak even more, which made Hermione burst once more into gales of laughter, reminded of the corny notion of bedsprings creaking because of couples having sex.

Reaching down, Severus found Hermione's ticklish spots and began to poke and prod at those areas. This made her squeal and begin to scamper away from him, which was hard considering Severus had her pinned down to the bed with his body and weight.

"You think that's funny?" he asked as he continued to tickle her. "Do you?"

Hermione was out of breath, begging for him to stop, the bed continuing with its voluminous protests.

Relenting, Severus stopped. As he lay atop of Hermione, both panting, he thought he'd never seen anything lovelier. Hermione's hair spread all around her, her cheeks flush, eyes bright and smiling up at him, laughter ebbing from her lips.

Hermione couldn't hold back any longer. Seeing him gaze at her with such adoration, she said, "I love you, Severus."

As much as she had feared saying those words, given their arrangement, she felt it was time to say them, not wanting him to leave England without hearing them from her lips.

He had longed to hear them, but never expected she would ever say it. His mouth came crashing down upon hers, and suddenly a swift fever of want overtook them both.

Hermione moved her legs and Severus quickly settled himself between them.

Her hands grabbed at his shoulders, as his hand skated down between her legs to check to see if she was wet and ready for him since she hadn't taken the lubrication potion yet. She was more than
Braced on one elbow above her, he positioned himself above her.

Lovingly, he stroked the hair out of Hermione's face and breathlessly confessed, his own eyes shining bright with a rare vulnerability, "And I love you," before sinking himself into her.

Hermione's back arched and she screamed in pleasure. With her hands reaching for the brass bed rails above her head, she moved her legs up higher until they were over his shoulders.

She began chanting his name over and over again as he began to drive into her. The bed began squeaking in a loud rhythmic pattern like a metronome, each protest of the springs signaling each time he sunk himself into her deeply.

As his thrusts became more powerful, the headboard began making contact with the wall behind it, thumping in time to Severus' movements.
Overwhelmed with the love she felt for Severus, their confessions, and his passionate lovemaking, Hermione eventually began to orgasm, screaming even more hoarsely. Severus began ramming himself even harder into her, the bed making a loud thump-thump-thump noise though neither cared at that point if the rest of the bed and breakfast heard. Everyone assumed they were
newlyweds anyway, and making love is what newlyweds did.

Just as her orgasm waned he came, collapsing on top of her, his body damp with a light sweat. He moved his hips languidly, each successive thrust with less force in time with each spurt of his seed into her, each movement accentuated with a gentle sigh of release until he was spent.

Hermione brought down her legs to rest over the backs of his thighs.

Tenderly, she stroked his hair and back as he continued to pant breathlessly onto her shoulder and the pillow beneath her head.

"And I love you too," she said softly.

Severus, still inside of her, though his erection began to wane, lifted his head up and looked at her in awe. Despite his past and his own lengthy list of faults and imperfections, she still loved him. He’d strongly suspected she loved him, and maybe even deep down in his heart he already knew. But to hear her say it to him, they had crossed a line that both had silently agreed to not cross, back at the beginning of their relationship. And once he heard her confession, there was little point in him not admitting he felt the same way for her as well.

Laying himself down next to Hermione, he watched as she curled up next to him, her head on his chest, a finger playing with his patch of black chest hair.

Eventually Hermione needed to excuse herself to take care of bodily needs, to avoid a bladder infection. As she returned to the bedroom, Severus was there reclining on his side, his head propped up on one hand, the blanket down far enough that his chest and stomach were exposed.

She stopped and admired him on the bed. Severus may not have been considered attractive by most women, but he was certainly very handsome to Hermione, looking like some raven-haired sex god awaiting her in their bed. At that moment, she could not think of a more handsome man.

Before crawling back into bed with Severus, Hermione pulled her wand out of the pile of clothes on the floor, handing Severus his in the process from his own discarded clothes, and cast a charm to silence the bed from making any further noise. She then cast a Cushioning Charm between the headboard and wall so there would be no more banging against the wall.
As they sat up in bed next to each other, their fingers intertwined, the pads of Severus’ fingers tracing the tops of her knuckles, he said, "When I leave, come away with me."

He had thought about this over the course of the day, having never felt so at peace in so long, all because of Hermione and her love. He’d sworn to Draco over the past several months, since she had entered his life, that Hermione was not coming along when they escaped, even when Draco pointed out the changes in Severus that he noticed. Today had changed his heart and plans, though recent revelations about Lavender and Hermione's husband were also a factor.

"What?" Hermione said, stunned at his offer, sitting up straighter in bed and turning to face Severus.

"Really. What is keeping you here in England and not joining me abroad?" he asked.

"Well, for starters, I'm still married."

"And so is Ginny, yet the day we leave she intends to end her marriage with the return of her wedding ring and the incantation, as indicated in your book. Even your husband, he only married you due to pressure from his mother. You've said for months how you felt the death of your relationship was approaching, and that you were never in love with him either. Even the old Roma woman predicted the end of your marriage by the end of the year," he recounted.

Flustered, Hermione countered, "But what of my Potions apprenticeship?"

"I'll train you. We've already proven to work well together," the Potions master insisted, as he tried to snuggle up next to her as a show of affection, but was hindered by her scooting away from him to look him in the face and continue on with their argument.

"I can't!" she insisted.

"Why?" he demanded to know, his brow beginning to furrow, a feeling of rejection creeping into his heart.

"Because that old Roma woman said if I had the chance to leave with you, I should go with you, but that if I don't go with you, I would see you again," she blurted out. She had hoped never to have to tell him that part of her fortune.
"You never mentioned she said that," Severus said, feeling affronted she had neglected to disclose that to him. That last bit of the fortune also indicated that his escape was certain, and would have saved him weeks of worrying about the fluxweed.

"Because I don't want to let the Fates determine my destiny in some predetermined course of events that I have no control over. You have said yourself how you have felt like you have had little control over your own life. I would think you would understand the desire to fight against being forced into a situation that was not of your choosing," she said hotly, feeling angry at the world that it had robbed her of many choices in life so far.

"Besides," she continued peremptorily, "I want to stay behind and fight to clear your and Draco's names."

"This again?" he sighed with exasperation, knowing it was going to be yet another battle based on her tone.

"Yes, this again," she insisted, irritated he was dismissing her desire to continue pursuing this yet again. "There must be something, somewhere, somehow your name can be cleared. You and Draco have not exactly had any support from anyone in this matter. Everyone is already willing to assume the worst, and that is what they have already done."

Severus turned to face away from Hermione, feeling his own anger at the world bubble up in his chest.

Continuing on, Hermione added with certainty, "I know you're innocent, Severus, but I also know you had nothing to do with Dumbledore's death or the attack on Hogwarts, and that you were true to the Order and Dumbledore to the end, as was Draco. You have not had access to resources nor the ability to look objectively into possible sources for your exoneration."

"And short of Dumbledore's will magically popping up years later, just how do you plan to do that?" Severus snorted derisively, feeling bitter and no longer blissful. "Even if you ask his portrait at Hogwarts, he doesn't know. The Ministry asked his portrait and it was clueless as to Dumbledore's will's whereabouts. The portrait is only an echo of the great wizard that once was." Severus was suddenly missing his old mentor very much. Even the mental apparitions of Albus in his flat had not been much as of late.

"I don't know, Severus, which is why I want to apply myself towards establishing your innocence,"
she insisted.

Innocence was such the perfect word for the moment. Earlier in the week, shortly after Ginny began stewing the lacewing flies, Severus did as promised and confessed to Draco the history about his wife, Gabrielle, and his part in her death; she’d been pregnant when she was killed after trying to convince Death Eater wives about the fallacies of pure-blood propaganda. Draco had insisted that Severus tell Hermione, but Severus refused. Though given that he had just asked her to come with him, it might be necessary if she were to truly comprehend the man she would be running away with. The secret would eventually come out in time, which might cause her to leave him, horrified by his past actions. Draco insisted in honesty. Perhaps telling her would only harden her resolve to stay and reconsider seeking to clear his name, given his crimes.

This was not the time for disclosure. This was supposed to be a perfect weekend away with Hermione before she had her own litany of horrific truths to face regarding her husband and Miss Brown on Monday. Severus wanted to let her have some peace and quiet, and here they were already fighting.

"I'm not exactly innocent," he merely said.

"I know," she acknowledged. "And if you ever choose to tell me about why you became a Death Eater or not, it still doesn't change the fact that I love the man you are right now, here with me. I know you have made choices you regret, but that doesn't change the fact that I have fallen for the man you have become."

Severus wasn't sure Hermione could ever forgive him for what he had done regarding his wife; He hadn't even forgiven himself after all these years. He wasn't even sure he could even confess the whole tale to her before he left. It was hard enough to disclose everything to Draco. Draco had been under threat by his own father and the cold stare of The Dark Lord in order to accept the Dark Mark against his will and carry out his own set of atrocities in order to stay alive, even when playing spy for Dumbledore. Draco understood, but Severus doubted Hermione could, with her soul still filled with light and all that was good in the world. Severus didn't think Hermione could comprehend why he did what he did, despite all his reasons and excuses.

Sliding up behind Severus, who sat facing away from her, his legs hanging over the edge of the bed to hide his face, she said, "I want you to go, Severus. I want you to be free, and you deserve to be. But how can you be truly free if you must flee and never be able to come back of your own free will, if you chose to do so without facing a Dementor's Kiss if everything that you're accused of is not proven wrong? That's not free, that is running away. You deserve to be free, Severus. I want you to be truly free to go anywhere in the world of your own free will, without persecution. But no matter what, I will stay here and fight for you, until you are."
He couldn't love her any more at that moment if he tried. Despite her love for him, she did not ask him to stay, but to go. She believed in him. She was willing to fight for him when no one else still living would. Dumbledore fought for him, but had also used him for his own ends in the war. Hermione was doing this out of love for him, with no expectation of any benefit other than knowing he would one day be free, even potentially facing ridicule from those she would argue against. She was the only one who would ever selflessly fight for him, and it humbled him.

Hermione's hand stroked his back, an act of comfort as she sensed the conflict roiling within him. Severus leaned into her touch, eventually reclining against her, with her hands softly stroking his hair with tender affection. He had his cheek pressed to her breast while listening to the beating of her heart.

"I love you, Severus. And I always will for the rest of my life," she assured him.

Severus knew she meant every word she said, the sounds of her beating heart echoing her words, but he wondered if he did confess his sins to her, whether Hermione would still mean those words.

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Sunday morning they stayed in bed making love, after deciding their limited time together was more precious than some mediocre Continental breakfast, tinned fruit, or overcooked rubbery eggs. Check-out was at eleven, and they wanted to make the most of their mini-holiday. Breakfast could have been fabulous as well, but they still would not have cared.

As they drove back towards London, taking the scenic route to delay their return, they held hands across the center console. Eventually it began to drizzle – earlier in the day than originally forecast – and Severus helped Hermione pull the convertible’s top up, avoiding using their wands to prevent drawing attention to themselves.

Passing through Cambridge, she told Severus that if it was sunny, she might have pulled off so they could go punting on the Cam, having a romantic afternoon repast of wine, fruit, cheese, and crackers, even if it was a bit chilly outside. But it was raining and the chance to be recognized was too great, to their regret.

Both were comfortable with the silence as they drove homeward, but Hermione, out of curiosity, turned the radio on to know what Muggle pop and rock sounded like as of late. Severus found a classical station they both agreed was much more pleasant, considering the present restful state of their minds.

After a leisurely lunch at some restaurant in Buntingford, they got caught in Sunday afternoon traffic as they approached London. The lovers did not prolong their goodbye or give each other a
kiss as she dropped him off back in front of the hotel where she had picked him up in front of the
day before. There was no need to risk them kissing in London where witches and wizards
abounded, even though Hermione had put her wig back on and Severus was sporting his new hat.

Once the rental car was returned, she went back home to her empty flat to find Maxwell, her
parents’ owl, waiting for her with a note tied to its leg.

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Hermione,

Your Aunt Christine is in the hospital and we think she might lose the baby. We are at
the local hospital. Come when you can.

Love,

Mum
-------

Looking over the note, she did not see a date.

"Did you come here today?" she asked the bird.

The owl turned to face away from Hermione as a sign that he had been waiting longer.

"Yesterday?"

The owl hooted as a sign of affirmation.

"Shit."

After giving Maxwell a big bowl of owl treats, since Ron had taken Pig with him for his trip, she
changed quickly and dropped off her bag before grabbing a handful of Floo powder and heading over to her parents’ house.

Her father was the only one at home when she arrived. Rushing into his embrace, she quickly apologized, "I was away this weekend and I just got home to see Maxwell waiting for me. How is she?"

To Hermione's dismay, she learned that her Aunt Christine had already lost her baby. She had been almost five months along and was still at the hospital recovering.

Father and daughter got in the car and drove over to the hospital.

During the short drive over it struck Hermione that this was probably the blood relative the old Roma woman was referring to in her fortune. Hermione wondered though, since the child had not been carried to term, if that truly was the blood relative to die as foretold. There was still the slight possibility of another blood relative dying over the next four months.

Weighing the possibility of her father dying or her Aunt Christine losing her child, Hermione realized that she would gladly deal with her aunt's loss rather than face the death of her father. She knew it was a bit selfish and cold to be thankful for such a thing, but she was not willing to part with her father, even though that unborn child had its whole life ahead and would never live to see it.

"I wish I could have done something," Hermione said, feeling helpless. "Unfortunately, even if I had come back in time, there are still laws regarding the use of magic on Muggles, even close blood relations, that would have prevented me from helping."

Hermione regretted lying to her mother months ago that she could use a Potion to help a Muggle who was an immediate family member. In the aftermath of Marge's death, she had spoken in haste and grief. Using magic to heal a Muggle, even if they were immediate family resulted in a lengthy trip to Azkaban and possibly having one's wand snapped. It was the sort of offense that might cause some to seek sanctuary if they felt they were unjustly persecuted for trying to save the ones they loved most dearly.

"I know," Wallace Granger said, patting her hand in sympathy. His daughter had explained to him and Wendy how she could not use magic on Muggles, after initially saying she could in a moment when she’d felt helpless despite all the magic coursing through her veins.
Even though her parents understood, it didn't lessen the feeling of helplessness that consumed her. She felt like she was a bystander in many of the events of her life as of late, all things beyond her control. As much as she understood she could not have changed anything, even if she could have a hand in steering events, there was not much that would have changed anyway in the end.

When Hermione showed up at Severus' flat, she looked like she had been up most of the night, which she confirmed that she had. Upon recounting the last twenty-four hours or so since she’d dropped him off, Severus could only give her comfort with a supportive hug and some kind words.

If he could have delayed the news Hermione was to receive tonight by a day in order to lessened the quickness of such blows, he would have. As it was, Miss Brown would be waiting for both of them that evening.

Severus served up a diner that would be light on her stomach, as such news that she was about to be given would certainly upset her digestion.

After dinner, Hermione begged off doing any Potions work, to which Severus informed her he was taking her to meet Lavender. She assumed it was to discuss wages, start dates and such, but something in Severus' subdued bearing gave her pause.

Arriving by Floo, they took the lift up to the top floor where the offices were. It did not escape Hermione's attention that there were only house-elves she saw, even though she knew that Lavender, Severus, and Malfoy were the only humans at the company.

Rapping upon the office door, Severus and Hermione were bid to enter.

Severus noticed that not only did Miss Brown have a fresh tea service ready, along with post-supper nibbles and desserts, but that there was a decanter of strong spirits and three glasses ready and waiting. Not in all his years of working for Miss Brown and all the bombs, bits of bad news and unreasonable requests had Miss Brown ever offered him distilled liquor in order to soften the blow – except when getting him to sign the contract to work for her.

Lavender rose from behind her desk. She gestured with her hand for Hermione to take a seat and offered tea, which Hermione accepted.

Once again in Lavender's presence, Hermione felt under-dressed and dowdy. And given the rather
trying previous night, she was looking much worse for wear, sporting dark circles and bags under her eyes.

"Thank you for coming tonight, Hermione," Miss Brown began, as Severus continued to stand, refusing to take a seat. He stood there glowering at Miss Brown from behind Hermione, his arms folded across his chest.

Hermione was still upset at this witch for setting her husband up with Zabini, but held her tongue. She knew she had to be professional and put such matters behind her. It wasn't Lavender's fault that Ron was bisexual and had needs to be filled, though she resented the fact that this witch across the desk from her had provided them.

Lavender continued on. "Since you are Albert Dobmeir's new apprentice, there are some things we need to clear up before you begin. First is pay."

Hermione nodded in agreement, since even she wasn't sure how much she was going to make, given that private apprenticeships don't pay and most businesses don't pay apprentices anything.

"I was thinking along the lines of 3,500 Galleons a year," Lavender began, but stopped when Severus cleared his throat.

"Sorry, I meant 4,000 Galleons a year, which is more than what you're currently earning," she corrected herself.

Hermione noticed what Severus did. She was glad she had him to help negotiate her salary, though there was little to negotiate since it was more than she was already earning at the Ministry, which was only 3,000 Galleons per annum.

Already she knew that it would still not be as much as her and Ron's salaries combined when he was still working at the pub and being paid a paltry sum as second-string Keeper. However, given that she would be leaving Ron, there would be fewer expenses, mostly the food bill and broom care, so she could scrape by on that.

"And then there is the matter of royalties," Lavender continued.

Hermione almost forgot about that and thought that those would certainly help make up the
difference of her and Ron's old combined income. She set her tea cup down on the edge of Lavender's desk in front of her.

Lavender continued with her discussion, "I was informed that because of your ingenuity that the price of Ashwinder eggs has dropped in price, solely due to your new testing methods. I'm using my connections at the Ministry to incorporate your methods into the new testing procedure policy."

A small bit of pride rippled through Hermione, knowing she was the sole cause of that.

"And," the blonde witch went on, "there are the brewers kettles you suggested and the other potions you have helped Severus develop, including a part in the edible body paint." Lavender glanced up at Severus and gave him a pointed glare. She added a little dig by volunteering, "Another project that seemed to have completely escaped his otherwise immense talent to solve until you helped him."

As much as Hermione wanted to turn around and gauge Severus' face, she kept her face forward, giving her future employer all her attention.

After Lavender cleared her throat, she said, "And then there is the matter regarding a misunderstanding."

Hermione wasn't sure what was misunderstood, but continued to remain quiet and would learn soon enough.

"It has come to my attention," Lavender began, but stopped to take a sip of tea, "that you believe that I set your husband, Ron, up with Blaise Zabini."

Hermione sudden felt her cheeks go hot, and her ears begin to burn. A white hot flush spread throughout her chest. Hermione was sure there was no misunderstanding about seeing her husband descend the stairs from Zabini's apartment.

"Ron was not shagging Zabini upstairs in his apartment."

Now Hermione was thoroughly confused, for there was only one flat above Severus' and that belonged to the particular wizard.
"Ron was on the roof with me," Lavender admitted.

A wave of numbness swept through Hermione. What was once a building rage inside of her fell away into an overload of all her senses. Her body felt numb, it seemed the room had darkened, and her hearing had suddenly diminished as her mind raced to process what Lavender just said.

"As a matter of fact, Ron and I have been having an affair since May of 2000," Lavender added.

Searching her mind, which was now overloaded by so many emotions, all of them passionately intense, Hermione flipped through the calendar of her mind and recalled that it was about a month after Harry and Ginny's wedding, which was when she and Ron had that big fight and he was gone for about a week. Now she knew where Ron was when he left her and he said he was at a "friend's" house. Hermione finally understood why Lavender dropped her fees for Hermione to see Severus, as the blonde was fucking Hermione’s own husband and probably felt guilty about it.

Had Hermione's arms and legs not felt as if they were made of lead, she would have leapt up and soundly backhanded Lavender across that now pale and drawn face. The blonde’s lips were set in a grim line, staring at Hermione with an equal mixture of shame and defiance. Hermione could have hexed her, but kept her hand still.

Suddenly, Hermione remembered Severus was standing behind her, and she understood why his demeanor was so grim that night. The light dinner, and the soft sympathetic look on his face when he greeted her even before she’d told him about her aunt.

Turning around to face him, she asked accusingly, "You knew?"

"I only just discovered this myself Wednesday night."

"Why didn't you tell me Thursday?" Hermione asked with exasperation.

"Because I did not want the knowledge that Miss Brown has been committing adultery with your husband for so long to mar what should have been and was a perfect weekend. I thought that since it had been going on for so long, ninety-six more hours would make no difference at all," he explained.
"Adultery?" Lavender challenged, her voice rising into a shriek. "You two have been going at it since summer and you hypocritically accuse me of adultery?"

"Because you bribed me with money to first see her, but with an ultimate goal of hoping that she would leave her husband for me so that you could snatch up Weasley for your own without a fight," he hissed at his boss. "Is that not the ultimate goal you had in mind when you arranged for us to meet each other at first, Miss Brown?"

"I hoped that Hermione could help you procure ingredients for the Polyjuice Potion so you could escape, or did you forget that?" she countered hotly.

Hermione sat between the two watching them as one would a tennis match, a volley of angry words thrown at the other. She chose to remain silent for the time being to see what other things Lavender had been scheming.

"And yet you don't deny the fact that an alternative purpose was to draw Hermione away from her own husband so you could have him for yourself."

"Well, she was pretty fucking miserable with Ron when I met her, and she seems to be pretty happy seeing you, so I don't see the harm in that!" Lavender screamed. "Or do you not care about Hermione's happiness and you're just more concerned over the fact that I manipulated you two to be together – more than the fact you're both in love with each other, and happier for it."

"I never said anything about love," Severus snarled back at her, finally challenging her correct observations about their emotional attachment for one another.

"Puh-leese! It's plain as fucking day you two are deeply in love with one another. And considering how Hermione was never in love with Ron, nor Ron with her – and was pushed into marriage by his mother – what difference does it make?" she threw back at him mockingly.

Hermione could not stand it any longer, talking about her as if she wasn't there, and stood up. "*Because Ron was my husband!*" Mrs. Weasley shouted.

"'Was' or 'is'? Interesting choice of words, Hermione," the blonde witch pointed out smugly.

Even Hermione had missed that Freudian slip, having already decided that she would ask Ron for a
divorce when he returned. She didn't need to wait the three weeks, she already knew. Stunned at the realization of her own words, Hermione sunk back into her seat.

Lavender admitted, "Yes, I put you two together in hopes that Hermione could provide the Polyjuice ingredients. Yes, I was hoping you two would fall in love and Hermione would leave with Severus, leaving Ron for me alone. Yes, I admit to it all, but it still doesn't deny the fact that Ron and I are deeply in love. You should know the only reason he hasn't asked Hermione for a divorce long ago is the fear of facing his mother, who bullied him into proposing to Hermione in the first place. There is also his worry that Hermione would not be able to take care of herself on her salary alone, should he leave her. But given that she'll have an apprenticeship – with pay, I might add – plus royalties, and free boarding at your flat, Severus, once you leave, if she chooses, then she will not perish in penury as Ron feared.

"He felt some noble Gryffindor obligation to look after you, even though he's not in love with you, Hermione. And as much as I have begged and pleaded with him to leave you over the years, I also admire him for standing by you and not abandoning you like I wish he had."

Had Hermione had a heavier dinner, she surely would have thrown it up by now. She was glad for Severus' thoughtfulness on that small detail, which was the only thing she could think of despite everything she had just heard.

Hermione felt like fine china held too tightly; the cracks were beginning to show and she would fracture into a thousand pieces at any moment.

"And if you choose now to rescind your apprenticeship and reject my offer of employment, I completely understand," Lavender said in closing.

'If you have the opportunity to leave with your lover, do so. But if you do not leave with him, you will see him again in the future,' the fortuneteller's words rang in Hermione's mind. It seemed so clear now, she finally understood.

If Hermione stayed behind, she would see Severus again, meaning that it was most likely she would clear his name, as once he reached sanctuary he would be untouchable, as long as he remained within the boundaries of said sanctuary. Severus was careful and she knew he would not be caught and brought back to England otherwise, unless he came back willingly as a free man. If anything, this firmed her resolve not to go with Severus, but stay behind. This meant that she would have to accept her apprenticeship with Dobmeir, which meant working under the witch who stole her husband. But what was there to steal if Ron's heart was never hers to begin with?
Lavender had admitted Ron would have left her years ago if it wasn't for his mother and worrying about Hermione making ends meet. And now she had already decided to ask for a divorce herself. There was nothing left to decide, she had already made her choice.

"I'm staying and keeping my apprenticeship. I'll agree to work for you, and you can have Ron. You're right. 'Was' shows that I had already made up my mind to ask Ron for a divorce. And you can have him on the condition that you come with Ron and me when we break the news to Molly about the divorce – and that Ron will be marrying you instead," Hermione dictated. "You two do want to get married. Am I right?"

"Yes," Lavender replied, looking now even paler, the color having drained from her cheeks once more.

Hermione looked to Severus, then back to Lavender. There was something else, she could tell from the exchange of glances. Since everything was being put down on the table, she didn't want to be left in the dark about anything else.

"What?" the brunette witch asked with little patience, as she noticed Severus give Lavender a knowing smirk.

"Shall I tell her or you?" Severus asked, an amused lilt in his voice.

Lavender waved her hands, indicating Severus could have the distinct pleasure.

"Your mother-in-law, Molly Weasley," he began, "has been visiting me for the past ten weeks for tea and a sympathetic ear."

Horrified, Hermione's face fell in disgust. "You don't mean..."

"Merlin, NO!" Severus assured her. "There is no amount of money in the world for me to even..." he trailed off with his body shuddering slightly at the repulsive thought.

"Thank GOD!" Hermione sighed with relief before turning back to Lavender. "But how could you, knowing that...?" She let out an unladylike snort to try and convey the very messy circumstances of everyone involved.
"I didn't want to!" Lavender protested, throwing her hands up. "She cornered me. She had heard from some friends about how I had wizards in my employ who lend a kind ear, and she forced me into it. I couldn't say no since she implied she knew people who would make my life difficult if I didn't comply."

Hermione sat back, feeling as her mind would explode with everything that had been revealed. Her tea sat there cold and forsaken. Even the slice of Victoria sponge that had caught Hermione's eye when she first entered the room was forgotten.

Severus was also contemplating if this was the right time to inform Hermione that Calpurnia Fudge was responsible for her inability to land an apprenticeship until now, but decided against telling her. There wasn't ever a good time before to tell her about Fudge's wife since he and Miss Brown were able to eventually subvert her plans. The opportunities he did have to tell her, Severus didn't want to upset Hermione since there were seemingly far more pressing matters that she was currently facing, including the death of her marriage, and now the events of the past twenty-four hours. As she was about to begin her apprenticeship, he saw little need to tell her. There was little chance for Calpurnia Fudge to learn of Hermione's apprenticeship.

Then there was the possibility of telling Hermione. His lover had a hidden revenge streak that, should she seek to take on Calpurnia Fudge, even Hermione's cleverness would be tested to its limit should she square off against the older witch. Given how soon he would be leaving, he would not be around to provide her counsel on how to out-master a formidable chess player and someone who epitomized the House of Slytherin where cunning was concerned. No, it was best, for Hermione's sake, not to tell her about Calpurnia.

"You know," Hermione began in a surprisingly calm and amused voice, "When we announce to Molly that Ron and I are getting a divorce and that you two will be getting married instead, you can always use this to blackmail her should she object. Having Arthur discover his wife had been paying to cry on another wizard's shoulder for sympathy and support would not sit well with him."

Hermione liked Arthur, but if Molly had engaged in manipulation of her, Ron, Harry, Ginny, Draco, Lavender and who know who else, then Hermione was willing to use that knowledge to their advantage.

"Once you marry Ron, she'll be harping on you about providing her with grandchildren," Hermione warned her in addition.

"I'm already well aware of that, having heard from Ron for a long time."
Hermione realized she couldn't stop Ron from seeing anyone once she divorced him, but for the fact that she had been suffering a terrible marriage with him all this time under some false pretenses – and a shoddy facade that had already fallen away when he was in love with someone else – didn't stop it from smarting. Her pride was deeply wounded.

Hermione Floo’ed directly home from the Lovely Lavender headquarters, energized solely from the knowledge she would finally get to pen her resignation letter to Madam Dushka, which was the only bright spot in her entire evening. She would begin work as Dobmier's new apprentice starting two weeks from that day.

The Ministry had a policy of one-week’s notice, but Hermione decided to be kind for the sake of Trevor Spawn. She would surely help in finding her replacement during the last remaining weeks of her tenure there in the Department of Standards & Regulations. She didn't want Trevor to catch the brunt of Madam Dushka's wrath since he had made a valiant effort to come up to speed on testing Potion ingredients and had done a good job of it.

Just as she began to undress for bed, she noted her menstrual cycle had already begun. This would surely clear the way for a quick and easy divorce with Ron.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: mywitch, on LiveJournal, has created a lovely and sensual piece of fan art for me of Hermione and Severus making the bed go thump-thump-thump at the bed & breakfast. mywitch did the same drawing with three different color tones: warm (embedded in the chapter above), cool and gray. You can view the cool and gray versions here: http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/post/142574530115/braced-on-one-elbow-above-her-he-positioned

Much thanks and applause to my wonderful betas, Hope and JuneW, for the talents in making my drivel more readable.

You can learn more about the seal rookeries of Horsey here: http://friendsofhorseyseals.co.uk/

Title for this chapter inspired by Norah Jones' song, “Come Away With Me.”

Disclaimer inspired by the chapter number mixed with lyrics by The Beatles song, “When I'm Sixty-Four,” written by Paul McCartney, John Lennon. Copyright: Sony/ATV Tunes LLC.

Oh, and the bedsprings squeaking scene? I wrote this scene about two months before the show “Outlander” had a similar scene with Claire and Frank in Inverness at the bed & breakfast, so I did not borrow it from them, though it seems to be a favorite type of scene to write.
Even with everything that had happened to Hermione over the past few days, the singular thrill of handing Madam Dushka her resignation letter almost made it worth it all. Almost. She had fantasized about this moment since the first week she’d started working for the mincing harpy, shortly after the war. The harpy’s stunned look of disbelief, the growing realization that her most competent worker, who had been vastly underpaid for so long, was heading for greener pastures just made it all that much sweeter.

The icing on the cake was that morning when Hermione had walked into her office, Madam Dushka opened the conversation with the announcement that Hermione’s review was complete and that she had done a very good job of training Trevor, so far; however, there was no extra money in the Ministry’s budget with which to increase her salary this time... again, or so Madam Dushka claimed. This was an ongoing problem since it had been three years since the Ministry had given her a raise. Hermione relished setting that resignation letter down in front of her, in response to another year without a pay raise.

Hermione understood why Molly and Arthur scraped by, if the Ministry continued to keep denying raises to some, even if inflation – which existed even in the wizarding world – kept inching up prices higher and higher every year. She never discussed salaries with Arthur, but she couldn’t imagine him demanding a pay increase if denied one; instead, he would be saying like Molly that they would just make do the best they could.
Madam Dushka asked Hermione what she was going to do now that she was leaving, and Hermione was tempted to tell her it was none of her business. Since the wizarding world was a small one and Madam Dushka was going to find out anyway, Hermione informed her boss that she was leaving for a paid Potions apprenticeship.

Hermione's boss burst into whoops of mocking laughter, exclaiming that no one ever got paid for an apprenticeship, or if it was a "paid" apprenticeship, it was probably only five Knuts a year for some obscure tax reasons.

The new Potions apprentice merely let Madam Dushka think that she still had the upper hand. The older witch made some comment about Hermione being a sweet but extremely naive witch who still had a great many things to learn about the world.

Hermione had more than enough experience in this world between her years growing up at Hogwarts and the constant peril she had encountered, the war, and now the Machiavellian manipulations by the hands of her future employer. There was no mention that Lavender Brown would be paying her during her apprenticeship.

If anything, Hermione wanted to stick around and have a say in hand-picking her replacement. There was no point in leaving on bad terms, unable to give her insight into the selection of a new candidate; if the new candidate was incompetent The Lovely Lavender Company would then be plagued with shipments of bad ingredients. Madam Dushka did give Hermione permission to have final say in who the final candidate would be, avoiding the fact that Madam Dushka had picked Trevor Spawn, who initially was a completely incompetent walking disaster until he straightened up and flew his broom right.

Once in the lab, she had the unpleasant job of informing Trevor she would be leaving. It wasn't that she would miss Trevor that much, as he had turned into an all right work mate, but that she was taking his old apprenticeship.

Trevor seemed to handle the news well enough, understanding that it was his burning down the lab that was a major cause of him losing his apprenticeship, but he was a good sport and congratulated her. He was sincere in his congratulations that between the two of them, she was the one who truly deserved it.

Hermione made it a point to keep an eye on Trevor over the next few years. Should he continue to improve and apply himself, she would recommend him for an apprenticeship under Albert Dobmeir or another master once her apprenticeship was finished, but her recommendation would be based on merit, not a greased palm.
The rumor mill was in full swing that day. Even though Hermione had only told two people at eight that morning, by eleven, it seemed that half the Department of S&R had swung by to ask Hermione about her new apprenticeship, who it was with, and if it was true she was getting paid. They asked how much, to which Hermione just said that was confidential.

Lavender Brown had made the announcement to the press at the Ministry's Halloween masked ball that Albert Dobmeir was her new Potions master, but so far, few people put two and two together.

By noon, Harry had come around, having heard tongues wag. He congratulated Hermione, having been in the loop about her apprenticeship pending on some contingencies. Her old friend even offered to take her out to lunch in celebration, which she gladly accepted. She hadn't seen Harry much, as of late, and was hoping to catch up with him.

As Harry and Hermione lunched at this Muggle Chinese restaurant Harry had recently found, she filled him in on the details, knowing he would not recount them to others, except Ginny. Hermione mentioned to Harry that Albert Dobmeir was Lavender Brown's new Potions master and her pay would be from her, not her Potions master. She asked Harry to not mention anything to Ron, and that she wanted to be the one to tell him the "good news." No doubt, she could imagine the look on his face when she would tell him – upon Ron’s return from his three weeks abroad – that her new boss was his mistress, padding their vault. With a divorce, though, it would soon be "her" vault, after monies were segregated.

Curious to think that Ron's reason for not divorcing Hermione was due to money, but that his mistress and second wife-to-be would be paying her. Life had proven to be stranger than fiction as of late.

Reflecting on how monies in their Gringotts vault would be split made Hermione think about the long list of things she had to do in preparation, including getting her own owl. She could just ask her parents for Maxwell, but her parents did like having the creature around, since voles and other critters around house and garden were dramatically reduced, easing up the chore of trying to discover what ate the strawberries and tomatoes.

As the meal ended, the bill was presented with two fortune cookies. They both laughed at the prospect of random proverbs inserted into a cookie that could have any prophetic qualities to it whatsoever. Harry even told her about this Muggle tradition he’d learned about: that anything you read, you're supposed to interpret it sexually, adding on the tag line mentally of "between the sheets."

It surprised Hermione that Harry had made a sexual joke.
Harry cracked his open first and read his aloud. "You will step on the soil of many countries." Laughing he said, "Actually, this one is pretty spot on. I finally asked for time off of work to take Ginny on holiday. We'll be leaving in a little over three weeks."

Hermione had been so busy, she hadn't had time to catch up with Ginny if she succeeded in getting Harry to agree. Now things were truly set into motion.

"Pity it'll be right before the twins open that new store with their partner. I'll be glad not to be going though since it sounded a bit racy. They never said who their partner was," Harry noted.

"Lavender."

"So wait? Fred and George are in business with Lavender? Which means, you'll be working for the twins too?" Harry asked.

"No, not exactly. I'll be helping Dobmeir develop potions for Lovely Lavender; some of those will be sold at The Sirens' Secrets," she clarified.

Harry leaned across the table and whispered, trying not to sound scandalized, "You mean you're going to develop sex potions? Does Ron know?"

There were a lot of things Ron didn't know, the least of which that Hermione personally tested out every variable of the Male Enhancement Potion with their old Potions professor, every variation of the Arousal Potion she had a hand in developing herself, and combinations of the two together. She had fucked Severus' brains out for hours to the point where she had trouble walking many times afterwards.

Waving her hand dismissively, she said, "I'm sure it's nothing like what you think. There is probably a way of testing these things without it getting too friendly."

Hermione wanted to change the subject, but realized she still had her own fortune cookie to open and read.

As the golden-hued treat broke apart, she picked out the small rectangular paper amid the pieces. Holding it aloft, she cleared her voice before reading aloud, "Be prepared to accept a wondrous opportunity in the days ahead." Her face fell as she read it.
To mask her true emotions, she screwed her face up in confusion and said lightly, "Well, can't apply that between the sheets since Ron is gone for two more weeks, and I already have my Potions apprenticeship." She shrugged, which seemed to make Harry laugh at how his was spot on, but interpret that hers missed by a mile where timing was concerned.

She wondered if the fortune was belated, since Severus had presented her with such an opportunity, three days prior, to leave with him.

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To Severus' delight, Molly Weasley canceled all further meetings with "Eduardo," stating in her owl that recent family obligations prevented her from having much free time. Hermione informed him that Percy's wife, Penelope, had just given birth a few days ago and there was probably a great deal of truth behind her excuse, as Molly was busy helping over at their house.

Now began the task of wrapping up the last of the loose ends. First was an owl to Katherine Bigelow who had relocated to Spain. If anything, Sebastian Delgado going back to his homeland would only make correspondence that much easier between the two. Since where Severus was going was not going to be the easiest place to owl from, he stated that Sebastian had some family matters that would take up all his time back home in south-central Spain, and would need to refer all future consultation to his fellow Potions master, Albert Dobmeir. He thanked her for her correspondences and wished her future success with her business.

The only thing left to wrap up the fabricated enigma of Sebastian Delgado would be the correspondence between Hermione and Delgado regarding the brewer's kettles and other potions in which she was to receive royalties.

Even the edible body paint was complete and was already going into production for The Sirens' Secrets grand opening in a little over three weeks.

Miss Brown had already begun buying many copies of Severus’ books, since the Aurors had inspected the "Research Library", which was Severus' office, and had seen all the shelves crammed with books. Of course Lavender would not replicate all of Severus' library he housed in his office, but many of the more obvious books she was procuring as of that moment. He gave her a list of the ones that a person of her skill level and expertise would be reading and use for her work, that were in his own library.

Lavender kept the newly bought books off-site at The Sirens' Secrets office space that was also the location where the Polyjuice Potion was currently brewing. To fill the space of what she did not replicate from Severus’ library, she had house-elves go to every wizard estate sale and buy up dusty looking books to make it look as if the library was exactly the same as before, if one didn't
The night before Ginny, Draco and Severus were to leave, all the books she was storing would be swapped out with Severus' and the house-elves in Miss Brown's employ would bring back Severus' library to his flat to be packed away in a bag with an Extension Charm. Other than his books, a few cooking implements, some clothes, and his armoire, there would be little else to take. He wasn't even sure if he would be wearing many of the same clothes as he wore here in England. His new home would be much warmer, and from the books he had read, all written by Muggles, it seemed that wool was not worn much at all, but linen, cotton and cool silks were the preferred fabrics of choice when packing.

Most of the furniture was courtesy of Miss Brown, as the place came furnished, since he had bartered away everything else he'd owned, except his books and armoire with flame mahogany and bird's eye maple, after the Death Eater Decree. There were bed linens, but who knows what he would be sleeping in or what size the new bed would be.

Of course nothing back at his flat would be packed before the morning of his departure. A surprise Auror visit would tip them off that something was amiss should his flat look barer than usual. So far he had only had two surprise Auror visits, and that was plenty. He and Draco still had to provide a tip to lead Aurors on a wild goose chase the day he would leave in order to delay them in their pursuit. At their parole meeting a few weeks prior, he and Draco had said that they had overheard Jugson in a pub talking about obtaining a spare wand in Knockturn Alley in order to cast spells that would not turn up when his own wand would have a *Prior Incantato* cast to provide proof he had not been using any prohibited spells. Of course this turned out to be true, as Miss Brown had used a few of her house-elves to find some nice incriminating evidence that might get other Death Eaters in trouble. Kingsley thanked Severus and Draco for their tip the following week. This set the stage that another "anonymous tip" would send Aurors to the far corners of the United Kingdom, allowing them to get away.

The only thing he wish he had to pack that was not in his possession was a photograph of Hermione. He would ask Ginny if she had one of Hermione that she could give him and to pack it with her own belongings.

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Trevor Spawn held his head in his hands, despair overwhelming him. He emitted a low keening whimper from the back of his throat, sounding like a beaten and cowering animal.
"Please don't tell me I was half as bad as that last candidate?" he begged, his voice creaking and despondent.

"That witch had seven spelling errors on her C.V. You had only four." Hermione felt a small bit of satisfaction that Trevor was getting a dose of what she had gone through when trying to find a replacement for her old co-worker, Marge Mallowton. "Perhaps this next candidate will not be so bad since he seems to have earned an E in Herbology and an A in Potions for his N.E.W.T.s and had no spelling errors on his C.V."

"Please, Merlin," Trevor sighed dramatically.

Both were rather worn out by the candidates who had immediately applied for the position of Potions Ingredient Tester for the Department of Standards & Regulations. The ad listing an opening for the job was in the Wednesday Daily Prophet and Madam Dushka was swamped with owls by that afternoon. It appeared that many of the people who recently graduated from Hogwarts had spent their summer having fun; now that summer was over, they were looking for gainful employment.

There were a few candidates who were older, but most of them were witches whose children were grown up and moved away, and the mothers were now ready to earn a bit of pin money. However, many of those witches were sorely out of practice when it came to identifying some basic Potion ingredients, or their cauldron simmering skills had diminished since leaving Hogwarts many years ago. During one test, one middle-aged witch cast a flame far too hot and evaporated the ingredient instantly, turning it into a billowing cloud of blue smoke. It took at least twenty minutes for the lab to air out before Hermione and Trevor could stand to go back in. The applicant apologized and made the excuse that she was used to cooking in large batches for her family, and needed a flame that big and hot to get the cauldron going with soup or stew.

Finally, one particular witch came in. Her C.V. was spelled correctly, but she was a much older witch, which probably meant poor cauldron skills. Hermione and Trevor hoped that when giving her an aptitude test on some basic skills, with a little bit of luck she would not blow them all up.

She was nearly eighty years old with gray-streaked brown hair pulled back into a practical ponytail. She walked into the room with a smile and shook Hermione and Trevor's hands with a firm shake before she seated herself.

"So, Madam Fastrada Johnson. I will just get to the point quickly. What makes you think you are qualified to test Potion ingredients here at the Ministry's Department of S&R?" Hermione didn't want to be rude, but it seemed like this witch was wasting their time. It had been decades since she had any experience behind the cauldron, based on her resume.
"Well, unfortunately, most of my experience I was not able to put on my C.V., since I was not what can be called 'gainfully employed.' My husband was a Potions master for many decades and I helped him in his lab, working as his assistant," Madam Johnson explained. "Since I was married and no salary was drawn, I can't exactly put that on my application. I helped tend his personal garden, did most of the shopping for ingredients for him at the apothecary, went with him on Potion collecting trips, and helped him personally test many of his experiments."

Hermione and Trevor looked at each other, and their eyes lit up with hope.

"And why are you looking for work now, Madam Johnson?" Hermione asked.

"Because my husband passed away a few months ago. And though I have enough experience to qualify me as a Potions mistress, my husband and I never got around to formally getting me accredited. I can't exactly go around claiming to be a Potions mistress if I am not certified." Madam Johnson held her chin up high, proud and defiant that these two before her might dismiss her years of work at her husband's side, simply because of a piece of paper he never got around to signing and filing with the Ministry, which would have gotten her a review before the accreditation board. "I am a hard worker, I am careful and precise, and I keep my area clean."

Hermione placed a small box on the table and asked Madam Johnson to identify its contents.

"This is aconite," the elder witch said scoffingly, as if it was too easy.

Trevor and Hermione gave a sigh of relief before Hermione grabbed one more box and handed it to her.

"Could you please identify this as well?"

Madam Johnson opened the box and pulled out a very large white feather.

"Looks like Roc..." she began, but held it aloft, examining the rachis, inner vanes, and curve of the feature. "Is this a joke? This is an eagle quill that has been enlarged."

Hermione nearly leapt from her seat in joy. She had kept the fake Roc feather as evidence of the
Damocles Brothers trying to pass off faulty and fake ingredients.

"One more test, Madam Johnson. Could you please give us an example of your cauldron skills?"

The three all went over to Hermione's testing bench.

"What would you like me to test?"

Hermione wanted to see just how good she was and pulled out a rare ingredient for Madam Johnson to show her level of skill.

"Ah, the seed pod of the rare Miniature Man-Eating Masdevallia orchid," Madam Johnson noted before taking a knife to the small oblong pod.

Hermione watched with rapt attention as Madam Johnson used a knife with quick skill and grace, taking off only the outer husk and leaving nearly all the pulp behind.

"I'm sorry," Madam Johnson apologized. "It's been years since I've had to handle one of these."

Hermione looked in awe of the leavings, noting she herself wasn't even one fourth as good as this witch with her knife skills, and until Severus pointed out how far she had yet to go, she thought she was pretty good already. Madam Johnson put Hermione to shame.

The job candidate grabbed a small copper cauldron. She added the peeled pod and some base solution to it, setting it on a very small low flame. She brought it up to a simmer, observed how the pod expanded as it absorbed the water, and killed the flame just before it began to break apart. Placing the swollen pod on the cutting board, she cut it in half and scooped out the seeds before mincing them finely and adding them back into the cauldron once more with some water. Once it starting coming to a slow boil, she added a dropper full of acid solution and watched for the reaction, and a green froth bubbled up near the rim of the copper cauldron before subsiding.

"Slightly stale pod, but still within what I would call acceptable standards for a fresh Potion ingredient. I think this would pass Ministry standards," Madam Johnson remarked.
"You're hired!" Hermione exclaimed.

There was no need to have Madam Dushka even consult on Hermione's decision. Madam Johnson was as good as Hermione, if not better. She could think of no person better qualified to leave in charge of the lab upon her departure. Granted, Trevor had seniority in terms of tenure, but even he could see that he could learn much from this witch and would gladly defer to her.

"Really?" Madam Johnson said with a broad smile.

"In fact, I insist on taking you out to lunch to celebrate. My treat, Madam Johnson," Hermione insisted. "And you'll be my treat too, Trevor, as a farewell luncheon."

"You're leaving?" Madam asked, a little crestfallen. "And please, call me Fastrada."

"Yes, Fastrada. I am leaving for a Potions apprenticeship in less than two weeks, and you're my replacement."

"Really? Who is your Potions master?"

"Albert Dobmeir."

"Albert? Oh, my goodness! Wait, I thought he took some wizard as his apprentice?" Fastrada asked with puzzlement.

"That would be me," Trevor spoke, his hand meekly raised. "But I lost it when I nearly burnt down this lab shortly after starting here."

Fastrada gave Trevor a wary look until Hermione stood up for the wizard and added, "Trevor, since then, has learned his lesson and applied himself. He now understands the importance of this job and the responsibility it carries. He has learned a great deal since he has taken this job more seriously, and though he still has much to learn, I can't think of anyone better than you to help him along the way."

Trevor stuck out his hand and said, "Welcome to the Department of Standards & Regulations,
Over lunch, Hermione and Trevor went over not only Fastrada's duties, but recent problems with suppliers, including the recent mislabeling between the lemonite and sulfur mishaps, in addition to how to deal with Madam Dushka.

Hermione had to bite the inside of her cheek during some comments Trevor made about Madam Dushka, as he was unaware that she had spied him in a three-way sandwich between their boss and her husband during the Halloween masked ball.

Fastrada, it turned out, was friends with Albert Dobmeir, as he and her husband had been good friends who had collaborated periodically. She mentioned how Albert recently lost his wife of many decades.

The older witch guessed that Albert had decided to take a position in the commercial sector and take on an apprentice to keep himself occupied since his wife, Dangerose, passed. Hermione knew a great deal more behind the story, but wasn't about to volunteer unless asked directly, and even then she would try to be vague.

"So how exactly did you land the apprenticeship, Hermione?" Fastrada asked, leaning across the table, dying to know.

"Since Mr. Dobmeir is replacing Mr. Delgado, Mr. Delgado recommended me since I had had some correspondence with him," Hermione admitted.

"Delgado? You mean that Spanish oaf at the ball? Oh, my goodness!" Fastrada exclaimed, breaking out into peals of laughter.

Hermione shrugged noncommittally and tried not to egg her on, but Fastrada's eyes lit up.

"Oh, my," Fastrada said, realization dawning on her face. "Were you that witch in that stunning slim blue dress and the black hair?" she asked, looking equally aghast and amused.

Trevor piped up, "That was you? Merlin's teeth, you looked amazing! I had no idea that was you."
"You were one of the few who didn't look like an over-baked meringue."

Hermione hid her face behind her hand and nodded that she was indeed that witch, and the focus of Sebastian Delgado's very public apology to her in front of half of British wizardkind.

"What did he do to make such a scene to apologize like that?" Fastrada went on, despite Hermione's hopes that the topic would be dropped.

"A cultural misunderstanding. He thought talking about Potions with great interest equaled interests in 'other' things as well," Mrs. Weasley explained with an edge of exasperation in her voice, hoping that would be the end of the matter, distressed that Fastrada had witnessed the exchange.

"That's the Spanish for you!" Trevor commented knowingly.

No more Quidditch games and no more Weasley family obligations until Bill Weasley's birthday party on the 29th, after Ron's return. Hermione came over to Severus' flat on Saturday. It wasn't just Saturday she came over. She had come over to his flat nearly every night that week, dining with him and spending the evening either making love, reading, or talking, and often all of the aforementioned.

That Saturday was different from her previous recent visits since she was giving him an early birthday party, just the two of them. He would be gone by the time his actual birthday rolled around, and she insisted that since he cooked for her and gave her such a lovely birthday, she should at least return the courtesy.

Severus insisted that their getaway the week before was a perfect present, but she insisted that she have the pleasure of cooking for him once, in addition to any other requests, suggesting even a massage. Her insistence to give back to him the same care and consideration he had given to her all these months touched him, and he relented. He was territorial about his kitchen, but agreed only if he could watch, curious as to what she was going to prepare for him.

The fish monger at the farmers' market had the extra large jumbo prawns she was looking for, in addition to all the ingredients she needed. The wine merchant had a bottle of Amontillado for cooking, and a nice white Spanish Albariño for drinking that would work well with the shellfish without overpowering the flavor. Given Severus' recent performance at the ball, she thought it was fitting to get a Spanish wine to go with the meal.

"Just how much garlic are you using?" he asked, taking note that if he liked the meal, he would
make it himself in his new home.

"This originally called for a whole large bulb for three pounds of prawns, but I'm using almost half a bulb for the pound of prawns for the two of us. It's a bit more, but it's nearly impossible to use too much garlic for this dish," she said as she chopped the fragrant bulb.

He watched as she added an equal amount of olive oil and butter to the pan, noting the moderate flame and temperature, when she added the garlic and shellfish before the turning of each large prawn to the other side once its carapace began to turn from a bluish-gray to a bright orange-pink. She added a heavy splash of the Spanish sherry half-way through, the pan erupting into a column of bright yellow and orange flame before subsiding to be extinguished. As the prawns cooked, they began to split along the back where she had deveined them. At this point, she turned the prawns so they sat upright, their tails up in the air as their interiors cooked. An extra large pinch of the chopped cilantro was added at the last minute. She swirled the sauce swirled the pan a few times before she removed the prawns and placed them in shallow soup plates, then poured the garlicky sauce over them.

A large loaf of crusty French bread was served up in order to mop up the sauce from the soup plate.

Severus ate his early birthday dinner with relish, complimenting the chef.

"Had I known you were such a good cook, I think I would have asked you to cook for me a long time ago," he said, a glimmer in his coal black eyes.

"Severus, you cook for me because it's the only time you can legally lay your hands on a knife. I usually come over here exhausted, tired of cooking for Ron, and you have been more than happy to show off your culinary skills to me. I know you love it when I praise each wonderful and delectable meal you have ever made for me. You have enjoyed pampering me and I have truly appreciated it, but let's not kid ourselves," Hermione plainly stated, giving him a skeptical look.

"Besides, your cooking is far superior to mine," she continued. "This is the dish I usually ask my mother to make for my birthdays, and that is why I know how to make it. Otherwise my cooking is much more plain and simple out of sheer convenience." Hermione didn't mention the fact that Ron liked simpler fare; she didn't want to hear him complain about fancy spices, herbs or too much garlic, which he used to do until she toned down her cooking style.

Hermione said, "You'll have to teach me your ratatouille and cassoulet before you leave."
It was then that they both realized that there would be an end to their dinners, conversations, and time together. Both were aware of it from the beginning of their romance once she agreed to help him procure the Polyjuice ingredients, but realizing he would no longer be cooking for her made them both a bit introspective for the moment. They ate in silence for a while before Severus asked Hermione about the new candidate she’d hired to replace her at work.

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As much as Hermione wanted to sleep over at Severus’ flat, as he invited her to every night but Sundays until Ron’s return, she kept it to Saturdays only. She still went to his flat after work every weekday, all day Saturday, and part of Sunday. They took turns cooking for each other, Hermione feeling inspired to cook the way she liked versus catering to Ron’s blander palate.

She didn't want to risk someone coming over by Floo, like Ginny and Harry had done in the past, to find her gone and the flat appearing abandoned. She felt it best to keep up appearances since neighbors might observe a change of pattern of Mrs. Weasley returning to her flat or not at all for days at a time. Who knew who the Aurors might question if Hermione became a suspect in Severus and Draco's disappearance.

It was a prudent decision as one night she came home from Severus' flat to find Trevor waiting in her own flat. He was in distress over the fact that Madam Dushka was pregnant, and neither of them were sure if it was his child or Mr. Dushka's.

Trevor Spawn didn't know who else to talk to or trust speaking with.

He confessed about his affair with Madam Dushka, expanding to include her husband once he discovered their affair. It was all hunky-dory until the recent revelation that day that Madam Dushka was expecting. They would have to await the birth of the child before they would discover if the child was sired by her lover or her husband, which would change the magical bond between her and her husband, since they had not gotten around to having children during the past two decades of marriage. It seems that not even magical contraceptives were one hundred percent fool-proof.

Now Trevor feared losing his job.

Hermione pulled out her copy of The Magical Contracts of Marriage and Children and agreed to let him borrow it for a few days. She would need it herself when Ron came back, but she didn't tell Trevor that.
"Listen, if anything, I will vouch that if she chooses to terminate you, it will be unjust since you are a fine employee. If you contest it, there can be an inquiry at your request, and then there would be questions about personal reasons behind her firing you, if she did. Trust me, she will not want to make this an issue of public record. But I would suggest that you and the Dushkas sit down and make a plan that will ensure your continued employment and a course of action," she suggested. "I'm not privy to all that has happened, but I'm sure you have a memory or two that could be viewed in a Pensieve that would sure call into question her objectivity, should she fire you."

Trevor thanked her profusely for her help and promise of discretion before he Floo'ed back home.

Once gone, all Hermione could think is that she would not be around when Madam Dushka's pregnancy progressed. Who knew how much more of a harpy she would become once morning sickness was in full gear, not to mention the mood swings, fatigue, and everything else that came part and parcel with the condition. Hermione had seen enough of her sisters-in-law go through all the various stages numerous times, and she knew exactly what to expect.

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Time flew faster than Hermione realized or wanted. Before she knew it, it was her last day at the Department of Standard & Regulations. It was spent having Fastrada shadow her throughout the day, and when Trevor botched up an experiment on some irregularly ground dragon bone he had on a flame that was too high, he had Fastrada fill out the report before signing it himself. They doubted Fastrada would need to fill out many of those herself, but it was good to know what paperwork was involved.

The three all went to lunch together, as Madam Dushka bowed out at the last minute looking a bit green around the gills. Hermione guessed it was morning sickness, but said nothing.

After lunch, Hermione had to finish sorting through the last of her stacks of Potions and Herbology magazines, Ministry-owned books she had yet to return to their library, and a copious number of journals she had read but never bothered to chuck or sort.

Fastrada had already read most of the materials at home since she still had owl delivery after her husband's passing, but she asked to have them for her own archives at work, for reference.

Once done with her sorting, Hermione noted her couch was a whole lot bigger than she remembered, now that one end did not have a teetering stack of reading materials upon it. Normally she was a neat witch, but lack of adequate bookshelf space had made her improvise over the years.

At five o'clock, Hermione handed her keys back over to Madam Dushka. She Floo'ed home to
shower and change before heading over to Severus' for a celebratory dinner he’d promised. He’d also finished his last day at The Lovely Lavender Company under his nom de guerre of Sebastian Delgado, so it was a double celebration.

There was a lesson in ratatouille and preparation of the duck confit for tomorrow, which required preparation the day before for the cassoulet, since she would learn how to make that dish on the following day, Saturday.

After dinner, there was dancing followed by rigorous love-making without the use of any potions, except the Lubrication Potion. As they showered afterward, the moment demanded that they go at it one last time for the night. Hermione and Severus discovered there was some rot in the wall behind the tiled shower wall. Hermione had her feet sturdily braced against the shower walls opposite, and she’d pressed her back against the rotted tile-covered wall while Severus thrust firmly into her. The wall slightly caved, and they had a good laugh over it, deciding to finish their canoodling in the bath instead.

Lying in bed, their hair still damp and Hermione occasionally bursting into spontaneous fits of giggles and chuckles, Severus said, "I'm sorry to leave you a place that is falling apart, if you intend to take Miss Brown's offer of free lodging."

Hermione hadn't even decided if she wanted to live in Severus' flat once he vacated. The lure of rent-free living did hold a distinct monetary allure; given that she had recently been enjoying a few more Galleons in the vault with Ron's bump in salary and position as first-string Keeper for the Chudley Cannons, she was strongly considering it. It wasn't like she’d spent that much extra money with Ron's pay raise, but it was nice to be able to go out to dinner once in a rare while. Then there was a new set of robes when one set was getting too ratty and worn, and it was convenient to not need to count Knuts just before pay day as she had done for years.

She noticed that the study had enough shelf space for even her book collection, which was large, but not as large as Severus'. Most of her books were currently in the cellar space under her and Ron's bed. The cellar was already there when she and Ron moved in, sold as a place to put Christmas decorations, extra brooms, and storage that their tiny flat otherwise lacked. Severus' bed was far more comfortable than hers, and the kitchen was more spacious with more cupboard space. There was no contest when it came to his bathroom.

"Are you leaving the bed?"

"I have no intent to take it," he replied. Severus hoped it would be easy to buy a nice feather bed where he was going.
"Sold. I suppose I should wait to move in until after you've been declared missing, this place turned upside and gone over with a fine-toothed comb, Sneakoscope, Foe-Glass, and who knows what else Mad-Eye will use to look for clues as to your whereabouts."

"That would be the prudent thing to do," Severus agreed as he nuzzled his head against her breast, enjoying the way she lazily stroked and played with his hair.

They lay there entwined with each other before he added, "Though I would consider bringing it along if you came with, if you're that attached to it."

He hadn't mentioned his offer for her to go with him since their weekend in Weybourne two weeks prior.

Hermione didn't want this to turn into another fight and she was tempted to placate him by saying that she would think about it, but that would be leading him on. Severus had been honest with her, once his mask was discarded, and she would not begin lying to him now.

"I have my reasons for staying, Severus. If anything, I know that if what the fortuneteller said is true, then I will see you again."

"Even if you clear my name and I could come back, I doubt that I ever would. England has become a prison for me. I can't travel up to Hogsmeade or even Wales without special permission." He lifted his head from her chest to regard her, brushing the hair away from her face. "If I were to come back to England, it would not be willingly. Which means that if you see me again, it will be because you've left England as well."

Hermione hadn't thought about it in those terms; Yet, Severus omitted the other possibility – of him being caught and dragged back against his will. Still, she had assumed that he would come back once his name was cleared. She hadn't considered that even if he could come back that he would still stay away. When she thought about it, what person ever willingly went back to sit in their jail cell once freed?

And if Severus would never come back, would that mean that she would never clear his and Draco's name, giving up and joining him abroad?

There was no time period the old Roma woman gave as to when Hermione would see Severus again when he left. It didn't mention if he would even be alive, just that she would "see" Severus again.
Now what seemed clear to Hermione once again became nebulous and uncertain.

Chapter End Notes

A/N:

I know, I know. I used the same Extension Charm as Hermione's bag in DH, and I already established I would not use any new canon from HBP onward, but the Extension Charm was already established in GoF with the Weasleys’ tent.

This recipe is very close or is about the same recipe that my mother taught me:

Hermione's Prawns
Serves two

1 pound Colossal or extra large jumbo prawns/shrimp
1/3 bulb of Garlic
1 Tablespoon Cilantro (heaping)
1/4 cup Olive Oil
1/4 cup Butter
1/4 cup Amontillado Sherry

Directions:

1) Draw a sharp knife along the back of the prawns, deep into the interior of the meat so it is mostly butterflied. Devein the shrimp, removing and discarding the intestinal tract. Leave the shells on, as they add flavor to the sauce.

2) Peel and finely chop the garlic, set aside.

3) Coarsely chop enough cilantro to equal one heaping tablespoon – or a very generous pinch, and set aside.

4) With a large skillet, set the heat to medium. Once the pan is warm, add the oil and butter.

5) After the butter has melted and started to bubble a little, add the garlic and cook for about ten seconds.

6) Add the prawns, laying them on one side. Let them cook until the color of the shells change and they become bright pink-orange.
7) Flip the prawns to cook on the other side.

8) When both sides are bright pink-orange in color, the prawns should start spreading apart where you cut through the backs, splitting open.

9) Once both sides are brightly colored and the backs have started to spread open, add the sherry. Stand back as the alcohol vapors will probably catch fire. The alcohol will burn off quickly and the flame will subside.

10) Turn the prawns to “stand up” where the interior meat is now facing down on the pan, shells on top, and the tails are curled up into the air. Cook for a few more minutes until the interior of the prawns are cooked. Do not overcook the prawns or they will be rubbery.

11) Add the cilantro to the pan and swirl the pan about to mingle the cilantro with the sauce.

12) Serve up the prawns into two soup plates, then split the sauce between the two plates.

13) Serve with a large loaf of sliced-up crusty French bread and a nice dry white wine. Add an empty bowl to the table to hold discarded shells.
Chapter Summary

Chapter Sixty-Six: "Last Tango in London" Hermione and Ron finally get around to brass tacks. Later on, it is the last night together for our two lovers; tears are shed, confessions made, and a promise given. Fan art and a drink recipe included!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Sixty-Six
"Last Tango in London"

Disclaimer: En español – Google translate
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Severus had discovered over the past three weeks that he actually enjoyed some of the ordinary mundane aspects of domesticity. The only things the couple didn't have to deal with in that arena were issues like money matters, visiting family or friends, and most chores, since Marf took care of those. It wasn't like he had any family to visit since both his parents had long since passed, and he had no other family that he was in contact with except for some distant cousins that he wasn't even acquainted with. Hermione rarely visited her parents, though he wondered how they would react to their soon-to-be divorced daughter being romantically involved with an ex-Death Eater twenty years her senior.

Severus was almost forty-four, but still could pass for a man in his thirties, though some aspects of working as a spy had aged him a bit, most notably around the eyes. Once in a rare while he had what some Muggles called the “thousand-yard stare.”

Regardless of all the minor details of life they didn't have to deal with together, Severus was regretting the end of their unfettered stretch at playing house.

Since "Delgado" was no longer employed, that first Monday he found himself rising out of habit to
only realize half-way through breakfast that he didn't have to rush off to work. He could sit on his arse all day like some bored housewitch, waiting for Hermione to finish her day at her new job and come "home" to tell him about it. It was quite the gender reversal.

Now free to do anything he wanted, he read. There were some old Sanskrit tomes he had been meaning to read once again, first to refresh his memory, and second to practice his Sanskrit since it was a little rusty.

He wondered if he would have the opportunity to employ more use of the foreign languages among the members of his new community. There was much he was uncertain of, but the only thing he was certain of was that this was the last place in the world that truly offered sanctuary.

Greece once used to have a sanctuary for witches and wizards who ran afoul of their wizarding government's laws or were persecuted justly or unjustly, but since it was a popular place and easy to reach for the European wizarding populace, the guardians to Greece’s sanctuary began demanding payment for entrance: a fee to be free. Just as unscrupulous politicians can be bought or pressured, the magic regarding the several millennia-old sanctuary in Greece was changed through some very powerful spellcasting. Now for an even larger fee from a determined government, witches and wizards could be unwillingly extradited back to their homelands to face jail, Dementors, or execution.

Where he, Draco, and Ginny were going was still a place where they did not have to pay to enter; they would truly be safe from any Aurors who might try to capture and take them back. The magic, he was told with great authority, was quite strong and powerful.

Lost in a book and off his usual schedule, Severus suddenly realized he had not done anything to prepare dinner as Hermione knocked upon his door. Upon entering, she greeted him warmly, eager to tell him about her first day with Albert.

Before she could continue, he stopped her and apologized that he hadn't done anything regarding dinner, to which she suggested that she head out and bring back some take-away from a great curry place that she and Ginny had tried recently.

Once again, Hermione was paying for something that he felt obligated to pay for; she insisted that if he felt strongly about it, if they did take-away again, he could always pay for it then, though she would still be the one to fetch it. Hermione told Severus not to worry about him forgetting dinner, as she had upon many occasions forgotten all about dinner with her nose in a book.

After a trip via Floo and a bit of Apparating, Hermione knocked on his door once more with a
couple bags of hot food. Severus had forgotten how much he really liked curry, as he hadn't explored Indian cooking on his own, despite having a couple cookbooks. Additionally, Miss Brown didn't care for it and never had the house-elves at Lovely Lavender serve it for lunch. Besides, the strong odors usually interfered with one's ability to properly smell afterwards and required a change of clothes as well to escape the scents.

As they ate basmati rice, naan bread, Rogan Josh, Chicken Tikka Masala, Aloo Gobi, Riata, and Channa Masala with a couple of chutneys on the side, Hermione recounted her first day as Albert Dobmeir's Potions apprentice.

"Why didn't you tell me that the house-elves provide lunch for you every day?" Hermione asked as she put a bit of Riata on her naan to cool the mellow spices from the Rogan Josh warming her tongue.

"I had become so accustomed to it, I had forgotten it was a perk of the position," he admitted with a shrug. "Besides, it's not like Miss Brown wants to have two ex-Death Eaters spotted leaving her headquarters around lunch every day, to re-enter an hour later."

"Well, it certainly will be easier for the fact I don't have to head out to lunch every day or pack my own, which is what I did many times."

"And did you lunch with Miss Brown?" He gave Hermione a curious glance, his one brow cocked.

"Yes, and it was a little awkward, but we pretended as if there were no bad blood between us. There was no need to embarrass Albert with the salacious details of our personal lives that will hit the papers soon enough once it becomes public knowledge when Ron and I file officially." Hermione used her spoon to push around the curry-soaked rice about her plate, suddenly feeling her appetite wane a little.

There was the question of whether they would file the divorce privately or at the Ministry. Either way, it would magically appear in the Ministry's records for all to see once complete. Hermione hadn’t looked into getting her own Gringotts vault yet, and there was still the issue of buying her own owl. Either action might be viewed as suspicious, if scrutinized too closely by the Eeylops Owl Emporium employees or the Goblins at the bank.

Severus placed his hand atop hers. It was comforting to know that he would still be around when she divorced Ron and would have a shoulder to cry upon, should she deal with any emotional baggage that had yet to be expunged. She had cried enough over this latest development in her marriage, and now she had reached the level of quiet resignation and acceptance.
When Hermione came home Tuesday night, having spent the evening at Severus’ again, Ron's owl, Pigwidgeon, was waiting for her with a postcard in his beak. Once she retrieved it, the little Scops owl dove into the tray of owl treats and began eating nearly the whole bowl down in one go.

Turning over the card, she looked at the date, realizing this was the first postcard Ron sent her. He’d sent it over a week ago.

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Hermione,
Thailand and India were amazing. Morocco was too dry and sandy.
South America - mix of good and bad. Home soon.
Ron

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Flipping the card back over, she more closely looked at the photograph on the other side. It said, "Greetings from Tahiti", with a picture of a tropical beach, an empty hammock, and palm trees swaying in the breeze. She could see the waves gently lapping at the white sandy beach.

"You came all the way from Tahiti?" Hermione asked the diminutive owl.

Pig hooted at her with his beak full of owl treats that he was still wolfing down.

"I'll get you a nice fresh mouse tomorrow. How does that sound?"

The owl hooted twice and snuggled up against Hermione's hand in appreciation of her offer.

"Fine, two mice. You earned it."

In anticipation of Ron returning home Wednesday, Hermione decided not to visit Severus the day Ron was supposed to come back. She would go back to the old Monday night and Thursday night routines until Ron or she had moved out. More likely, it was Ron who would leave for Lavender's place, preferably the night he returned.
Looking in her cupboard and pantry, she realized she had let her food stores whittle down since she only ever ate breakfast at her flat now. She had come home from work, and there was very little to cook. Ron wasn't home yet, so she made a quick run out to the butcher’s for a couple steaks, and she would cook up some noodles and carrots she still had in her pantry.

As she was putting the groceries away, she heard the Floo roar to life.

"'Mione? 'Mione, you home?" Ron called out.

"In the kitchen," she hollered back.

"Wow, you're home?" he said in surprise, used to her coming home late most nights, even Wednesdays.

Hermione stood in the doorway and looked Ron over. His hair was rumpled, his face tanner, and it looked like he’d gained even more muscle, but his face was thinner, indicating he had really chiseled down his body fat even further.

As much as it would have been natural to run across the room and throw her arms around him in welcome, it was not going to happen.

There was an awkward silence as Ron didn't make any move to run over and embrace her either.

"I started my apprenticeship with Albert Dobmeir this last Monday," she informed him blandly. "That's amazing!" Ron said, sincerely happy for her.

"Albert Dobmeir is Lavender Brown's new Potions master."

Ron's face fell.

Over all the talk of her apprenticeship with Albert Dobmeir, Hermione had forgotten to mention that Dobmeir and herself would both be working for Lavender. Had Ron been aware of that fact before that moment, he may have confessed himself about the affair before she found it out from Lavender herself.
"I want a divorce," she said flatly without emotion. Before Ron could object, she added, "I am making enough money now, working for Lavender. Between that and my royalties, plus free rent at a block of flats she owns in which I've been offered a place to live, I won't have any money troubles, Ron."

Ron just stared at her. His face was ashen.

When he continued to stand there and do nothing, Hermione turned around and went back into the kitchen to begin cooking dinner.

"You still like your steak rare?" she called out from the kitchen.

Ron finally found his feet and his voice and rushed to the doorway of the kitchen.

"'Mione, I can explain," he blurted out.

Hermione stopped and swiveled on the spot to fix him with a glare that would freeze a phoenix's arse, the cooking knife in her hand and pointed towards his chest. "Shall I recount everything Lavender has told me and then you can add anything she left out, or shall I let you blather on and dig yourself deeper into a hole?"

Ron weighed the possibility between keeping his mouth shut or rambling on. He decided on the latter.

"But if you know all this, why are you working for her if you're this upset?" he asked, wondering how Hermione could work for the woman he was having an affair with.

"Because, Ron, this apprenticeship is something I have wanted for a long time. And when I finally have it, I'm not going to give it up because you couldn't keep your wee willie out of some other witch's fanny." Hermione punctuated the end of that statement with a sharp and forceful chop of her knife, cutting a small carrot in half with precision.

Ron winced at the implication of her subconscious gesture.
"I know you've been fucking her since that first big fight shortly after Harry and Ginny's wedding," Hermione began as she listed off each point as she wielded her knife with precision, focusing her frustration on the phallic vegetable in front of her. "I know when you've been gone and said you've been at a 'friend's' place, you've really been at her place. I know she has begged you to divorce me for years. I know that you only married me because your mother coerced you into it. I know we never really loved each other the way a husband and wife should. I know you're in love with her and she with you. I know that you have not divorced me because you were worried about me having enough money to live on, a problem now resolved with my new job, thanks to your mistress, who is paying me, and that you're too scared shitless of your mother to tell her if we do get a divorce, **which we will have**." She finished chopping up the carrots and put them in a pot to boil. "Did I leave anything out?"

"Yeah, not only did Mum push me into marrying you, she threatened that if I didn't propose soon, she would kick me out of the house and financially cut me off, job or no job."

Hermione almost felt some pity for Ron as he'd proposed shortly after dropping out of Auror training. It was before he landed his position as second-string Keeper and part-time barman.

Ron sounded very bitter at having been strong-armed by his mother. He had expressed recently how he wished he was stronger when dealing with her domineering personality; he hadn’t had the fortitude to push back against her bullying. Hermione realized he had been, in some ways, just a kid at the time and fresh from a war that had damaged everyone's soul it touched. Everyone had been too tired to fight anymore, even Ron.

Still feeling less than generous towards her husband, Hermione threw back in Ron's face, "Why didn't you just go stay at Harry's, then?"

"You know what she's like. Or have you forgotten about her nagging about children already?" he countered, his voice rising in anger.

The emotionally-drained witch slumped against the counter, her hands braced on the chipped tile for support. She knew exactly what Molly Weasley was like. The rancor she felt towards her mother-in-law was near equal to the anger she still felt over Ron's betrayal. It wasn't like Hermione was any more faithful towards the end of their marriage, willingly falling into Severus' bed after writing off her marriage at the end of her anniversary dinner.

Hermione and Lavender both agreed that Ron was to never find out about his wife and Severus being together. Not only about that, but Lavender's side gigolo business as well. Ron would never understand about any of it. Ron was going to have a hard enough time dealing with his little sister
running off with Draco, leaving Harry, his best friend, alone and forsaken.

The slow burning rage in the pit of Hermione's stomach made her want to tell Ron about his own mother's visits to see a gentleman named "Eduardo," but that would be hexing her own foot off. Instead she tamped it down and calmed herself enough that she could at least face eating without wanting to throw it up.

The pan was sizzling hot, so Hermione threw the steaks on and told Ron to sit. They were to have one last dinner together as husband and wife, then after dinner he was to pack up his things and get the fuck out of their flat and go stay at Lavender's. He could come back tomorrow while she was at work to pick up the rest of his things.

They would sort out who got what and splitting of the money in their vault later. She would even force him to take that cheeky mirror she had spelled silent for the past three weeks so she did not have to listen to it bitch at her any more, but she wasn't going to share a bed with him any longer.

Ron didn't argue; he only shook his head in agreement, his head hanging down like the guilty dog he was.

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Bill Weasley was celebrating his thirty-third birthday. The whole family was going to be there, even Percy, Penelope, and their newest child, Prunella, as well as her older siblings, Parker and Primrose.

Since Hermione was no longer going to be Ron's wife, Lavender got the duty of finding a birthday present for Bill. Hermione gladly handed that chore off to her, having had her fill over the years of buying presents for the various Weasley family members. That one obligation alone that she would no longer have to part Galleons over would probably save her a small fortune. Lavender was rich; she could afford to buy Bill whatever her tastes desired.

Hermione, Ron, and Lavender Apparated together to the path near Bill and Fleur's home. No one held hands as they approached the house.

Knocking on the door, they were greeted by Fred, who asked, "What are you doing here, Lav?" He wondered why his business partner had shown up for a private family function.

Ron rushed inside and masked his nervousness by acting a bit overly cheerful. "Has the party started yet?"
Hermione and Lavender both entered the home behind Ron and waited for the questioning glances and looks to subside as to why Miss Brown was there. Ginny, who already had a glass of Fleur's famous champagne cocktail in her hand, just stared quietly.

Hermione and Ginny had had lunch recently and the older witch updated her friend on the goings on as of late, but it still hadn’t quite prepared Mrs. Potter for what was transpiring before her eyes.

Molly was making noise in the kitchen that, "Ron and Hermione better arrive soon or they'd have trouble to deal with," when she rounded the corner with her hands full with a casserole dish.

A small shriek of fright erupted from Molly, her eyes wide and full of terror. Her hands dropped the casserole; it landed on the floor with a crash, roasted squash splattering all over her brown heeled shoes and stockings.

All eyes in the room swiveled from Lavender, who was like an interloper, to Molly who reacted so violently to seeing her there.

"Oh, my! Why didn't you tell us you'd be bringing a guest to Bill's party?" Molly began nervously, stammering.

Molly pulled her wand out and the casserole was restored, dish and squash intact as if it had never hit the floor. She was forgetting the fact that there was probably lint and hair now contaminating the squash casserole, and it would still need to be chucked in the bin.

As Molly rushed to put the casserole on the table, before dropping it once more, Ron said, "I have an announcement."

He swallowed hard; suddenly surrounded by his entire family, his voice failed him.

"Hermione's pregnant?" Molly blurted out, her face suddenly turning from dread to hope.

Hermione, sensing that Ron was going to lose his nerve stepped up next to Ron and clasped his hand as a sign that though she may be angry with him, she was with him at that moment.
"No," Hermione said defiantly, "Ron and I are getting a divorce."

The room erupted into a cacophony of riotous noise.

Lavender, who had been standing back watched in awe as the room became a flurry of waving hands, mothers clapping hands over their children's ears as if "divorce" was a dirty word, which it sort of was in the wizarding world, and shouts of disbelief.

"How could you do this to me!" Molly shrieked in shrill tones at her youngest son.

"Wow, and I thought Mum finding out about our sex shop was going to be hard," George muttered to Lavender as an aside.

Philippe turned to his mother, Fleur, who was equally shocked. He asked, "Mum, what's a divorce?"

Charlie got into Ron's face and started asking him if this was some joke the twins put him up to.

Penelope gave Hermione the stink eye before saying snidely, "I hope this bad news doesn't make my breast milk go sour."

Ginny just continued to sit there while Harry ran over to confront Ron and Hermione about this out-of-the-blue revelation.

Bill sat down in a chair, bewildered and overcome by the news.

Molly continued railing on, "And you couldn't have waited until after dinner and cake to tell us this? You just ruined your brother's birthday dinner!"

"There are more important things than Bill's birthday dinner, like you forcing me to propose to Hermione when I didn't want to!" Ron shouted back at his mother in a booming voice.
The whole room went deadly silent. All eyes once again turned to look at Molly, whose face was starting to turn a lovely shade of cerise.

This time, Arthur was the first to speak, "What do you mean, Ron, when you say she forced you?"

"It's nothing, Arthur," Molly interrupted. "He's just exaggerating. I did no such thing."

Ron had finally found his backbone and stood up even straighter, the full force of his muscular physique dwarfing his mother. He said very clearly, over-enunciating each and every word, "Really? Shall I have someone fetch a Pensieve? I can show everyone my memory of you threatening to cut me off and throw me out of the house if I didn't get around to proposing to Hermione and 'right quick', as you put it!"

Arthur turned to look at his wife, disbelieving his wife had pressured Ron into a marriage he was neither ready for nor wanted.

The room devolved once more into screaming, questions and accusations before Molly shouted, "Well, you can't get a divorce."

"Actually," Hermione interjected, "we did it this afternoon from home, just before we came over. When the Ministry opens on Monday morning, it will appear on their registry that we are no longer married." She let go of Ron's hand to sit down, now feeling quite tired.

"Well, undo it!" Molly insisted.

Harry yelled at Ron, "Why didn't you two tell me and Ginny about this?" He presumed his wife didn't know, and she didn't correct him.

"This still doesn't explain why Lavender's here!" George yelled loud enough for everyone to hear.

Lavender walked up next to Ron to clasp his hand to present a unified front and said, her chin jutting defiantly, "Ron and I are going to get married."

Molly howled with incredulity, "YOU'VE BEEN HAVING AN AFFAIR...WITH HER?!?" in a
voice so loud some of the grandchildren cowered and began to cry.

"And just what is wrong with Lavender? I am deeply in love with her and we have been for a long time. Maybe I would have married her and been happier and had children already if you hadn’t forced me to marry Hermione in the first place," Ron shouted back.

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley," Lavender said in a cool voice that denoted a calm attitude and that she was in charge of the conversation. "Just what is wrong with Ron marrying me? We have been in love each other for years."

"You mean you’ve been committing adultery all along?" Harry asked, ready to hex his friend for cheating on Hermione.

"It makes no difference now, Harry," Hermione said calmly, putting her hand on Harry's wand arm, noticing how it was twitching, itching to cast some jinx at his oldest friend. "We were never in love to begin with, and this marriage has been over for a long time. We just finally both have the sense to finally end it and part ways."

Hermione could have added that she was now working for Lavender, but that would have created a whole new ruckus, so she figured that it would come out later.

Not surprisingly, Fred came over to stand next to Hermione and said very quietly, "You do realize that Albert Dobmeir – the guy you're apprenticing under – is Lav's new Potions master, right?"

Hermione nodded and said somberly, "I already had my first week at my new work. Trust me, I'm well aware."

Fred whistled long and low, shaking his head. "Man, you Muggle-borns have some pretty liberal attitudes. Almost as bad as the Spanish."

Hermione ignored Molly, who was still railing on, and went over to Bill. "I'm sorry I ruined your dinner party, Bill. But this has been coming for a long time, and we had to break it at some point. Happy birthday, Bill."

She shook his hand and went to head to the door.
"And just where do you think you're going?" Molly questioned shrilly, spying Hermione making her exit past Ron.

"I am going home." Hermione exited and walked out the door, closing it gently.

Outside along the path, George ran after her and asked her to stop for a moment.

"I know my mother can be a bit much, but even though you're not married to Ron any more, you'll always be a part of this family, even if you are divorced. If you and Ron were never in love with each other, I don't blame you for ending it. Charlie, Percy, and Mum might be having a fit right now, but some of us are a bit more understanding."

Hermione gave George a hug and thanked him.

"Ginny knew, didn't she?" George asked quietly.

"Do you think I could have gone through all this and not tell my dearest friend?"

"You didn't tell Harry, since he was just as shocked as Mum," George observed.

"Harry has his own issues to deal with, and he doesn't need my troubles heaped on top of his," she said cryptically, without giving details of Harry and Ginny's own crumbling marriage.

"Well, I hope you're still coming to the grand opening of The Sirens' Secrets next week," he said.

"With bells on," she assured him.

Before she Apparated away, George suddenly shouted with inspiration, "Ooh! Bell nipple pasties! Thanks for the idea, Hermione!"

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Since Severus had his days free now, his madam, Miss Brown, had arranged some daytime visits
by some older witches looking for a bit of company. As his client list had whittled down to just Mrs. Paxton on Sunday, appearances had to be kept up that Severus was earning his keep by peddling his companionship. It was just for one more week, but Severus did it in order to help create a believable story that she had no idea he was leaving, by keeping him solidly booked, but the other six nights were still strictly free for Hermione.

If anything, he got to use his masks one last time before getting rid of them. He decided to keep his Casanova mask embellished with a few gold baroque swirls as a reminder of the night he and Hermione met each other. If anything, it symbolized the mask she had stripped away from him and his heart.

Most of the witches were thankfully not interested in anything sexual, though one did get a bit frisky, to which he had to inform her that he wasn't being paid for that type of company, especially the meager sum she had offered for his time through Miss Brown. Marf was happy that he got to make a lot of tea and sandwiches that week.

Now that Ron was gone from her life, Hermione came over every night, since Severus was mostly a Beau du Jour gigolo now.

Time was speeding up faster for the two lovers. Though it seemed his day of departure would never arrive, he wanted each night to last forever so he could be with Hermione just a bit longer before she went home to her own flat each night.

That Monday morning, the Daily Prophet had a headline in bold print that read: "QUIDDITCH STAR DIVORCES WIFE FOR BEAUTY EMPIRE QUEEN!" There was an old photo of Ron and Hermione's wedding that the paper had from when they published the announcement years ago. It was tearing in half with a photo of a sultry-looking Lavender Brown popping up between husband and wife. Lavender was winking, making the photo look as bad as the story implicated.

It was even written by Marietta Edgecombe, the budding reporter at the Daily Prophet who still had the word “SNEAK” written permanently across her face in old acne scars, thanks to Hermione's secret jinx imbued in the Dumbledore Army contract in her fifth year. Marietta's article was almost as scathing as if Rita Skeeter had written it herself, no doubt taking pointers from the prevaricator.

Their divorce was public record, but as for how the hacks at the Daily Prophet discovered that Ron was with Lavender, she wondered if there were a few more unregistered Animagi at the paper than just Rita Skeeter.

Hermione was glad she could Floo directly from her flat to work, as there were reporters who
knocked on her door at home at all hours asking for an exclusive, and the house-elves kept the press away at work. Lavender came into work complaining about how Ron was being harangued by the press equally. Hermione felt much less pity for those two.

Bascom Nettleton wasn't too upset over the news and seemed to find perverse joy in it, declaring that every witch would want a calendar featuring the Chudley Cannons’ Keeper, Ron Weasley, since he must have been pretty hot looking for the beauty empire queen to steal him away from his wife. Lavender seemed to also mention Bascom Nettleton's name with a slight shudder. Hermione secretly wondered if Lavender had had an equally smarmy encounter with the older wizard, but didn't ask.

Albert Dobmeir had the decorum to offer a kind ear without judgment. Hermione declined for now, saying she might talk to him later about it, but she just wanted to concentrate on her work instead. He kept her busy by having her work on Greek, the first language she chose to master, when she wasn't working on new beauty Potions with Albert or going to his house to tend his personal Potions garden.

She could scarcely believe it, but this was the last night she was going to visit Severus. He had become such an integral part of her life, her routine, her heart, that she didn't want to believe it. Their evenings together, first with Severus posing as Calleo, then known for his true self, had become the one bright thing in her life amid the depressing drudgery of being married to Ron and working in a dead-end job she loathed.

Severus had provided a soft shoulder and some tea, becoming her friend before they became lovers. And now he would soon be gone.

Staring at a fresh bowl of lemons she had procured from a recent visit to the Hogsmeade Memorial Cemetery earlier that week, Hermione said to the peculiar fruit, as if she was speaking to her old Headmaster in person, "Why didn't you take care of Severus and Draco? How could you die and leave them without some proof that they should not be persecuted?"

She played with one of the lemons in her hand, noting the leathery quality of it, since she had picked it up off the ground and who knew how long it had been there before she’d grabbed it. There was a temptation to throw it against the wall in anger, but instead she placed it in the pocket of her cloak to give to Severus.

The two lovers tried to pretend as if this was just another evening together, but the portent of what would happen tomorrow loomed over their last night together.
They ate a salad accented with fresh pomegranate seeds and shaved fennel over a bed of spinach and arugula with a light dressing, alongside the main entree of roasted goose glazed with apricot jam Severus had canned in late spring. It was a lovely last dinner to share together.

The salad reminded Hermione of the Greek myth of Persephone eating a few pomegranate seeds. That act had resulted in the origin of winter and how seasons occur, since they were on the cusp of the coldest and darkest of seasons, when Persephone parted from the ones she loved against her will.

As they dined, Hermione practiced a bit of her Greek with Severus, who helped her with her pronunciation and a few mnemonic tricks he knew. After supper, they retired to the settee for a bit to let dinner settle before dancing.

Severus began by playing Hermione's favorite song, “I Left My Heart in San Francisco.” It was by the third song, a slow tango, that they stopped dancing and began making love for the last time.

They took their time, taking it slow. Both wanted to remember it all in perfect detail.

There was an urgency in their kisses. It wasn't like the first time they kissed where they needed to consume one another to fulfill a long denied hunger. This was different. They needed to gorge themselves on each other in order to last the months or years until they would see each other again. Even Severus had silently admitted to himself that when the old fortuneteller said Hermione would see him again, it didn't exactly imply he would still be alive.

He had Hermione undressed first and on her back in his bed. His mouth and fingers probed and delved into her, bringing her to orgasm twice before he would let her up off the bed to reciprocate. She let him guide the pace when it was his turn, wanting to let him do anything he wanted. When her gag reflexes kicked in, he eased up, but her hands guided him to go deep into her mouth and down her throat. He was in awe of the sight of her lost in the rapture of giving him pleasure.

Finally, unable to wait any longer, Severus removed himself from Hermione's mouth and pulled her up onto his lap. She quickly impaled herself on him and rode him, feeling as if she would cry. He grasped her tightly and thrust up from underneath with a desire to keep her there forever in her bed. As much as he needed freedom more than he needed Hermione, he briefly thought about what would happen if he did stay behind to be with her.
His head planted firmly against her chest, his arms tight around his love, Severus came, screaming and howling, no longer holding back his reserve. Hermione angled her hips in such a way that increased the friction against her clit and came as well, as Severus was nearing the end of his orgasm.

They laid together in his bed, both unable to speak for a while, before Hermione rolled over and began to kiss him again. It wasn't long before Severus was ready once again. This time he had Hermione on her back, her legs spread wide and far apart, her knees practically up under her shoulders. He slammed into her, each thrust accented with a fierce grunt, as she watched him. His eyes were shut tight as he was concentrating on the sensation of her warmth tightly wrapped around him. She watched the way his long, straight raven locks swayed with each movement, like the boughs of a tree in a steady summer breeze.

"I love you, Severus," she choked out, her voice thick with emotion and her eyes filling with tears. She didn't want him to go and almost begged for him to stay.

Hearing Hermione declare her love yet again, he came, but this time his face did not screw into an exquisite grimace of furrowed brow and grim set mouth, but that of one in pain, as if surrendering in defeat. His brows lifted and his eyes pleaded with hers, his mouth slack.

Collapsed on top of her, he firmly kissed the whole of her face: Her forehead, her cheeks, her eyes, her brow, her chin and mouth. They were both panting laboriously, Hermione kissing him back similarly, kissing his shoulder and neck as well.

He had to say it one last time.

Draco had taken Severus to task for offering to bring Hermione along recently when – not some months before – Severus had reamed him out at the insistence of taking Ginny. Their plan was set and here he was willing to risk it for a witch, who at the time was still married to Weasley.

"It's not too late," Severus said, still trying to catch his breath, still buried inside of Hermione. "You can still come with us."

He didn't care if this would turn into another fight; he knew he would regret it if he didn't try one last time.

Hermione's heart felt as it would break in two right then. Her resolve was sorely tested, his voice
was almost pleading, begging nearly in the same way he had begged to have her when he ground himself up against her in the kitchen when he still wore his mask. His voice had been heavy with desperation for release and need then; his voice held that same expression of his need for her now.

"I will see you again. I know it in my bones, Severus," she whispered with certainty into his hair, her hand gently stroking his back, legs still wrapped around him.

He wanted to believe her, and perhaps he did. It still didn't stop the hole that was opening in his heart, already missing her though she was right there in his arms, beneath him, still locked in a lovers' embrace.

Memory of Draco's insistence that Severus tell Hermione about his wife came once more unbidden to the forefront of his mind. For the fact that he had been battling with the question more and more as the weeks progressed made him think that he did need to unburden his sins upon his lover. Even the ghostly images of Albus and Minerva had been nagging him with increasing urgency that he tell her.

Maybe his story might evoke some pity in her and she might change her mind and still come with him in the end; or she might hate him and end his futile hope that she would come with him. And even if he never did see her again, she would know him for who he truly was and not the man behind the mask who hid his pain and shame. This was his last mask to strip away for her.

"Draco thinks I should tell you some parts of my past. And perhaps he is right. Should you change your mind and come with me, it would be best that you know," Severus began as he crawled off of Hermione to lay next to her, staring at the ceiling, unable to look her in the eye.

Hermione laid next to him and held his hand to let him know that whatever he might confess, she was still there for him, comforting him in his pain as he told his tale.

"I became a Death Eater because of the people who I thought were my friends. I was foolish and young, confusing the seduction of inclusion – and of a false sense of belonging with flattery and praise – with actual friendship. In order to belong, I let my own opinions be swayed by others’, since I had never really fit in before."

Hermione gave Severus' hand a squeeze, remembering how alone she’d felt her first year at Hogwarts and the overwhelming loneliness, unable to find a way to fit in or make friends, until befriended by Ron and Harry.
Severus continued. "It took a while before I realized the mistake I had made. In my seventh year, my father had arranged a marriage for me to a pure-blood witch three years my senior."

Hermione sat up and looked at Severus in surprise, but kept hold of his hand, squeezing it once more.

"We were married shortly after I had taken my N.E.W.T.s and came home from Hogwarts. She had been caught by her father in bed with a Muggle she claimed to be in love with. Being from a pure-blood family, this was unacceptable. The only course was for her to be married off to another pure-blood as soon as possible."

Hermione had no idea Severus was ever married, but given his own cryptic bitter comments about arranged marriages, it shouldn't have surprised her.

Severus only kept going, urged on by the soft reassurance of Hermione's touch in his own hand, encouraging him. "We loathed each other at first. We were both resentful with each other that we were forced into a situation against our own wills. Something I think your ex-husband can relate to, I'm sure."

Turning away from Severus, the tears came, realizing the Ron probably held some resentment towards her all these years after having his own mother pressure him into a marriage he wasn't ready for. She wiped away the tears before regarding Severus once again.

"She was a Ravenclaw, and she saw the logic in trying to make the best of a bad situation. Eventually we established a friendly rapport with each other. I may have even loved her, as you loved your husband. But we were not in love."

This time Severus squeezed Hermione's hand back, indicating silently that he had fallen in love with Hermione as he had not with his wife.

"Eventually, she became pregnant."

He paused, trying to hold back his own tears. Even after all these years, he still had trouble dealing with the fact that he’d almost became a father. The fact that Draco and his unborn child could have even grown up together and possibly been friends had crossed his mind more than once.
"The problem with Ravenclaws is that sometimes they think logic is the cure for all ills of the world. That everyone should see things logically, especially when evidence is provided that can support ideas with facts. What my wife..." He almost could not say her name, but he soldiered on, "… Gabrielle, could not comprehend is that prejudices are not based on facts, but cold hard ignorance that does not wish to be erased. Prejudices can be as zealous as blind faith. And the other Death Eaters and their wives had nothing but that to prove their unwavering faith in the Dark Lord."

He closed his eyes, wincing at the utterance of the wizard who still struck terror in his soul. "Gabrielle, having dealt with Muggles, and once having one as a lover before marrying me, thought that with intellectual debate she could convince the wives of Death Eaters that Muggles were not to be feared or hated, but embraced and welcomed. Needless to say, she was made an example of."

Hermione gasped in shock of this news. She began softly sobbing in sympathy for Severus loss, even though she had not heard the whole story.

"I was summoned by the Dark Lord..." he trailed off, trying to find the courage to speak his most grievous sins. Severus swallowed thickly, his mouth gone dry and his voice began to tremble as he recounted, "Gabrielle was there, bound on the wet ground, caked in mud. She was five months pregnant with our child. The Dark Lord said that a pure-blood witch who commingled with Muggles and espoused their equality was unfit to live, much less wield a wand and call herself a witch. He even questioned the paternity of the child. Lucius added in the crude joke about possibly being cuckolded by her old Muggle lover. I was ordered to... dispatch her."

She was crying silently, but he could feel the bed shake as she tried to keep quiet as the sobs racked her body.

"I hesitated. How could I kill her?" His voice overwhelmed, almost laughing at the despair that flooded him upon recalling those memories. "When the Dark Lord sensed my wavering obedience, he offered to have Lucius Malfoy do it if I could not.

"I knew that if I did not do it, then not only would she and my child die, but that I would, too. And if I was dead, then I could not avenge her, fight against those who would force me to kill her. I knew I had to do it or else I would have died in vain."

Hermione buried her head into his shoulder, her tears soaking the sheets beneath his skin. Still, she kept as quiet as possible while she cried.
"I summoned all my rage against her that I could. The resentment of having to marry her against my will, the petty battles we’d had, my anger at Lucius who looked like he was enjoying this as he smirked at my pain, my utter hatred that I had ever felt towards anyone, and I cast the Killing Curse."

Hermione finally let her sobs find voice and she cried pitifully. Severus wasn't sure even he could stand the sounds of her cries, as she was not crying for herself this time, but for him.
"Afterwards, I went to her parents' house to offer myself up to whatever punishment they wanted, but I found that they had already been killed. So I went to Dumbledore. I threw myself at his mercy, and even begged him to kill me himself, poison me, even. But he made me promise to fight against the Dark Lord and spy for the Order."

Hermione's sobbing began to subside somewhat.

"After the war, the Headmaster kept the killing of my wife a secret, knowing I lived with the remorse of it every day, even now. My work as a spy was the justification as to why the Wizengamot could not delve into what I had done during the first war. But nothing can excuse me, not even your forgiveness, if you were to give it, of what I've done."

Hermione threw herself across Severus’ chest as her sobs returned anew.
"I'm so sorry, Severus. I had no idea. My God, what could you do?" she wailed into his shoulder.

"I could have died alongside her like I deserved," he replied, emotion drained from his voice in defeat.

"No! No, Severus," she insisted. "If you had died, then the war might have been lost. I wish she hadn't died, I wish your child hadn't either, but there was nothing else to do. It's their fault she died; you were forced to do it, just as Draco was forced to take his Dark Mark against his will as well. You did it to survive, Severus. And until one is put into a life or death situation, no one is ever sure of what they will do, and they may question for the rest of their life what they should have done. But you did what you thought was right for the moment. I cannot judge you, Severus. I can forgive you, but I cannot judge."

Severus rolled away from Hermione, feeling as if he was undeserving of her pity and forgiveness.

"Severus, I did things during the war that I wish I had done differently. But we make the choices as best we can. You chose to live, to fight back and avenge her. For the fact that you did not give up and let them win, I can only assume that you would have done all that you could to save her, but couldn't." Hermione felt her own remorse wash over her as she remembered the second war. "I
wonder myself, if I had done something different, if I didn't hesitate, struck for a brief second by fear, if I could have cast the counter-curse and saved Remus or Minerva in time. I wonder who else I could have saved if I wasn't periodically frozen with paralyzing fear and bone-weary fatigue, trying to make my mind work, unable to recall some spell, or aiming wrong because my hand shook too hard. You're not the only one who lives with regrets, Severus. But we move on and do the best we can. That is all we can do. Keep living for those who don't any longer."

Hermione was sitting up in bed by this point, her knees drawn up to her chest, her face red and tear-streaked, eyes puffy.

That sat in silence for a long while. He had spoken enough.

Eventually, Hermione said, her breath hitching as she came down from a good cry, "I still love you, Severus. And I still think you should be free, which is why I should stay. Had you no remorse over your actions, that would be one thing, but I know you do. And it is because of that that I can forgive you and still love you as much as I did before."

They fell into each other's arms, holding on to each other as if clinging to a raft, trying to save each other from drowning in the depths of their sorrows.

Severus' heart did not feel lighter nor did he feel any less shame than before. The only thing different was that Hermione knew, which seemed to change nothing in her mind about coming with him or her intent to clear his and Draco's name. He wondered if it was truly worth it.

In time, they rose to shower. As they soaped each other, it was more like an act of absolution than the rinsing of sweat, like the symbolic washing of one's soul after confession. Severus' contrition would never diminish, but Hermione's tender ministrations as she lathered his hair and washed his back felt as if she gave him the peace that he needed to look her in the eye once again and finally accept her affections once more.

After their shower, they returned to the settee for tea and dessert.

It was fitting that the last time they were together that they should once again share a cup of tea, just like the first night they met each other.

As their night drew to a close, Severus placed Hermione's cloak about her shoulders, his hands deliberately slow as he brushed her shoulders, sensual and tender. It was much like when he was
trying to seduce her during their first meetings, when he would try to arouse her with a gentle caress of her skin.

Hermione turned around as she reached into the pocket of her cloak. Pulling the lemon out, she carefully placed it into Severus' hand, placing her hand on top.
"Take this as a symbol of my promise that one day I will see that you and Draco are truly free."

He looked at it and studied it for a moment. This was one of the lemons from the famous tree that grew at Dumbledore's graveside. He had heard about them, even read about them. Severus even
knew the epitaph upon the headmaster's grave was, "The answer to all your questions can be found in a Lemon Drop."

The former spy almost laughed at the irony that this lemon seemed to hold no answer except a broken promise. At least the old Headmaster told Severus how to reach sanctuary before he passed, should he require it.

Hermione placed her hand upon his cheek, her love was full of grace. "Never doubt my love for you, Severus. And though you may never forgive yourself, I hope one day you can find peace."

They kissed one last time before Hermione turned to head out the door, tears falling as she descended the steps, her shoulders slumped.

Severus closed the door only after he could no longer see her from his doorway.

The sound of the door clicking shut echoed with finality about the empty atrium of the block of flats of the Red Ginseng.

Chapter End Notes


I'm posting this chapter a bit earlier in the week than usual as I'll be away to Las Vegas this weekend for the final staff site visit before Leviosa, the Harry Potter conference where I am Hotel & Logistics Director. Oh, didn't know there was a Harry Potter conference happening this summer, July 7-10? Wanna come for four days of fandom fun? Hurry, registration deadline is May 31st: http://leviosa.org/

A round of thanks to my betas, the fabulous JuneW and the wonderful Cytherea. Without them, you would be bothered by my many errors they catch and correct.

Yes, I know Severus is half-blood, but when I began this story back in 2004 before Half-Blood Prince, this was not known yet, so I am keeping true to the originally perceived canon at the time.
And yes, this is exactly how I envisioned Severus killing his wife way back in 2004 when I introduced Gabrielle into the story, and going to Dumbledore afterwards. You can imagine the shock of reading Severus in the books and his memories, and how I felt a little thrill that I got sort of close to the actual canon before it was published.

Belle du Nuit is the French euphemism for "lady of the night." “Belle du Jour” is the name of a French movie about a women who prostitutes herself, but only during the day, a play on the phrase. Beau du Jour refers to him being a man of the day in the same euphemistic manner.

And here is Fleur's champagne cocktail recipe, that Ginny was sipping; I developed the recipe for Leviosa. The variation of this is the Beauxbaton Bracer with no Elderflower Liqueur and 4.5 oz of champagne instead, which will be served at Leviosa.

**The Fleur Delacour**

**Ingredients:**
4 oz. champagne or sparkling white wine
1/2 oz. Blue Curaçao
1/2 oz. Elderflower liqueur
1 sugar cube
Lemon for zest

**Directions:**
1. Zest lemon rind to create a 2”-3” piece of zest.
2. Place sugar cube in bottom of champagne flute.
3. Pour 1/2 oz. of Blue Curaçao and 1/2 oz. of Elderflower Liqueur over sugar cube.
4. Tilt the champagne flute at 45-degree angle and pour in one to two ounces of champagne into flute along the side of the glass, allowing the champagne to froth up without spilling over. Once the froth has subsided, keeping the flute tilted, pour the rest of champagne into the glass.
5. Add lemon zest and serve.
Chapter Summary

It's time for Severus, Draco and Ginny to finally leave for sanctuary; Hermione is having second thoughts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Sixty-Seven
"Free Bird"

Disclaimer: (In Greek: Google Translate)
Όλα τα αναγνωρίσιμους χαρακτήρες ανήκουν στην ΤΖ και συνεργάτες. Δεν παραβιάζει
πνευματικών δικαιωμάτων προορίζεται.
All recognizable characters belong to JK Rowling and associates. No copyright infringement intended.

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Hermione tossed and turned all night. She could see clearly in her mind’s eye the moment Severus’
door shut, when he would give the signal to Marf. Then all his books that he had hidden away,
were brought back to his flat, to be packed away into an old handbag of Hermione's.

Severus was leaving disguised at her. She had given him everything he would need to wear on his
journey from his flat to the Portkey Office at the Ministry. He would be traveling along with Draco
– Polyjuiced to look like Harry – with Ginny by his side.

Ginny had ordered a Portkey, not for two for that Friday, but for three. She had told her husband,
Harry, that the Portkey was at 9:00 p.m., when in actuality, the Portkey for the three of them was at
9:00 a.m. Everyone at the Ministry who knew Harry, knew he was going on holiday with his wife
soon, so there would be nothing amiss with seeing Mr. and Mrs. Potter strolling across the Ministry
floor. All the Aurors would be about on a wild goose chase, so no one in Harry's department would
be asking why he wasn't out and about. And "Hermione" would be along looking as if she was
seeing two friends off.
Severus had suggested that – were Hermione to join them – she should bring a set of her husband's clothes and some bits of him, and Severus would transform into her husband instead. It wouldn't be much bother to add an extra person to a Portkey, since three were already going. Last-minute additions to holidays were common enough so that no one would question it otherwise.

That was the plan.

Hermione laid in bed staring at the ceiling and walls. She could find no peace; not when she opened her Greek language book, nor with a cup of calming herbal tea.

As the sun broke the horizon, a panic overtook Hermione. Her heart seemed to beat irregularly, as if it had been transformed into a bird trying to take flight. Sweat broke out along her hairline. Glancing at the clock, it was 7:49 a.m.

Her resolve broke, and she bolted for the bedroom and began looking for the set of clothes Ron had left behind, forgetting to pack it when she’d kicked him out of their flat. She had meant to return the clothes, giving the set to Lavender, but she had forgotten. Or it could have been she had forgotten on purpose.

As she found shoes, socks, trousers, shirt and an old cloak, she began to look for bits of Ron to add to the Polyjuice Potion.

Frantically, with her hands shaking, she searched for anything of Ron. His hair brush was gone and so was his toothbrush. She couldn't find anything of Ron, until in the back of her medicine cabinet she discovered his razor. Carefully, on a piece of parchment she tapped the razor, and to her delight found a few whiskers still clinging to the blade that came loose. Grabbing a small vial, she deposited the whiskers in it and Floo'ed directly over to the Red Ginseng.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Severus had finished casting the last of the illusionment charms to make it look as if none of his books were missing. The charms would hold for at least a week or until the Aurors showed up and ended the spell, revealing that his library was gone and definitely the bibliophile Death Eater as well.

Everything was packed into the bag Hermione had provided with an Extension Charm.

He dressed in his usual white shirt, black frock coat and trousers, boots and long black winter-weight wool cloak before joining Draco for their last parole meeting.
They stopped at the Twenty-four Blackbird Bakery, Draco with his habitual croissant, Severus with his usual brioche. There would be no more chance sightings of Hermione on Friday mornings along Diagon Alley.

Their boots echoed throughout the overcast morning air. There were no flowers blooming in the flower boxes above their heads. Soon the windows and lampposts would be festooned with evergreens and boughs of pine for the upcoming Christmas season. But for now, there was nothing but empty boxes beneath windows.

Kingsley began the parole meeting in the same way he always did. Once the official business was over, the Auror checked the room for any spying devices Moody might have sneaked in. Kingsley said he had a lead as to connections Pansy's murderer might have had within the Ministry, which might explain why he was let off despite being otherwise proven guilty without a doubt, short of a confession to the crime. Draco nodded mutely in response to this latest development.

Before they ended their meeting, Severus said, "We have another 'anonymous' tip."

Leaning forward, Kingsley said, "Really? What is it?"

"We overheard a Death Eater talking about fleeing the country today. I didn't see his face, but I saw a flash of the Dark Mark on his forearm. But he said something about leaving by ferry, boat, or large ship, willing to lower himself to leave by Muggle methods."

Kingsley sat forward in his chair, his face etched with serious concern. "Did he say which port?"

"No, but he said no one would have guessed it. So it could be a big port or small. I don't know," Severus said. "Liverpool, Dover, Plymouth. Could even be a small marina in a village for all we know."

"Thank you, Severus. I'll dispatch all the Aurors to every port right now and begin looking. If this pans out like your last tip, this might certainly help pave the way for Moody to stop being so suspicious of you both," Kingsley assured them.

'Not bloody likely, even if it was true,' Severus thought derisively.
As Severus and Draco crossed through the atrium of the Ministry, Aurors were Flooing in by the dozens, including Harry Potter who ignored the two cloaked figures moving in the opposite direction.

Back at his flat, Severus checked the time and noted it was an hour until their Portkey. Ginny would be back home at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place casting the incantation. Her wedding ring would be placed upon her marriage certificate to Harry Potter; once the incantation was complete, the ring would be broken in half, like two people bound together unbound. She had already penned her letter to Potter as to why she was leaving and Molly's part in keeping her and Draco apart. She and Potter had already talked in marriage counseling about how Molly had pushed them together, much like Ron Weasley was pushed into marriage with Hermione, but with the threats directed at Ginny instead and much more subtly.

Severus began undressing, neatly folding his clothes, which would be stored in a separate pocket of Hermione's cloak for easy and quick access once the Polyjuice Potion began to wear off. He glanced at the clock one more time.

The Polyjuice Potion had been completed the same day Ron Weasley returned from his trip, but this was the day Ginny had arranged for the Portkey. They had tried the Polyjuice Potion in the office space of The Siren's Secrets, resulting in Ginny transforming into a carbon copy of Draco Malfoy. Draco, the real one, was so thrilled, he swung Ginny, who now looked like him, up into a kiss. Hermione had provided her own hair, snipped into small pieces for easy inserting into the flasks and vials Severus had. Draco and Severus had several small bottles of the Polyjuice Potion. They were to wait until the last moment before adding bits of Hermione and Harry at the last minute, and then only at two vials at a time. The rest of each vial was to remain without the last ingredient, so that in haste, if they were followed quickly and identified, they could grab bits of hair from random people as they fled and transform into them if necessary to escape detection. There were even a few vials Ginny had with some hair from some random Muggle about her size, but with a badly dyed blond job, a larger nose, and a pair of thick lips.

Severus waited as long as he could in hopes that Hermione would change her mind and come. He could wait no longer. The Potions master added the small pieces of Hermione's brown hair to the vial and downed it in one go.

Watching in front of the mirror, he watched his nude form transform into Hermione's shorter and more feminine form. His hair grew out and began to spiral into her natural waves and curls, his nose shrank, breasts protruded and his penis shrank between his legs beneath a triangle-shaped patch of dark curls. Severus could have stood there all day long, but he had to go.

He began dressing, putting on a pair of pink underpants, followed by a brassiere that he had a little trouble hooking. Considering how many times he had taken one off of her and other women, it was harder to put one on. Then came the tights, which he spelled not to run, and her skirt, blouse, and
shoes. Finally slipping the cloak on, he was done.

There in the mirror was a reflection of Hermione in her dingy blue navy blue cloak and dowdy blue skirt. He was glad she was finally getting rid of the unflattering outfit, along with the slightly over-washed blouse he’d hated from the first day he saw it on her. If anything, he would be less noticeable looking slightly frumpy in such garb as he entered the Ministry later.

Grabbing Hermione's bag, with his library, his favorite knives, clothes, armoire, and a few other personal items packed in it, he was ready to go.

The only thing that needed to be done was to toss all his masks into the fireplace. He saved the Casanova mask from their first meeting. Everything else was to be incinerated in the fireplace.

Marf had already given Severus a tearful goodbye and thanked him for being a kind Master, with the promise to take care of Mistress Hermione.

Grabbing the door handle, he looked back and waved his wand, ending the charm on his bed curtains which changed them from their perpetual black, back to registering various colors based on the shades of people's auras.

The bed curtains flashed and swirled in shades of pale yellow, indicating hopefulness.

The ex-Death Eater, former Hogwarts professor, spy and gigolo closed the door to his old life, now looking forward to a new one of his own choosing.

Hermione came through the Floo. She bolted out of Macnair's old flat and began to run up the stairs, two at a time, straining her legs in an attempt to reach Severus in time.

She spotted Ginny and “Harry” descending the stairs. “Harry” gave her a glare, his eyes flashing with anger behind his glasses.

Behind them stood a copy of herself, dressed in her old navy blue outfit.

Ginny and the copy of Harry Potter moved past Hermione as she stared past them at her own living
Severus walked down the stairs to face her.

"I have Ron's clothes and bits of him," she excitedly blurted out.

Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out the one small vial containing some of Ron's old whiskers, but in her excitement, it slipped from her shaking hands.

The vial bounced against the wooden rail of the banister before cascading end over end. Neither Severus nor Hermione could reach their wands fast enough to stop the vial from falling before it hit the tiles in the lobby below with a high-pitched shattering crash, shards of glass spread all over the floor.

They could not retrieve the bits of Ron. Any attempt might mean contamination of anyone else's hair, including the odd mouse that scurried about. They couldn't risk it and it was almost time for their Portkey.

Hermione slumped onto the stairs, crying hysterically.

"I had it. I wanted to go," she wailed.

Severus bent down beside her and held her tightly. "I know," he said, her voice coming from his mouth instead of his soothing baritone.

They stood up, and Severus clasped Hermione's face in his hands that were small and calloused now. "I will see you again. I know it as well."

Hermione's eyes shone bright with tears, frustrated that Fate had chosen to keep them apart.

"I love you, Hermione. Thank you," he said and kissed her soundly.

It was strange to have a version of herself kissing her, as if something from a dream. She kissed
him back knowing that underneath that bushy brown hair and soft form was the man she loved.

They broke apart and Hermione could see there were tears in her own eyes, knowing Severus was crying too. She had never seen him cry and now it was as a version of herself she finally saw it.

Severus continued down the stairs, joining Ginny and a very impatient looking version of Harry Potter.

Hermione stood there on the stairs unable to move. When she heard the Floo roar to life, she knew that he really was gone this time. There would be no more chances.

Trudging up the stairs, she opened the door to Severus' flat and sat on the settee.

Hermione had lost her sanctuary, as it was Severus who made it one for her. Now he was leaving to seek his own.

She would wait until nine o'clock before going into work. At that point, her copy would be far away and the brokenhearted witch would be alone.

Severus could almost hear the grinding of Draco's teeth as they walked across the floor in the atrium of the Ministry. Ginny walked beside Draco, holding his hand for support and to help calm him down. Severus could tell he was livid.

The Potions master walked behind the pair, having to walk much faster than he was used to; his legs – Hermione’s legs – were much shorter, and these heels made it more difficult to keep up with Draco's pace. It helped that Draco was now pretending to be Harry, which meant shorter legs for him as well. It was these small and inconsequential details that kept Severus’ mind focused on the task at hand – that he was finally fleeing England, but without Hermione by his side now. Severus forced the tears to stop, knowing he could mourn later.

Seeing her run up those stairs and tell him she was coming with him made his heart soar, which made the loss of the vial all the more tragic. As that vial broke, so did Severus' heart, knowing from the look on her face that she was resigned to stay behind now.

As they approached the Portkey Office in the Department of Magical Transportation, they noticed there was a bit of a line. Looking at the signs above there were two lines: one for scheduled and
one for unscheduled Portkeys. The longer line was for impromptu requests, whereas the line for the pre-booked Portkeys was very short.

Had Hermione come with them, no doubt they would have had to wait in the unscheduled Portkey line, which would have delayed their flight from England. Draco turned around and gave Severus another glare, his head nudging towards the implication of waiting to add Hermione last-minute to their itinerary.

As it was, they were going to have to make more last-minute Portkeys along the way until they reached their final destination.

Going up to the front of the line, Ginny spoke first. "Yes, I have a scheduled Portkey for three at nine o'clock."

"Names?" the witch behind the counter asked.

"Harry and Ginny Potter, and Hermione Weasley," Ginny answered.

The witch behind the counter looked at the Polyjuice version of Hermione to look back down at the ledger, then back up to regard Severus again.

"Wow, talk about timing. When Mrs. Potter booked this, I bet you had no clue your husband was going to be leaving you soon anyway," the witch volunteered, offering up her own opinion when it was not asked for, nor wanted.

Severus held his tongue. Now would not be the best time to hex someone nor lambaste them in a way that was uncharacteristic for Hermione.

"This way," said the witch. She led them to a room with a small table in the middle of it.

On the table was a table fan. The Portkey Office tended to, but not always, match items in size to the number of people who would be traveling. A large party of twenty might require a lawn mower, couch, or an automobile fender. Since it was just going to be the three of them, a table fan sufficed for them to all grab at the same time.
"You have a ten-minute window in which to activate it, otherwise you'll have to go back in the
unscheduled line if you change your mind last-minute," the witch informed them. She was citing
standard protocols since there were some travelers who hemmed and hawed about going away, or
forgot something back at home, and missed their scheduled window.

"I'll just close the door and be back in ten. Have fun, and don't get a sunburn," the witch said as she
closed the door.

All three looked at each other. The Polyjuice Potion would hold for at least three hours until they
needed another dose. They had already spent an hour in their altered form. They hoped one dose
would be enough to get them there.

"Ready?" Severus said, hearing Hermione's own voice.

All three reached their hands out and touched the table fan.

Severus closed his eyes as he felt the old yet familiar pull of something grabbing him behind his
navel and yanking him forward into an ethereal abyss.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 67 A/N:
~o0o~ END of SEASON II ~o0o~

Come betas, take a bow! For this chapter, please thank JuneW and Cygnuz. And to all
my betas who have worked on this since I picked this up again and started posting
once more with Chapter Fifty-One: JuneW, who has been with me for years as a friend
and an invaluable beta on every chapter since I started posting again; Hope, Cygnuz,
Cytherea, who have made my work better with their keen eyes and raw SPAG talent;
and Keladry Lupin/Rogue_Panda, another dear friend who betaed most of the chapters
in the 50's who improved my work that I forgot to acknowledge in the A/N section at
the time with JuneW.

Well, this really isn't so much a fanfic in clearly defined acts, but more serialized.
Think of this as a season cliffhanger of a serialized story, like a TV show. Besides, this
isn't following any formula when it comes to acts. If we wanted to be more traditional,
we could have had Act I end when Hermione figured out who Calleo really was.
So, where did Draco, Ginny and Severus go? Will Hermione follow? Does she even know where they are going? Will Hermione and Severus ever be reunited? Who murdered Pansy? And what is it with those damn lemons?

The title for this chapter is inspired by the Lynyrd Skynyrd song lyrics, “Free Bird,” written by Allen Collins and Ronnie Van Zant:
"I Left My Heart in San Francisco"

Chapter Summary

The clock is now ticking. Join our fleeing trio on their journey to sanctuary. Watch Severus try not to be frank with Frank.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Sixty-Eight
"I Left My Heart in San Francisco"

Disclaimer: (In California-speak)
You know, like, totally know that all the guys you might recognize and say, “Hey, I totally remember that guy from the books” is Rowling's stuff. So Rowling and all her peeps, they own it, 'kay? And, don't be all butt-hurt, 'cause no infringement is, like, meant or done, like, on purpose. Alright?

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The clock was ticking. Now that not only one, but two Death Eaters had left England without permission, alarms would be going off back at the Ministry where the Aurors normally sat at their desks. But since they were all out scouring the four corners of England, after an anonymous tip had warned them about a Death Eater fleeing, the alarms would be turned off and the attempt to find one Death Eater at some conventional Muggle port or marina would intensify. None would be suspecting that two Death Eaters had left via magical methods at the Ministry itself, right under their very noses.

As the trio of British travelers landed in the Portkey arriving area, they quickly moved aside and exited the area, should the next arrival land on top of them and knock them to the ground. It was common Portkey courtesy which most employed, but some forgot, similar to the way that some Muggles would not remember common courtesy when exiting and entering a Tube carriage.

Looking around, the trio glanced at the sign.

WELCOME TO THE CAYMAN ISLANDS
The Cayman Islands were a British Overseas Territory. Although they were closely tied to the Muggle and wizarding governments of the United Kingdom, there were some aspects that made them independent of said government entities; most notably their banking system.

Just as the Cayman Islands were a banking haven for many in the Muggle world, so it was for the wizarding world as well. And as the Malfoy fortune in the British Gringotts vaults had been seized by the British Ministry of Magic, the Malfoy family fortune in other Gringotts branches around the world were left intact, including the one Malfoy vault in the Cayman Islands.

Though Lucius Malfoy was a syphilitic lunatic who slowly went mad, his mind corrupted by a venereal disease and close association with the Dark Lord, he at least had the soundness of mind to make sure that the Malfoy fortune was dispersed about in various Gringotts vaults worldwide.

Now that the travelers had arrived in the country where one of those untouched vaults lay, Draco rushed off to take care of some banking matters while Ginny and Severus, still in Polyjuice form as Hermione, went to arrange another Portkey on to their next destination.

As luck would have it, being a popular banking haven meant that the Gringotts branch in this tiny island country opened extra early, usually in time with European branches. It stayed open late, closing at the same time as the Chicago Gringotts branches, U.S. Central Standard Time.

Ginny had taken some money from Lavender, a small deposit of the fortune Draco and Severus had amassed, and would use some of it to pay for the next Portkey. When things would die down back in England as to Severus' and Draco's disappearance, Miss Brown was going to make discreet transfers to some foreign Gringotts branches in the name of setting up some corporations abroad. It would be a convenient money-laundering operation to hide the money that Draco and Severus had earned during their unsanctioned work for Miss Brown that didn't involve peddling their flesh or company.

It was three o'clock in the morning. Since this tiny nation took travelers from all over the world, the Portkey office was fortunately open twenty-four hours, just like the one back in London.

Ginny and Severus were to wait before getting a Portkey, delaying until Draco returned from Gringotts, as the Goblins would no doubt ask why someone with the Malfoy vault key was asking for entrance and looked like Harry Potter. Draco could use the truth as part of the lie, stating he was going to a Polyjuice party, and even turned his wand and key over to the Goblin as identification. Draco even held aloft a small vial of Polyjuice Potion, which convinced the Goblin to allow Draco access to his vault and also allow for transfer of funds to a branch at their final destination. The Goblin was not aware of the Death Eater Decree back in England, and if he was,
he would not care.

Once done, Draco raced back to the Portkey Office at the Ministry where Ginny and Severus were waiting.

Severus was relieved that Draco had needed a little less than an hour to take care of money matters. Draco even agreed to float Severus as much money as he needed until funds from Miss Brown could be finally accessed.

There was only one hour left on the effectiveness of the Polyjuice Potion, and they hoped it would be enough.

As they entered the line for unscheduled Portkeys, they had to wait behind a witch who was asking the wizard at the desk for recommendations, since she wanted to get away for a three-day weekend and wasn’t sure where to go.

Severus was tempted to suggest Azkaban or the Black Hole of Calcutta were lovely this time of year, but once again, he held his tongue.

Ginny stepped up and suggested some places in Italy, remembering some of the details Hermione shared about her honeymoon. The witch thanked her for the suggestion and quickly booked a trip there.

Draco let out a huge sigh of relief and muttered a quiet thanks to his lover for her quick thinking.

"Three Portkeys to San Francisco, California, please," Ginny said.

"Thanks!" the wizard behind the counter said with an exasperated sigh. "I didn't think she was ever going to make up her mind." He paused for a moment before asking, "Didn't you just come in?"

"Yeah, but we needed to take care of a few things here before we went to the States," Ginny replied, keeping it as vague as possible.

The wizard shrugged and arranged for a Portkey to take them in five minutes.
Grabbing hold of the shade of the table lamp that was used as a Portkey, all three of them were transported to the Portkey hub in San Francisco.

As they exited the arrival area, they heard music playing loudly on the other side of a door that led the way to the lounge and bar area.

Walking quickly over to the Portkey Office ticket window, they saw a sign that said, "Back at 2:00 a.m." The hand on the clock affixed to the window was counting down. It read 56 minutes, then 55 minutes.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, it was 1:05 a.m. They had just missed it. The trio would have to wait nearly an hour before the person who attended the window was due to return.

Their Polyjuice Potion dose would be wearing out about the time that the Portkey officer would return, and so they decided to wait a half an hour before taking a second dose in order to keep their current forms.

They had only one dose with pre-added bits of Harry and Hermione, and hopefully, they would not require a third dose. This was their last jump.

They could have taken a Portkey from London to their final destination, but that would have immediately indicated that something was severely amiss, and then everything would have been exposed. The jump to the Cayman Islands was to keep them within the British realm, which would minimize suspicions of Ginny's choice for a holiday with Harry. From there, they could jump to the United States, giving themselves a harder trail to follow, should Aurors be close behind. And a third Portkey away would make following that much more difficult to pinpoint.

With nothing to do but cool their heels, Ginny and Draco decided to hang out in the lounge and listen to the music that was playing, since it appeared there was a live band.

A sign by the door announced that tonight it was "Muggle Music Thursday." The other signs listed days such as "Classical Sunday," "Monday Wizard Blues," and "Tuesday Pot Luck" with finer print indicating that wizard and Muggle music were both played, Wednesday and Friday were wizard jazz nights, with Dixieland on Wednesday and cool jazz on Friday. Saturday had a variety of acts that came through with a schedule of upcoming bands.
It seemed that the music supplied six days of week for the Eye of the Pyramid Lounge was played by the band called “Tommy and his Two-Bit Strung Out Pluckers”; Tommy Donovan on piano and brass, Jimmy "Two-Bit" Hoar on drums and percussion, and Eustice Ernesto on guitar and strings.

As the door swung open, a wall of sound entered the waiting area, overwhelming Severus for a moment, making him place his hands over his ears momentarily in response to the sudden change in volume. The singer was belting out something about some white boy playing "that funky music 'till you die." The crowd was jumping up and down, swaying to the music as the deep bass guitar thumped in time to the drums.

Ginny and Draco went through the door and quickly joined in the swaying throng dancing to the 1970's disco funk. They were unfamiliar with the song, but doing anything they could to blend in with the crowd and appear normal.

Severus stayed behind to peruse the travel literature on a rack near the door. Amid the brochures, he saw advertisements for tours to wizard wineries and resort spas in the valleys between Napa and Sonoma, and areas further north, hidden from Muggles. There were tours for Muggle wineries with warnings that the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy was still in effect no matter how much wine anyone sampled.

"Hmm," Severus mused aloud, "Potion gathering excursions," as he picked up one brochure arranging instructional ingredient collection tours with shaman wizards of various Native American tribes. He had always wanted to do a Potions sabbatical to Australia, but this also piqued his interest, should he be able to freely travel the world one day without persecution as Hermione promised.

There were regional tours to various tribes in different regions: Plains, Southwest, Pacific Northwest, Great Lakes, Texas, South, Appalachia, and New England.

"What the...?" Severus plucked up one that touted Muggle Camp.

Ever want to learn how to drive? Watch television? Fly in a plane? You can at MUGGLE CAMP

A one-week all-inclusive experience where you can try to learn and do everything the Muggle way.

Itinerary includes:
- Cooking lesson and how to cook with a Muggle stove
- Trip to a movie theater
- Lesson on how to ride a bicycle
- Instructions on how to use a telephone and cellular phone
- Driving lessons with a certified driving instructor
- A trip in a twin-prop airplane at some locations
- Surf lessons available at some locations
- Introduction to Muggle electricity and devices including computers, the Internet and electronic mail
- Access to television programming every night and Muggle board games

**Contest and prizes for who can go the longest without using their wands**

Book now for winter snow camping to experience how tough the Muggle pioneers had it!

Severus put the brochure back with a shake of his head, brown tendrils of Hermione's long hair swaying.

Looking at the clock, it was nearly time for Draco and him to take another Polyjuice Potion dose. Entering the lounge area, he scanned his eyes about, trying to look for a redhead standing next to a wizard with a black mop.

Had he not been Polyjuiced into being Hermione, he could have spotted them easier. As it was, he was now several inches shorter and had trouble seeing over the crowd, much less through it.

Winding his way through the jostling and bouncing witches and wizards singing along to Muggle songs, he spotted the two at the front of the stage. They were dancing along with the rest of the crowd, enjoying themselves. Draco was unaware of Severus approaching, until he tapped his hand upon his shoulder.

Just then the song finished, so he didn't have to shout as loud into Draco's ear that it was time to go take another dose of Polyjuice. The plan was to go to the toilets, find a stall, and down a vial away from prying eyes curious as to what each wizard was taking, and possibly asking if he had whatever he was taking to share.

As Severus was about to turn and walk towards the toilets, Tommy Donovan said, his voice amplified with the Sonorus Charm, "This song is for the beautiful brunette in the dark blue at the front of the stage."

Severus suddenly realized that all eyes were fixed on him and Tommy Donovan was looking right at him, giving him a wink before launching into song.

"She's got big red lips
She's got big brown eyes
When she treats me right
It's a big surprise
She won't do anything
That she said she would
She makes me feel good
She makes me feel good..."

Severus glared at the crooner with a bored look and promptly turned around and stomped off towards the loo, Draco following right behind while Ginny stayed at the front of the stage, bursting into fits of laughter.

The older Death Eater was so irritated that he had been come on to while in female Polyjuiced form, he almost went into the "Men's Restroom."

Draco fortunately grabbed him firmly by the back of Hermione's cloak and pointed him over to the "Ladies' Restroom."

'Why would someone need to rest?'

Severus shrugged over the local language dialect and went inside. Once in a stall by himself, he downed his second dose with bits of Hermione's hair in it. He felt the similar ripple sensation course through his veins, noting that he continued to remain looking the same. Severus flushed the toilet to make it appear as if he'd used it for its intended purpose and went to wash his hands.

The witch next to him, who was reapplying her make-up and readjusting her breasts in her brassiere to make them seem fuller and more globulous, remarked, "Boy, Tommy must be sweet on you. He doesn't sing that song for just anyone."

Severus had the distinct feeling that Tommy often used that song to woo some witch and bed her later, something that would definitely not be happening if it involved Severus.

Walking back out into the lounge area where the song dedicated to him was wrapping up, Severus looked out to observe the view.

The Portkey office and neighboring bar and lounge were in a basement of a former French restaurant located on a discreet alley between Post and Sutter, half a block from Union Square. The restaurant had closed down ages ago, complete with old brick front and tattered striped awning, and was a front for the current wizarding hub of San Francisco. The "window" Severus was looking out of was charmed to reflect the view from the top of the Transamerica Pyramid, which was located six blocks away as the owl flies.
It was raining, which seemed counter to the reputation of California being always sunny. California had a Mediterranean climate, which mean rain in the winter and dry the rest of the year, so it made sense that it was pouring down as it was right at the beginning of their rainy season.

As if reading Severus’ mind, Tommy began to sing about how, "It never rains in California."

Severus was wondering if this was Tommy's way of trying to flirt with him while he was in Hermione's form, noticing "her" observing the rain out the charmed window.

Turning around, Severus saw Ginny and Draco had joined the others in singing the song’s refrain, the lyrics simple and uncomplicated, their arms around each other and surrounding strangers, swaying side-to-side.

Severus went to the bar and ordered a stiff drink. The wizard next to him offered to pay for it, to which Severus just replied with a polite but brusque, "Thank you, but no."

When the song wrapped up, Tommy decided to take requests from the audience. Someone shouted a request for the Rolling Stones, another asked for Madonna, while someone else shouted for Red Hot Chili Peppers. Severus had never heard of any of these bands, and he didn't care. A lot of this music sounded as obnoxious as the music that Hermione initially played on the car radio during their weekend away until he'd found the classical music station.

For some reason, Tommy must have taken Severus' cool indifference for teasing and said, "Why don't we take a request from the young witch at the bar with the drink in her hand."

Severus swore to himself that if he ever again had to go about in public in Polyjuice form, it would never be as a female as long as he lived. He wondered if Hermione and other witches had wizards picking up on them so regularly, but he suspected that it was just his lucky night he’d caught the eye of this piano-banging wizard who just happened to have the attention of the whole room focused directly on him.

"I Left My Heart in San Francisco."

It was the only Muggle song he could bring to mind, and it was the song Hermione and he danced to during lessons. She had told him about the little snow globe her parents had bought her from a souvenir shop, probably purchased just a few blocks away from where Severus was sitting right
now. That song had unofficially become their song.

A small complaint rose through the crowd, one person saying, "Not again!"

Tommy calmed the grumbling crowd when he said, "Now, now. We haven't played it in a few weeks, and I think we can humor the Australian witch at the bar, since she's obviously a tourist and was hoping to hear it. Besides, it's time for a slow dance."

The piano began tinkling out notes that filled the room as he began to sing.

"The loveliness of Paris seems somehow sadly gay
The glory that was Rome is of another day
I've been terribly alone and forgotten in Manhattan
I'm going home to my city by the bay..."

Severus wondered if Tommy got the right song, since the version on Lavender's music box didn't include the intro, when Tommy began to croon sweetly.

"I left my heart in San Francisco..."

Now Severus could recognize the song's melody. It had become a particular favorite of Hermione's when they danced the foxtrot at his flat over the past several months.

He gazed at the window, wishing he could dance with Hermione right now as the couples did, swaying back and forth to the slow rhythm of piano, a soft snare drum, and gentle strings of the violin. Draco and Ginny were dancing, her head placed upon his shoulder, and they moved to and fro.

As the song ended, the crowd erupted into cheers like they did at the end of most songs, a little romance thrown into the night's play list.

"Another request," Tommy called out.

"Free Bird!" someone shouted.
The crowd chanted, "Banned! Banned! Banned!"

Tommy pointed to the sign that hung behind his piano that read in large, bold letters,

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NO REQUESTS FOR
FREE BIRD
MARGARITAVILLE
MUSTANG SALLY
BROWN-EYED GIRL

ANY REQUEST FOR THESE SONGS
RESULTS IN IMMEDIATE BANNING
FOR THE NEXT 24 HOURS
```

Tommy threw a ball at the wizard's head who had shouted out the offending request. The man was immediately Portkeyed to some unknown place, most probably the buffalo enclosure in the middle of Golden Gate Park.

A witch with vibrant green hair shouted, "Rock Your Body!"

The trio began playing some music that seemed to place more emphasis on a droning mindless beat and little melody. Severus had had enough. He threw a Galleon in the tip jar for the band in a show of gratitude that, despite protestations from the crowd, Tommy had still played his request. At least in the waiting room the sound would be greatly diminished, and he could see how much time was left before the Portkey office was open again.

Upon entering the waiting room, he saw a wizard place his wand at the lock to the Portkey office and unlock it to enter it. Severus hoped the wizard, who was at least five stone overweight and was sporting a week's worth of facial hair growth, would take down the sign that he would be back later, but he just went to sit at his desk behind the counter, pulled a burger out of a brown paper bag, and began eating.

Severus stared as the Portkey officer paid him no mind. The wizard was shoving the overly-large comestible into his gaping maw before taking a bite – not noticing the slice of avocado that was slipping out the side of his burger, nor the piece of bacon that didn't quite make it all the way into his gob – chewing with his mouth open. There was something dark brown that smelled like barbecue sauce that dribbled down from the corner of his mouth; Ginny had given Severus a bottle of the American condiment after Harry's birthday party to try, and he identified it by the color and scent.
Had this been Severus' first encounter with an American, he would have instantly agreed with Lucius Malfoy's derisive remarks that those former colonists across the pond were uncouth slobs who probably picked their teeth with their own wands.

To Severus' horror, the wizard took his wand out and did just that. He unhinged his mouth like a snake and shoved it way back amidst his tonsils, probably to dislodge the slop from the trough he'd gorged himself on earlier.

To make matters worse, the Portkey officer finally bothered to notice Severus, Polyjuiced as Hermione, and noted how "she" was staring at him with rapt attention. The wizard wiped his barbecue sauce-soiled hand down the front of his ratty faded red T-shirt, adding to the other colors of the wizard's previous meals visible on the shirt's mottled, spotty palette. It looked more like a bib than a T-shirt at this point. The shirt had the phrase "Which Wand, Witch?" printed on it, an obvious come-on line from long ago that had gone out with bell bottoms and disco. The shirt looked so old due to the faded letters from too many washings, it probably was decades old. The wizard winked at him, mistaking Severus' stare of disbelief for interest.

Severus checked the countdown clock on the window. There was still five minutes more. He debated sitting in the same room as this first cousin to a Mountain Troll, versus having Tommy announce more pick-up lines in front of the rest of the packed lounge.

The fleeing Death Eater decided two hundred witches and wizards in a darkened room staring at him was better that waiting one more minute with this monstrosity. Besides, it was almost time to fetch Draco and Ginny.

As the patrons clapped while singing, "Don't stop believing," Severus found Draco and Ginny in the middle of the crowd, and thankfully not next to the stage. He flashed his hand, indicating there were five minutes left.

They nodded and began heading through the crowd towards the waiting area, which also held the window for the Portkey office.

As they neared the door, Severus hissed in Draco's ear, "Quick, pretend you're my boyfriend."

Before Draco could ask what was going on, Severus clasped Draco's hand tightly and plastered on a sweet smile that even Ginny had a hard time believing as they entered the waiting room.
Just as they walked in, the countdown timer on the window finished and the wizard with the heavily food-stained shirt rose from his desk. Waving his wand, the sign and clock disappeared, and he charmed the glass partition to slide aside.

Seeing that the brunette hottie was taken, since it appeared she was with her boyfriend, the wizard focused his leer on the red-headed smokin' babe in front of him.

"And how can I help you?" he asked, his voice sounding a bit too helpful for a government employee.

"Three Portkeys to Hawaii," Ginny said.

"I can get you a Portkey back to New Zealand directly, if you're heading home," the Portkey officer said, assuming they were from yet another British Commonwealth. Australia, New Zealand, whatever.

"No, Hawaii is where we want to go," she insisted.

"Okay, fine. Which island?"

"Malu Palekaiko."

The unkempt wizard who smelled of grease and beer gave Ginny a second glance, suspicion beginning to etch his brow and narrow his eyes.

She turned on the charm and purred in a sultry manner, "When I come back through here next week, how about you and me go out for a bite?"

This seemed to take the wizard's mind off of any question as to why they wanted to go to an island known for sanctuary rather than one of the major islands instead, like the Big Island or Oahu, even though Malu Palekaiko had a larger wizarding population compared to the other islands. Most wizards and witches went to the major islands for vacations when Portkeying there.

After the wizard gave Ginny some contact information hastily scrawled on a torn-off piece of
parchment, she said she was looking forward to it as she paid for their trip.

All the while, Draco did not yank his hand out of Severus', as much as he wanted to. He understood why Severus was desperate to have him pretend they were attached. And Ginny was so much better, and far more practiced, when it came to turning on the feminine wiles to beguile a wizard, even one as slovenly as the cretin behind the counter.

Severus would have said something acerbic and most probably make the wizard consult a dictionary after they left. The wizard did have a name badge on that said "Frank" that Severus was going to take as a literal suggestion and be so with him.

From under his desk, the cretin grabbed a box of half-eaten double-fudge cream center “cookies,” smudged with half-dried mustard, and transformed into a last-minute Portkey.

As the three of them grabbed onto this excuse for a Portkey, Ginny gave the officer one last wink before they disappeared.

Looking around, the three hoped they had reached the right spot, questioning Frank's competency based upon his hygiene habits and charm alone. The waxing gibbous moon was about an hour and a half past the celestial meridian, indicating that they were at the right longitude.

Behind them the ocean lapped at the moonlit silvery sands, the soft reassuring sounds of small waves gently crashing mixed with the raucous chorus of frogs from the jungle in front of them. It was a wall of darkness that loomed up at the edge of the moonlit sand, the jungle and a single large mountain looking black in contrast to the night's star-filled sky. The light of the moon glinted off the palm fronds that lightly swayed as if in a trance.

The weather was warm and they removed their cloaks, feeling the humid breeze against their cheeks.

The only light was a small porch light by the door of a simple one-room thatched hut at the edge of the sand, perched beyond the jungle that looked like it was about to swallow it.

Walking over the sand seemed to want to envelop their boots, they finally got up onto the porch and saw three signs with bells hanging below them, ropes dangling.
"Lumos."

All of the signs were in Hawaiian.

Severus tapped his wand on each and they changed to English.

The first one read, "For Portkey passage through, please ring."

The second one read, "If this is your final destination and are visiting, please ring."

The third one read, "If you are seeking sanctuary, please ring."

They all looked at each other, Severus' wand light giving everyone's face a pale blue-white cast. Severus reached out and pulled down on the rope hanging from a brass bell underneath the third sign.

As the clapper struck against the bell, a large man in a batik-printed sarong and a simple, clean T-shirt, who was nearly the size of Hagrid, instantly appeared on the front porch next to them.

"Oh, man, what time is it?" he asked, rubbing his bleary eyes with the back of his hand.

"Eleven o'clock, or thereabout," said Severus, the Polyjuice Potion still working. Severus thought there was a three-hour difference from San Francisco, as his Muggle books Ginny got him said so.

The huge wizard looked down to spy the trio standing there. "All three of you are seeking sanctuary?"

They all answered in the affirmative.

"Oh, man, Gary isn't gonna like this, but I better get him," he muttered to himself before Summoning this Gary.
An older Asian-looking wizard in a pair of shorts, who was in the midst of taking off his Hawaiian shirt, appeared next to the giant wizard.

"What the... Why the hell..." the smaller, older wizard began, but stopped short when he realized that there were three people on the front porch besides the wizard who had Summoned him there.

"Three?" Gary asked.

"Yep," the larger wizard replied, popping the "p" at the end at accent his attitude.

"Well, better get Halulu."

"Naw, man. I ain't gonna get her. You can catch shit from her for gettin' her out of bed. I ain't gonna do it anymore," the bigger wizard refused.

Glancing at the three of them, Gary said, "Maybe I should get another witch from the council, or do one of you ladies not mind being questioned by a wizard?"

Severus raised his hand. "I'm a wizard," he stated plainly.

Gary looked at him with disbelief until Severus explained with two words: "Polyjuice Potion."

"Ahh," Gary said with understanding. "Okay, hang on a second, let me go get the other person and we can begin."

A minute later, a woman in her thirties appeared next to them. She had a long fall of dark brown hair that went past her waist, and was hastily putting some sandals on as she mumbled, "Can't wait a minute while I get some shoes on?"

Looking at Gary and the larger wizard, she said, "This better be good."
"Three for sanctuary," Gary explained.

"Three, Mounga?" Halulu asked the giant wizard for confirmation.

"Yep," he said once more, popping the "p" at the end again.

"Well, we'd better get started," the older witch asked. "Which one of you witches is going to go with a wizard for questioning?"

"That one's Polyjuiced," Mounga said, pointing to Severus, who still looked like Hermione.

"All right then. Let's get this over with and hopefully we'll be done before sunrise," Halulu said, her tone indicating her disgruntled attitude over the fact she would probably be denied a good night's sleep.

Halulu placed her wand against the knob of the door to the hut, and a click could be heard. She opened the door. Inside was a large space with a well-appointed waiting area with a corridor off to the side with several doors.

"Who do you want, Gary?" Halulu asked.

"I don't know." Gary turned to look at Severus and Draco. "Which one of you wants to spill your guts out to me? 'Cause it's me or him, boys." Gary jerked a thumb over at Mounga.

"I'll go with him," Severus volunteered, pointing to Mounga. The mountainous wizard was the least verbal of the bunch, and that suited Severus just fine.

Mounga went to fetch something from behind the counter and handed a small vial to each of his associates. Each one seeking sanctuary was then escorted to their own door along the corridor and bid to enter, followed by their inquisitors.

The room was bare and near gleaming white all around.
Mounga made some movements with his wand and a table and two chairs appeared. A toilet formed out of the wall in the corner with a small privacy screen, and another screen popped up in the other corner, forming a dressing area for some privacy when Severus would change back. It did not escape Severus' attention that the screens were placed in such a way that during interrogation that Mounga would not lose sight of him, but they would still afford some privacy.

Severus hung Hermione's cloak on a hook that appeared on the wall near the door and took a seat opposite of Mounga.

"Please place your wand and everything in your pockets on the table, please," Mounga asked politely.

Severus placed his wand on the table before fetching the cloak off the hook he had just placed. From the cloak's pockets, he removed the set of clothes he would change into once the Polyjuice Potion wore off, a few extra vials of Polyjuice, the lemon that Hermione had given him, and her handbag.

Mounga waved his wand once more, and a glass with water appeared. From the front breast pocket of Mounga's T-shirt, he pulled out a small vial.

Holding it for Severus to see, he said, "This is Veritaserum. I assume you know what it does?"

Severus nodded.

"Now, by law, you asked for sanctuary, and I must give it to you. However, in order to know what type of people are coming into our community, we'd like to know what you are fleeing from. Some people, it's an obsessive lover or violent spouse; others it's because of laws they have broken; some for political reasons and they are a target of their government. But we've had a few come hear seeking sanctuary that have done some pretty gruesome crap, and they thought that they could continue on with their... habits. As such, we'd like to know why you're here."

Severus nodded once more that he understood.

"Should you prove to be a wizard..." Mounga paused as his eyes looked Severus up and down still in feminine Polyjuice form. "... who might prove disruptive to our community, we will encourage you to set up house in the more remote areas of the island, and you'll be closely watched. We don't want trouble from you, and we won't give you trouble."
The Potions master understood the gravity of his statement.

"I can't force you to take this," Mounga began, but stopped short when Severus gave a derisive snort. Mounga cocked an eyebrow at Severus before continuing. "Well, technically, I can't force you, but should you agree to taking the Veritaserum and telling me everything, that will certainly make things smoother, should you want buy a house, have people willing to do business with you and such..." He trailed off implying that if Severus agreed to tell this wizard everything, life would go smoothly.

"A confession under duress?" Severus asked, his tone a bit cool.

"Well, let's say you don't take it. We don't know if you're a mass murderer. People will wonder why you didn't take it. Are you such a horrible person that you refuse to take it?" Mounga gave a great sigh and leaned forward, his meaty arms resting on the table. "If you're worried about everyone knowing your past, don't worry. I am bound to keep confidential what you say here in this room during your processing for sanctuary. I cannot tell anyone. But should you commit a crime that would go to trial, I am allowed to bring up your past crimes as proof that this is a past behavior you have engaged in that has not ceased, and if you pose a danger to our community, then you can get expelled from even here. You can go pay those Greeks to take you, and good luck with that."

Severus reached his hand out for the glass of water, as Mounga poured the Veritaserum in it. He would soon know if killing his wife would make him live as an outcast among outcasts.

As the water slid down his throat, he could feel the familiar sensation. He could feel his body relax and the desire to tell Mounga any and everything.

"Now, if there anything else besides these items on this table in your pockets or that you're hiding on your person?" the interrogator asked.

"No," Severus answered truthfully.

"Let's start with your name," Mounga said as Severus' lengthy confession began.

Chapter End Notes
A/N:

I have to be honest. I had a lot of fun writing the character, Frank. Almost too much fun.

Point of note, I wrote this chapter nearly two years ago, long before Rowling came out with her recent “History of Magic of North America” essay on Pottermore. Any resemblance between what she wrote and what I wrote in this chapter and going forward in this story is purely coincidental.

Thank you to my betas for this chapter, JuneW and Cygnuz.

Yes, I have an exact place in mind for the Eye of the Pyramiud Lounge. It's just just as I described, as there is an closed down French restaurant located at 44 Campton Place on a small alley-like street in San Francisco.

"Play That Funky Music" was written by Rob Parisso and recorded by Wild Cherry.

"She Makes Me Feel So Good" was composed and performed by Lyle Lovett

"It Never Rains in Southern California" was written by Albert Hammond and Mike Hazelwood

"I Left My Heart in San Francisco" was written by George Cory, and most popularly performed by Tony Bennett as his signature song. To see a lovely rendition of this song performed in a video, please watch this rendition on YouTube: "Union Bank of California promo. Beautifuly danced by Na Lei Hulu I Ka Wekiu. SF own local halau, lend their talking hands to the story of the city by the bay."  https://youtu.be/JCMj2U3xj7s

Considering Severus goes through San Francisco and requests this song and winds up in Hawaii, I thought this video was rather fitting. You even get a peek of the Transamerica Pyramid in the background.

"Rock Your Body" was written by Justin Timberlake, Chad Hugo, and Pharrell Williams, and performed by Timberlake.
"Don't Stop Believing" was written by Jonathan Cain, Steve Perry & Neal Schon, and performed by Journey.

Malu is the Hawaiian word for "safe." Palekaiko means "paradise." The island they finally Portkeyed to translates into "Safe Paradise."

As for sanctuary being located in Hawaii, the inspiration for sanctuary in this fic come from the City of Refuge on the Big Island of Hawaii that I visited myself a long, long time ago (and recently in April 2015 again) and remembered. Here is some information about this place:

“In ancient times, Hawaiians lived under strict laws. Commoners could not get too close to the chief, nor were they allowed to touch any of his possessions, walk in his footsteps or even let their shadows touch the royal grounds. The penalty for violating a sacred kapu (taboo) was death.

“Breaking a kapu was believed to incur the wrath of the gods. Hawaiians often chased down an offender and swiftly put him to death unless he could reach a puuhonua, or place of refuge. There he could be absolved by a kahuna (priest) in a purification ceremony, then return home with his transgression forgiven. Defeated warriors and non-combatants could also find refuge here during times of battle.”

Five stone converts to 70 pounds.

Halulu is a Hawaiian girl's name meaning "to roar, thunder, loud noise, racket."

Mounga is a Polynesian boy's name, meaning "mountain," pronounced mo-oon-gah.
Chapter Summary

Chapter Sixty-Nine: "Aloha" Severus and the two love birds find accommodations in their new home. Harry confronts Hermione regarding her knowledge of Ginny's affair with Malfoy, and her own affair with Snape.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Sixty-Nine
"Aloha"

Disclaimer: (In Hawaiian)
Kēlā mea ‘ike po’e mana’o no JK Rowling a ‘ohana holo’oko’a. ‘A’ole ‘ai.hue mana’o kūlia.
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Hermione showed up to work at nine o'clock sharp, certain that Severus was, at that very moment, going to places far and away from her. She still didn't know where he was going, and perhaps it was best she didn't until she cleared his and Draco's name.

As she passed the reception desk where a house-elf greeted her, the heart-broken witch grabbed a sample vial of the Lovely Lavender's Puffy Poof Eye Crème and dabbed some around her eyes in the lift. She was in desperate need of it after her sleepless night and her recent hysterical breakdown upon dropping the only vial of Ron's hair she had, destroying her chance of leaving with Severus.

Just as Hermione was about to knock on Albert's office door, Lavender came out into the hallway and called her into her office to speak with her privately.

Her employer had a full tea service ready and waiting. There were miniature croissants, butter, jams, tiny quiches one could eat with one bite, and fresh fruit.
"I wasn't sure if you had breakfast before coming in," Lavender began.

Hermione shook her head that she hadn't, looking quite despondent at the moment. She had been too preoccupied thinking about Severus and then rushing to meet him at the last moment that she hadn't gotten around to eating.

Lavender gestured her hand towards the miniature buffet, to which Hermione declined, only accepting a cup of tea instead.

"Since the papers will be screaming headlines about two escaped Death Eaters by the time Monday morning rolls around – or possibly sooner – I have a suggestion as to distract from the news," Lavender began.

Hermione let an unladylike snort escape. "That news will be hard to beat. What do you suggest?"

"Well, I think you, Ron and I should sit down with Luna Lovegood, and give her an exclusive into your divorce from Ron, and our affair."

The beginnings of a headache began to build at the base of Hermione's neck. She asked for a vial of headache relief potion, which Wonkle promptly provided.

"What do you mean, 'give her an exclusive'? Isn't it bad enough everyone knows Ron and I are divorced now? Isn't your reputation tarnished enough – and justly so," Hermione threw in bitterly, "that an exclusive article will do what? Satisfy the prurient curiosity of our salacious affairs to the public at large?"

"The article will detract from the fact that two Death Eaters have just escaped from England, and therefore reduce pressure from the Ministry on us," Lavender stated.

"Think about it," the blonde witch explained, "the Ministry does not want to look bad that two Death Eaters escaped at the same time. If anything, they will want to keep it quiet. The recent murder of Pansy Parkinson and her joke of a trial were kept pretty quiet in the papers, wouldn't you say?"

Hermione did notice that the stories of Pansy's murder trial did tend to be buried further back in the paper than on the front page, whereas her news deserved to be read, and not even the murder
"If we give an exclusive to Luna which comes out on Monday, it will cause people, who have only so much free time and a limited attention span, to focus on us rather than on Draco and Severus." Lavender paused to take a sip of tea and eat a miniature quiche in one bite before resuming her explanation. "The Ministry will no doubt be glad that our story will draw the heat away from them and public pressure regarding Death Eaters, since many of the Death Eaters have been dying over the years in ways the wizarding population is less than proud of and the Ministry has swept under the rug dismissively. And if people are distracted by a story about a love triangle, it means less pressure on the Ministry. Less pressure on the Ministry means less pressure on me, as I was the escaped Death Eaters' employer, and possibly less pressure on you, should you be linked to their disappearance in any way, though we've tried to engineer it so that would be hard to do."

The Potions apprentice noted the key word here was "try." Severus and Lavender may have tried to obscure Hermione's link to them, but only time would tell if they succeeded.

Reluctantly, Hermione agreed. She felt as if there was no other option. The press had already assumed much about her in the few stories she did bother to read about her divorce; much of it was pure conjecture and speculation, so she guessed it would be better to set the record straight in a way that would suit her purpose as well. If anything, she would use it as a platform against marriages where Muggle-born and half-blood witches and wizards who were unaware of the magical binding properties of having children would become informed of such risks. Had she been informed that such powerful magic could kill you with a divorce, then she would have definitely waited to marry Ron, or even break off their engagement.

Lavender sent an owl off to Luna offering an exclusive interview Saturday, to be published Monday.

Once it was settled, Hermione rose to start work for the day.

Before she left, Lavender said, "If there is anything I can do to help you clear Severus' and Draco's name, let me know."

Hermione replied with a weary thanks, her heart and her body feeling heavy.

Ginny was the first to finish with her interview. She had begun her story about how she'd dreamed of Harry Potter when she was a young witch with a bad crush. From there she went on to explain about her first year with Tom Riddle's Diary, as that experience later on helped her form a bond with Draco. There was her long pining for Harry Potter, his famous story, and the background about how her mother had encouraged Harry not to court Ginny during the war. Molly did not want Ginny to suffer worse should she and Harry fall in love and then for the Boy Who Lived to die.
Ginny knew it was her mother's way of trying to protect her only daughter and youngest child.

The young witch went on to tell about, having given up and moved on from her crush with Harry, she had fallen in love with Draco during the war and their growing affections. Here her story became more tragic. It was with the ending of the war the love between her and Draco bloomed, and then immediately following Hermione's wedding the Death Eater Decree was declared.

There were relevant details into her marriage which showed how she didn't want to marry Harry, but was pressured from her mother. There was also the story Harry told her about how Molly had egged him on to court and propose to her; Ginny related what her husband had confessed during their marriage counseling sessions.

The tale went on to include how Lavender had arranged to put Draco and Ginny back together, Draco's seamy "profession" and their rendezvous, and subsequent discovery by Hermione. From there the tale moved forward to include how Hermione had helped with the procurement of Polyjuice Potion ingredients and working around the legal restrictive aspects of certain Potion ingredients after the war. While Ginny didn't go into details about her and Draco's intimate moments, there was no question about their affair, nor their love for one another and her reasons for fleeing with him. There was nothing that Ginny omitted, compelled by the Veritaserum, and even then, without that Potion, she was willing to tell it all.

After a few hours, Ginny was done. Halulu did a cursory spell to make sure Ginny was indeed not pregnant, as it sometimes took a few days for symptoms to appear in a normal detection spell. If Ginny was pregnant, she would live throughout the pregnancy, but die shortly after delivery, just like Tom Riddle's mother.

Once confirmed that the redhead was indeed free and clear of her ex-husband without complications, Halulu shook Ginny's hand and welcomed her to Malu Palekaiko. Halulu even invited the young witch to come perform one of her belly dance routines at the luau on Saturday, since Halulu ran a hula school and was interested in seeing a new type of dance at the community party.

The elder witch assured her it would be a great chance to meet others in the community and break the ice.

Ginny stepped out onto the porch to enjoy the night, but she quickly went back in as a storm system had moved in over the past couple hours and there was a downpour of rain that would probably be brief. Meanwhile, she sat in the foyer inside, waiting for Severus and, most importantly, her lover. It would be a couple more hours until Draco would emerge.
Draco almost balked at taking the Veritaserum, but relented. He had a bad enough experience with the stuff dispensed by Mad-Eye Moody. What was ironic was that Mad-Eye Moody never used it to get a confession from Draco or Severus regarding the accusation of killing Dumbledore or letting the Death Eaters into Hogwarts. Draco, as well as Severus, had offered to prove their innocence with Veritaserum, but Moody had refused, using his unproven suspicions as evidence to damn them both under the Death Eater Decree.

Still, Draco had relented and drank it down, spilling every secret he had, even some he had not told to Ginny or Severus. Every last detail from his reluctance to accept the Dark Mark, down to his altered appearance with the Ageing Potion at the Ministry of Magic's Halloween masked ball and dancing with Ginny right under Potter's nose. He described his work on the sly doing advertising and marketing for Lavender Brown, and his cover work as a gigolo.

At one point, the Polyjuice Potion wore off and Draco barely had enough time to get out of Potter's clothes before growing back into his taller, larger form. There was no privacy screen for Draco since he and his inquisitor were both wizards, and he was not transforming across genders like Severus.

Gary seemed to understand that this young wizard was forced into a situation not of his choosing, despite being eager to become a Death Eater like his father in his formative years. At the end, the older wizard clapped Draco on the back and gave him some encouraging words; he told him he would fit in fine, since Draco seemed like a normal wizard who just wanted a nice quiet life with Ginny. Gary welcomed Draco to their little patch of paradise in the Pacific, and handed him a packet with some basic literature about local laws and customs, along with a list of merchants and services they might need to help settle into their new life.

Exiting from his interrogation room, Draco was relieved to find Ginny sitting in the waiting room reading her own relocation packet and making notes in the margins and on the free notepad.

They rushed into each other's arms and kissed fiercely. Tears began to stream down Ginny's cheeks as Draco continued to hold her tightly; neither could hardly believe that they were free to be together now.

Halulu, who had waited with Ginny, nudged Gary in the ribs and said, "Ahh, to think, we were that young once."

"I was never that young, and my wife was never that hot looking, but don't tell Iolana I said that or I might just find my balls in a jar on the mantle again," Gary joked quietly.
"Come on now," Halulu protested, "when you married her, you said she was the most beautiful witch you have ever laid eyes on."

"Yeah, I know. I'm just kidding." Gary sighed deeply. "But I love her just as much, if not more than the first day I met her." Nodding towards the young couple still locked in an embrace, he added, "I hope these two have a marriage as wonderful as what Iolana and I have."

"If they do, I'll be sure to tell Draco how to reverse that castration hex," Halulu threw back.

It was almost dawn before Severus had told Mounga everything. He was exhausted, having had additional doses of Veritaserum, since each dose only lasted for one hour.

About half-way through the interview, the Polyjuice Potion wore off and Severus excused himself behind the screen to allow the transformation back to his old self and dress himself in his regular clothes.

When Severus was done talking, Mounga shook his head and said with pity, "Man, that's just fucked up."

Severus was grateful the Mounga was mostly silent during his lengthy confession, only speaking to ask for a little clarification on some history and people he was not familiar with. Even Mounga knew who Dumbledore was, so it cut down some time, but not much.

"So you regret killing your wife?" Mounga asked.

"Every day of my life," Severus answered truthfully, still under the effects of the Veritaserum. Whoever brewed it was a talented Potions master, as it was very potent.

"And you have no intention of doing any Death Eater type stuff any more?"

"Was I not clear enough of my regrets and how I was forced to do some things for the war under the direction of Dumbledore?" Severus asked back, being more truthful than sarcastic in his
"Just checking, man." Mounga gave Severus a slightly worried look and asked, "And you don't want to do any more of that gigolo stuff?"

Severus gave him a glare back that it was pretty obvious he didn't. Although he did admit that he'd initially enjoyed having a bevy of witches in his bed over the years, it was clear he had grown tired of it – with the obligation to keep his cover working for Miss Brown. He even told of how in the process of falling for Hermione, he had grown to dislike his gigolo work greatly, wanting to bed only one witch exclusively.

"Trust me, you don't have to worry about me ever pursuing that for a vocation or hobby ever," he assured Mounga.

"And this Mad-Eye guy wouldn't let you use Veritaserum to prove your innocence?"
Severus shook his head. "Would that I could. The old Auror has had it in for me for years, and this was his excuse to keep me under his thumb. Even my request to take the Veritaserum it in front of the Wizengamot was denied. Only Dumbledore could have spared me, and even his will would have been binding enough to have freed me. But alas..."

Mounga looked at the lemon on the table, picking it up to examine it. "I'm not supposed to let you bring in random fruits or vegetables from abroad, as we have some pretty strict importation laws. But as this is a magical lemon from a magical tree, and from what you describe, it isn't really for eating or planting, I can let this pass."

The huge wizard handed the withering lemon back to Severus, adding, "I hope that Hermione chick figures out how to clear your name. You seem like a nice guy who just had a lot of bad luck and was forced into some bad situations you made the best of."

Mounga stood and went around to Severus, indicating the interrogation was over.

"I think you'll find people here are pretty easy and you'll like it here," the larger wizard assured him. "Aloha. Welcome to Malu Palekaiko."

As Severus stood, Mounga grabbed him and gave him a huge crushing hug, followed by a hearty clap on the back that Severus was sure might have cracked a rib or two.
Exiting the interrogation room and entering the waiting area, he was rushed by Ginny who threw her arms tightly about him, burying her head against his shoulder. "I'm so glad you finally made it. Everything okay?" she asked frantically with worry, wondering if Severus was going to be able to stay with her and Draco.

Severus eased her fears, and Ginny hugged him back even tighter.

Draco came over and the two wizards embraced in a brotherly fashion, having been through so much together, sharing a bond similar to what only soldiers in battle can know.

"Oh, this is for you," Mouna said, once hugs and greetings were done. He handed Severus his own welcoming packet, just like the ones Ginny and Draco were reading while they waited for their friend and mentor to emerge.

"Come to the luau tomorrow night at the community center," Mouna invited them. "It's our big Christmas show. There's a potluck, so free food, free drinks. A chance to meet other Potion masters and such."

"Ginny said she'd even dance for us," Halulu volunteered.

"You hula?" Gary jumped into the conversation.

"No, belly dance, though I'm not that good," Ginny scoffed demurely.

Draco laughed and said, "That's what you think. Besides, you've danced in a few recitals and won that one Muggle competition."

Ginny waved her hands dismissively, unsure about her own talent.

Severus had never seen Ginny belly dance, but he had heard about her skill from Draco. He remembered the way Draco would recount, with glazed-over eyes, how she could roll a Galleon down her stomach.

It would be interesting to see her dance finally.
When they stepped out into the early morning air, the faintest glimmer of dawn was approaching; the moon had set long ago. The rain had stopped and the air smelled of the ocean, decomposing vegetation in the jungle, and the perfume of flowers. Even the chorus of frogs had dissipated, supplanted by a concerto of birdsong.

Out on the sand, Ginny and Draco ran to the edge of the water and began dancing around in circles, laughing. Severus approached the edge where the sand changed from dry to wet and watched the happy couple rejoice in their newfound freedom.

Ginny, noticing Severus standing to the side, ran over to him and grabbed his hand. She was shortly followed by Draco as they dragged Severus into joining their merriment, dancing around in a circle.

Caught up in the moment, Severus began to smile and laugh for once himself, finally realizing he was free to do whatever he wanted without restrictions, and his life was his own to control now. The only thing that marred the joy that Severus felt was the absence of Hermione.

She had told Severus he would never truly be free unless he was free to go wherever in the world he wanted without persecution.

And she was right. Only as long as Severus remained on the small island of Malu Palekaiko, no Auror could drag him back.

Malu Palekaiko was technically a part of the United States, though their U.S. wizarding government was separate from the Muggle one. The U.S. and most other countries had a cozy extradition relationship with the United Kingdom, and vice versa. Had Severus been caught in San Francisco, he could have done nothing about it, and would have been brought back to England against his will.

Severus could venture to the other Hawaiian islands and even other countries and the mainland, and come back to Malu Palekaiko, as long as he wasn't caught. It was only the magic imbued into this small island that could stop an Auror from forcing Severus and Draco from returning. As long as he stayed within the geographical bounds of this particular island, which included up to three miles out to sea, he was safe.

Should an Auror come to Malu Palekaiko and attempt to secretly kidnap anyone who had sought sanctuary – using a Portkey or Side-Along Apparition, for example – the magic of the island would
But despite the heaviness in his heart where Hermione was concerned, Severus was still happy and reveled in the lightness of his being, no longer feeling the oppression of the Death Eater Decree weighing upon his shoulders. Freedom was liberating and Severus felt as if he could fly without a broom, his feet light and his body almost floating.

Once their celebratory jig was done, they agreed to go find accommodations. There was an eleven-hour time difference between London and Hawaii, and their bodies told them it was nearly time for dinner. Thankfully their interrogators had brought them some food to hold them over during their interviews.

As it was nearing breakfast time, they agreed to Apparate into town for breakfast. On the welcoming packet's restaurant brochure, Ginny had circled a place that offered "Fabulous Hawaiian breakfasts for even the most serious appetites." Given the size of Mounga, he must have had an appetite that was downright grim.

For the first time in years, Severus and Draco were free to Apparate, and they disappeared with Ginny from the soft sand beach where they had first arrived.

When they traversed the short distance from the Portkey hut into “downtown,” it seemed the town was still asleep. Sunrise was still half an hour away, and the only life around was a dog who ambled through the center of town in the middle of the road. There were some holiday decorations up around town with hanging baskets of poinsettias and garlands of magnolia leaves, and a few shop windows were painted with festive holiday scenes and symbols.

There was a crowing of a rooster in the distance that rose above the morning chorus of birds that began to sing with the approach of the sun.

Looking at the map and the address, Ginny found the restaurant, but the sign indicated it would be another hour until they opened.

To kill time, they went to look for a hotel or bed and breakfast. There was one official hotel in town and a long list of people who rented out lodging at their private homes. There was little tourism to this small island, except for the annual Pele Festival in the middle of summer and Oktoberfest. Most of the witches and wizards who came to the Hawaiian Islands stayed on one of the islands that were known to Muggles as well. As Malu Palekaiko was a sanctuary, many governments suppressed the publication of books and literature about the place, even editing maps to erase the island from the knowledge base of wizarding societies around the world, something that even
Dumbledore was guilty of.

Dumbledore not only suppressed knowledge about this Malu Palekaiko, but all of the Hawaiian Island chain as Voldemort began his rise. Many of Grindelwald's followers, after Dumbledore defeated him in 1945, fled to various sanctuaries around the world, mostly to Greece, but many to Malu Palekaiko as well. Since it was harder to erase knowledge about Greece and her famous sanctuary from the mind of the wizarding world, and given that Greece had succumbed to monetary influences to allow extradition on the sly, it was decided that the Hawaiian Islands would be easier to erase from British wizardom. As Voldemort rose, Dumbledore did not want to have someplace where his followers could flee to and hide, or worse, regroup if or when he fell.

It was only on Albus' deathbed, sensing his time was near, that the old Headmaster told Severus about Malu Palekaiko and to seek sanctuary there should Harry Potter fail. Severus wondered – if Dumbledore could foretell his own impending death – why did the Headmaster not make sure his will would be found after his death.

Draco knocked on the hotel's front door, after finding it locked.

A diminutive witch with dark brown skin and a wild mop of frizzy black hair that stuck out of her head at violent angles answered the door. She looked at the three up and down before saying, "Yes?"

"We'd like to get a couple of rooms," Draco said.

"Wow, been a while since I've had tourists other than during the festivals. Except for those who come to visit family on the island and the family are too packed to have a free bed for them," she added.

"We were just granted sanctuary," Ginny replied.

The diminutive witch stopped in her tracks and turned to stare at the three with a speculative eye. "You did?"

"Yeah, and Halulu, Gary, and Mouna gave us these welcome packets," the red-headed witch volunteered. “Your hotel was listed as a place where we could rent some place to stay? At least until we get around to finding a house."
The witch saw the packets still clutched in their hands and gave a sigh of relief. "Well then, aloha!"

The witch was much warmer to her guests upon spying the relocation packets in their mitts.

"I have a honeymoon suite, if you two are interested?" the hotel owner asked, seeking as how Ginny and Draco were joined at the hip.

"Well, the honeymoon doesn't start until we're married as soon as possible, but yes, we'll take it," Draco said, beaming as he gave Ginny a glowing smile. Ginny smiled back at him brightly.

"Ah, young love!" the tiny witch beamed. "I love a good wedding!"

Then turning to look Severus up and down like she was appraising a fine piece of meat, the proprietor said, "And I guess it's just you for the other room, tall, dark and handsome?"

Severus nearly startled at the blatant come-on from the tiny witch. She wasn't that much older than him, and she wasn't that bad looking, but he certainly wasn't interested.

Ginny started giggling, and through her chuckles, she queried, "What is it with you and the... ahem... opposite sex today, Severus?"

Before Severus could protest, Draco and Ginny began singing in time together, "She's got big red lips, she's got big brown eyes..." Ginny shook her shoulders back and forth in time to the song.

Severus glared at Ginny, but even he could almost find humor in their joke. Almost.

"I'll take the room farthest away from the overly hormonal nifflers here," Severus sneered. To make his own joke, he added, "Just in case someone forgets to put up a Silencing Charm."

Draco leaned over and said, "At least I can use one of those charms now."

Severus nodding, suddenly remembering that there were a lot of things he was free to do now, including casting spells and brewing potions.
The tiny witch, who introduced herself as Justina, showed them to their rooms. Draco and Ginny found the spacious honeymoon suite was decorated with a tropical theme featuring dark woods contrasting with gleaming white linens, intricately woven thatch lining a high ceiling, and a large balcony with a view of the town, volcano, and ocean. There was a large king-sized bed with a white billowy canopy and mosquito netting in the bedroom. They hadn't even closed the door before they were at each other, yanking at clothes, Draco's foot finding the door and slamming it shut while Ginny's wand cast the charm to keep the rest of the hotel hearing what they got up to in there.

Justina gave Severus a wink before showing him to his slightly more modest accommodations at the other end of the corridor.

There was a queen-sized bed, with a simple wooden canopy frame outfitted with mosquito netting, a bedside table, a dresser, two chairs with small table between them, a closet, and bathroom. The room was decorated with medium stained wood, and had a high ceiling with a much smaller balcony facing west that overlooked the hotel's small private garden. It was not as highly decorated or as large as the honeymoon suite, but just still had its own understated elegant charm.

"How well do Potions and Charms work to keep the mosquitoes away?" Severus asked Justina, seeing the mosquito netting as a common theme in the rooms.

"Charms wear off and Potions fade," she informed him. "Trust me, even if you're a talented wizard, I'd still use them just in case. For some reason, mosquitoes seem to be more impervious to magic than other creatures on this earth. And given that we tend to keep our windows and shutters open most of the year, I'd use the netting. You'll not meet any resident on this island who doesn't use it themselves for sleeping. But when you're out and about, Potions and Charms seem to work just fine."

Severus had read in his packet about recommended Potions and Charms to use to keep the offending insects away. He wondered if Ginny and Draco had remembered to use them before getting busy. English blood might prove a delectable treat to the little buggers.

Remembering how Justina had reacted to finding out about them seeking sanctuary and then spotting the packets in their hands, Severus surmised that welcome packets were only given to people the interviewers viewed as good and worthy of sanctuary – people who were not going to be breaking laws, hurting people, or causing trouble. Not being informed about Potions and Charms to keep the mosquitoes away would be one way to not make things 'go smoother' as Mounga phrased it about wizards who would be pushed to the fringes of their enclave.
With the door shut, Severus kicked off his boots and socks. He even took his trousers and shirt off to lay on the bed on his back in only his underpants, feeling the tropical breeze dance across his skin through the opened shutters. Severus made sure that he was under the mosquito netting; early morning and evening times were when they were most active, and it was peak time.

"I definitely need a more tropical wardrobe," he sighed, noting how his summer-weight woolen trousers, which he had changed into during his interrogation, were a bit oppressive, even in the cool morning air.

A cool December morning in Hawaii was like a pleasant sunny summer day in England; the low temperatures were in the low-seventies in Fahrenheit. At least he had some linen shirts, but given how everyone seemed to be either in short sleeves or sleeveless tops, even his long-sleeved shirts might be a bit too much. His blood was far thicker and could stand much chillier temperatures. In time, he would acclimatize, but for now, he needed new clothing, as he didn't have any linen or cotton trousers, and certainly no shorts. And leather boots in the tropical humidity would not do. Even he thought that he could tolerate the idea of sandals if it meant keeping him from overheating. And though he had a cool cotton cloak, he was sure he would not be wearing it today or even tonight.

As the sun began to rise and bring brightness to the vibrant color palette of Severus' new home – the forest just outside his window painted in rich hues of dark greens, vivid chartreuses, shocking pinks, luscious reds, glaring yellows, cerulean blues, and a whole array of surreal colors – he drifted off to sleep, worn out by the Polyjuice Potion.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

As Hermione stepped out of her Floo back home, weary after a long day at work, she found Harry sitting there on the couch.

His face was stern yet impassive. Hermione knew he had been home to find Ginny's wedding ring cleaved in two, the singe marks on their wedding certificate from the breaking of the ring, and her letter explaining why she was leaving him.

"Where are they?" he asked in a calm, but cold voice.

"I don't know," Hermione answered truthfully.

"Don't lie to me anymore. I figured out you finally knew about Ginny and Malfoy fucking each other, yet you still said nothing. Omission is the same as lying, Hermione."
"I'm not lying, Harry. I really don't know where they went," she insisted, suddenly feeling as if defeated. The jig was up and Hermione could no longer hide the truth from Harry any longer. The questions were: how much truth did Harry already know, and how much could she avoid telling him to damn herself even further.

"And how long have you been fucking Snape?" Harry bit out, venom dripping from his voice.

Hermione's mouth went slack, shocked he had figured that out, until anger started to rise in her chest. "Certainly not nearly as long as Lavender was fucking Ron," she threw back at him. In the time since she and Ron announced their divorce at Bill's party nearly a week ago, Harry had not come to speak to her once. She had left the party with Harry and Ron shouting at each other.

"So it is true," Harry gasped in amazement.

Hermione couldn't believe she got caught in that trap, confessing before asking what proof Harry had.

"How could you?" he screamed.

"How could I? How could Ron be fucking Lavender for years and you not say anything to me?" Hermione yelled back.

"You think I knew he was banging her?"

"You certainly could ascertain Severus and I were, for the few months we were, yet for three and a half years you couldn't figure out Ron was screwing her?" she screamed, her voice becoming more shrill. "And you call yourself an Auror?" Now she was being cruel, but she didn't mind. Lashing back at Harry was convenient, and he'd set the tone of their conversation.

"Had I known, I would have asked him why and told him to stop," Harry insisted.

"And yet you knew for how long Severus and I were seeing each other, yet you said nothing before now?" Hermione pointed out.
"I wasn't sure you and the bat were doing anything, but if I was sure..."

"If you were sure, you'd do what? Tell me to stop going to see him? What, Harry? What would you do?" she challenged him. "You did nothing when you had your suspicions about me. And yet you said if you knew Ron was having an affair you'd speak to him."

"You challenge me about knowing and saying nothing? What about you knowing about Ginny fucking Malfoy and saying nothing?!?" Harry was now standing, nearly jumping up and down on the balls of his feet as he yelled.

"Because she's in love with him, Harry. I know it's hard to conceive someone could love that prat, but Ginny loves him with all her heart and she said if you found out, you'd get him hauled off to Azkaban and make sure he got the Dementor's Kiss, or you'd kill him yourself and justify it away by claiming he had attacked you. Ginny was so certain that you would go off your rocker and go mad, taking Draco out, she convinced me of her fears. And given to some of your outbursts as of late, I believed her."

"And it turns out Ron is in love with Lavender, yet you're angry about that, and somehow I can't be angry about Ginny being in love with Malfoy?!? Come on now, Hermione. You're not a hypocrite."

Hermione slumped into a nearby chair.

"And so what, you decide to shag Snape to get back at Ron?" Harry continued on with his tirade.

The fight had gone out of her. "No, Harry."

"Then tell me how it is, Hermione. Because Ginny fucking Malfoy and running off with him is okay without telling me, but me not figuring out Ron was cheating on you all these years is somehow my fault, so you go off and fuck Snape to get back at Ron?!?"

"I didn't know Ron was fucking Lavender until a month ago."

"If you didn't know then, then why did you fuck him in the first place?!?" Harry shouted, his eyes becoming more vividly green as his face twisted with building rage.
"BECAUSE I'M IN LOVE WITH HIM!" she shouted back.

Harry fell back into his chair, the wind knocked out of him.

Her shoulders slumped forward, Hermione began to silently cry.

"I don't think you know. And even if you did, I don't think you'd tell me." Harry stood back up and stood next to Hermione who hung her head in shame.

"You can't tell Ron," Hermione begged.

"Why, so he can look like the bad guy and you can look like the saint, with all the papers espousing you for the ditched dowdy wife and Lav as the beauty queen who stole his heart from you?"

"His heart was never mine to begin with," Hermione said, her tone flat and firm.

"Tell me one reason I shouldn't tell Ron?" Harry asked, sounding impatient with this witch who seemed to have suddenly adopted a set of double standards.

"Because it would kill Ron. He would die knowing his wife willingly made love with a former Death Eater – one you two mocked for years growing up. He wouldn't understand."

"And somehow I'm supposed to understand my wife was fucking a gigolo Death Eater prat behind my back for years as well and eventually ran off with him?" he questioned her.

"Ginny never loved you the way she loved Malfoy. You already understood Ginny was forced to accept your courtship by Molly after counseling. Didn't you even register that Ginny's indifference and reluctant affections were because her mother nagged her into accepting dates with you beforehand? And eventually a marriage proposal? Ginny said she was going to leave you a letter explaining how Molly interfered and stopped Draco from pursuing her, and Ginny gave up hope of seeing Draco and only relented to marriage because her mother bullied her into it. The same way that Ron was bullied into mine?"
"Yes, it was all spelled out in the letter she left and more, but I was hoping it wasn't true," Harry finally admitted. "But it seems even you, until she begged you not to tell me, didn't even notice that."

"I was deluded into thinking if you two were happy, Ron and I should have been happy too. All these preconceived notions of who we were supposed to marry when we grew up, and truth about the magical binding of children when it came to marriage – all that was withheld from you and me." She sighed with resignation. "We married too young, Harry. All of us.

"Ron and I have come to accept that our marriage was never meant to be," she said. "But you can't tell him about Severus and me. He's having a hard enough time dealing with his mother, Charlie, and Percy. And then there is the press. To discover that Severus and I were..."

"Bonking like garden gnomes in the spring?" Harry threw out bitterly.

"In love, I was about to say," she ground out, her strength and her patience waning.

As Harry moved towards the fireplace he said, "It doesn't matter. I know where she is."

Hermione turned around in her seat, her eyes hopeful, and asked, "Really? Where?"

Harry gave her a sardonic smile, looking older and more cruel than his sweet boyish self, which seemed to be slipping away more and more each year. "You may have known her secrets, but I know her tells. If you don't know, then maybe perhaps Snape didn't love you that much and just used you knowing it would drive Ron mad should he find out. So I guess I won't tell Ron as that would only have made Snape happy.

"I don't know how they escaped exactly, but I will find Ginny and discover how they did it. And if I can, I will bring them back," Harry adamantly promised.

"Her tells?"

"Ginny may have been good at lying and keeping secrets from me – oh, and I do know about the belly dancing, in case you didn't know – but her cookbooks were a dead giveaway. I'm surprised a witch as clever as you didn't see that one from a mile away," he sneered, rubbing Hermione's nose in it before leaving via Floo.
A/N: Thank you to my betas, JuneW and Cygnuz, for improving this chapter.

If you want a peek at what Severus' room looks like, you can go here: https://www.wheretostay.com/prop_photos/92000/92164/Villa-Lama-St-Barts-Ch-1-vue-terrasse-copie.jpg

I know, the place is in St. Barts, in the Carribean, and not the South Pacific, but hey, it was close in my mind to where Severus is staying now. Here is the hotel, this room goes with: https://www.wheretostay.com/Villa_Lama-stbarts-villa-92164

And here was a hint I dropped in chapter 16, in the kitchen scene after the Quidditch game:
“Since Ginny had never been able to convince Harry to take vacation time off, she’d taken to learning the native food of places she wanted to visit.”

Remember in chapter 18, “The Inner Hunger,” when Ginny offered Hermione to come over for Hawaiian pork with a mango-pineapple salsa during their picnic in St. James park? Yep, that was Ginny’s tell that Harry picked up on: cooking and cookbooks.

BOOM! There it was, if you knew where to look.

Thank you to the Hawaiian dictionary, http://ulukau.org/index.php?l=en, for translations of words. Unfortunately, Google translator does not fully translate into Hawaiian yet. And yes, the disclaimer is probably butchered, but some words I had to find synonyms to translate the concepts.
At the London Portkey Office was a long line of witches and wizards who had decided to make the most of the weekend and go away at the last minute. Right after work ended on Friday was the busiest time for scheduled and unscheduled Portkeys.

Harry didn't have time for this. As he scooted past others, moving ahead towards the front of the line, there were grumbles until Harry turned, apologized, and said it was emergency Auror business.

Seeing the Boy Who Lived say that it was important made people immediately stop complaining and step aside to allow him faster access towards the front.

Once at the front of the line, Harry flashed his credentials and stated his name in order to get the staff to understand he needed an emergency Portkey to Hawaii that instant, and it was certainly and absolutely for business reasons only.
He couldn't necessarily blurt out he was on the heels of two Death Eaters who had somehow escaped England.

As the wizard behind the desk began working to make an emergency Portkey, the man stopped and said, "Wait a minute..." The wizard went back to the scheduled Portkey itinerary ledger and looked at a long list of names.

"Hang on," the wizard said, "I have you registered for a Portkey this morning for nine o'clock. And it shows that you already left with your wife, Ginny, and one Hermione Weasley."

"What?" Harry said, his face going white. "Who did you say was on that list?"

"You, Ginny Potter, and Hermione Weasley. The Portkey was scheduled for nine o'clock this morning, and you left on time for the Cayman Islands. Does that matter?" the wizard asked, confused.

It suddenly struck Harry how two Death Eaters had escaped, and how Ginny could have gone with them unnoticed.

"Get me a Portkey to Hawaii. Now!" Harry barked urgently.

“Erm...” The Portkey officer hemmed and hawed, trying to explain to the famous Harry Potter that the wizard couldn't make a Portkey to someplace that didn't exist. Hawaii? No one had ever heard of it.

As Harry arrived in Honolulu, he looked around for the Portkey officer in charge.

He couldn't believe there was a single soul in the Portkey office at the Ministry of Magic back in London that not only didn't know where Hawaii was, but that it wasn't even listed in the registry of Portkey destinations. Instead, Harry had to take a Portkey to New York, and then take one from there to Hawaii.
As he approached the counter in Honolulu, Harry said, "I'm an Auror with the British Ministry of Magic. I need to speak to someone in charge."

"What's this about?" called a witch from behind a desk towards the back.

Harry explained who he was and that he was chasing two criminals who had fled from England via Portkey earlier that day.

The witch, who was head of the Portkey Office for the Honolulu Transit branch walked Harry back behind the counter. She started pulling up records, as records from the arriving destination would magically show up on the ledger at their office.

After looking for all records for the past fifteen hours, despite the fact that Harry last saw Ginny twelve hours ago, there was no sign of a Ginny Potter, Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy, Severus Snape, Hermione Weasley, or Hermione Granger. Some Portkey offices didn't bother to take down names of those passing through, so their names might not have wound up on the ledger unless they were staying in Hawaii. At least, that's what Harry thought.

Stumped, he suddenly thought of something. "There are a bunch of islands in Hawaii, right?"

"Uh, yeah. It's why they are called the Hawaiian Islands. Why?" the head Portkey officer asked, thinking that was a rather obtuse question.

"What other Portkey offices do you have here in Hawaii?"

The witch began ticking them off on her fingers. "Well, there is Maui, the Big Island, Molokai, and Kauai – all of them can let other people Portkey in. And then there is Malu Palekaiko, but nobody goes there, unless it's festival time or they have family there."

"Why?"

"Because the only other people who go there are usually seeking sanctuary."

The witch's eyes and Harry's both got wide.
"You did say they were criminals, right, sir?"

"Yes."

"Are they dangerous?"

Harry said, "I'm hoping they won't be."

Severus had been sleeping blissfully for the past couple hours when he was awakened by Justina’s shouting and screaming at someone.

Roused from slumber, he was about to roll over and pull a pillow over his head. He started to consider looking later in the day for new lodgings, when he distinctly heard Harry Potter's voice.

"I know she's here! I found her with a locator spell!" Potter yelled, his voice becoming louder as he passed by Severus’ door, only to to diminish in pitch and volume as he walked on.

Leaping from the bed, Severus quickly yanked his trousers on and grabbed his wand, not even bothering with his shirt or shoes. Draco and he had not gone through all that they did just to have Potter show up and ruin it all.

Just as Severus exited his room’s door, Harry burst through the door of the honeymoon suite.

Ginny screamed in fright, having just woken up to her ex-husband finding her – and holding his wand drawn and pointed at Draco.

"Get Halulu now!" Ginny shrieked at Justina.

The hotel owner Apparated away on the spot.

Severus ran down the hallway to point his wand at the Auror and growled, "Drop your wand,
Harry spun around and pointed his wand at Severus now.

"I'm not leaving here without Ginny and you two!" Harry shouted back, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Draco wouldn't get the drop on him.

Beyond Harry, Severus could see Draco jumping up out of bed and grabbing something to throw on to cover himself while fetching his wand, seeing that Severus temporarily had Potter distracted. Severus saw Ginny busy hunting for her wand, lost in the midst of a tangled pile of clothes, while clutching a bedsheets to her person for modesty with her other hand.

"It's too late, Potter. We've been granted sanctuary, and by the magic of this island, you cannot take us against our will anywhere!" Severus shouted back.

"What? Sanctuary? What does that even mean?" Harry asked, not clear on the finer points of the concept. "I'm taking you and Draco back whether you like it or not, for sure."

"EXPELLIARMUS!"

Halulu had Apparated into the hallway behind Potter and disarmed him before the Auror could register the witch had even arrived.

Severus caught Potter's wand as it fell through the air.

"You must be Harry Potter, Ginny's ex," Halulu said calmly with great interest.

"Who are you?" Harry was disarmed and at the mercy of this witch who'd gotten the better of him.

"I'm the one who interviewed and processed your ex-wife's claim for sanctuary. You are not taking her anywhere," Halulu said in even measured tones.

"Really? We'll see about that," Harry said defiantly. He ran past Halulu and over at Ginny, who
was still crouched near the bed, the white sheet the only thing covering her otherwise nude form.

"No, I wouldn't – "

Before Halulu could finish warning him, Harry grabbed Ginny's arm and instantly disappeared with a small pop.

"Where did he go?" asked Ginny, just as bewildered as Draco at the sight of Potter disappearing without his wand, which was still in Severus' hand.

Severus had had an inkling this might happen.

"Great," Halulu sighed with exasperation.

Just then, Justina came back, and Halulu turned to her and said, "Can you alert the town that we have a bounty hunter without his wand somewhere? Depending on his intent, he could be anywhere from stuck in a treetop to dumped three miles out to sea."

The three sanctuary seekers looked to Halulu, who quickly recounted that anyone who tried to remove those who granted sanctuary against their will would be dealt with by the protective magic of the island. She gave them a brief rundown of what happened to one particular bounty hunter. It seems that that bit of information about this type of magical protection was not imparted to the trio during their interview process or included in their welcome brochure, but Severus was somewhat aware of this particular magic beforehand.

Halulu closed the door to let Ginny and Draco get dressed, while Severus went back to his room to put something on for the day before meeting Halulu downstairs in Justina's kitchen for some coffee.

Minutes later in the kitchen, Severus was sitting down savoring a wonderful blend called Kona coffee, making him reconsider tea as his morning beverage. As Ginny and Draco came into the kitchen to join him, Justina came back and announced they had found Harry Potter.

"Seems he got thrown back to the Portkey hut. So it looks like he wasn't going to hurt her, but it could have been worse," Justina informed them.
Halulu then recounted the tale of one such bounty hunter who had tried to take a wizard back, but was transported the first time to a precarious ledge half-way down a thousand-foot cliff above the jagged rocks just above the crashing surf. The next time the bounty hunter tried to take the same wizard back, he was magically transported into the middle of a shallow lagoon, surrounded by aggressive sharks. The third time, the bounty hunter found himself on the edge of the caldera of an active volcano, and he decided that whatever magic that protected this island was not going to let him bring that wizard back to his country for justice. That particular wizard who was being hunted and pursued was not exactly the innocent type with a clean record, but since coming to the Malu Palekaiko sanctuary, he had proven to be a model citizen.

"Too bad the piranhas didn't get a taste of The Boy Who Lived," Draco muttered into his coffee.

Ginny gave him a harsh glare and gently elbowed him in the ribs. She may not have been in love with her ex-husband, but she certainly didn't wish him harm.

"We don't have those fish here. You're thinking of the Amazon," Halulu corrected Draco, then made her eyes go comically wide. "We have sharks. Hungry ones, too."

Draco gave Halulu a slightly weary look. Ginny might be having a more difficult time getting Draco to swim in the ocean now.

Seeing the look on Draco's face, Halulu and Justina burst into laughter. "I'm pulling your leg, boy. The sharks only bite the Muggles, and rarely at that."

Draco let out a small sigh of relief and, quietly, so did Severus.

As Potter walked into Justina's kitchen at the hotel, Severus was twirling Potter's wand in his left hand, while keeping his own wand in his right hand at the ready.

Severus handed Potter's wand over to Halulu to do with as she saw fit, which to his and Draco's disappointment meant handing it back to Potter.

"What just happened?" Harry asked, unsure how one second he was going to drag his wife – ex-wife – out of the bed she was lying in with Malfoy and get some clothes on her, and the next second he was standing on the sand without Apparating himself.
"Magic!" Halulu sang overly cheerfully, smiling brightly and making jazz hands.

Draco, between Halulu's sarcastic response and the dumbfounded look on Potter's face, burst out laughing and threw his whole body forward, his head down on the table as he guffawed loudly.

Severus, who also saw the completely befuddled look on Potter's face, was infected by Draco's laughter and also began to laugh. He placed one hand up to his mouth in an attempt to stay serious, but Halulu's response was too good not to enjoy and even he started laughing harder.

Draco, seeing Severus laugh, started laughing even harder, his fists pounding on the table.

Seeing the two serious wizards dissolve into laughter, and knowing Harry wasn't hurt at all – that he just had a good fright – made Ginny start to giggle, too.

"Could someone please explain how I was upstairs and then suddenly on the beach in front of the Portkey Office?" Harry asked, trying to be heard over the laughter of everyone who decided laughing at his confusion and sudden disappearance was pretty darn funny.

"This is how it is, honey. Let me explain it so you can get this into your head..." Halulu began as her own laughter died down. She gave Harry a breakdown of the magic that was now protecting Ginny and the two ex-Death Eaters from any chance of being extradited, captured, removed, or kidnapped against their will. Portkeys, Apparition, vanishing cabinets, brooms, flying carpets, even plain old Muggle boats and planes – nothing could remove Draco and Severus from Malu Palekaiko unless they left of their own free will, and that went for Ginny as well.

Harry sat down in a chair on the other side of the kitchen, unwilling to sit anywhere near Malfoy or Snape, grasping the fact that he now knew where the two escaped Death Eaters had gone, but there was nothing in this world that he or even Moody could do to bring them back.

"Can I at least have a moment to speak with my wife – ex-wife?" Potter corrected himself, looking to Halulu.

"It's up to her. She's a free witch here. But I warn you, you lay a hand on her with any intent–"
"I was just going to throw some clothes on her," Harry hotly interrupted her.

"Naw, it was more than just clothes." She waggled a chastising finger at him. "The magic would not have chucked you back to the Portkey office if preserving her modesty was your only reason for grabbing her," she pointed out, knowing the power and near-sentient quirks of this particular type of magic far better than this Potter boy.

Harry did have the intended purpose of eventually dragging Ginny back to England with him, and though he denied that was the reason for grabbing her, the magic of the sanctuary knew what Harry's heart had intended to do.

"Be glad you didn't wind up at the edge of the caldera," Halulu warned the young Auror. "The volcano has been pretty actively lately."

Ginny assured Draco that Harry couldn't take her away. Draco didn't want to leave her side, but she asked for a moment to speak privately with her ex-husband to clear up some matters.

Draco was planning on standing next to the doorway to the kitchen when Halulu pulled him aside and said, "She'll be fine. No one can take her away from you anymore."

Halulu, Draco, and Severus sat in the small lobby of the hotel waiting for Harry and Ginny to emerge.

Eventually, Ginny and Potter came out, both sporting splotchy faces, red eyes, and runny noses, and wiping away at errant tears.

Ginny sat down next to Draco, who kissed the top of her red hair and squeezed her hand, placing a protective arm about her.

"Do you really love her, Malfoy?" Potter asked.

Looking up at the wizard, who now looked more like the small boy he’d met in Madam Malkin’s shop before their first year at Hogwarts than a grown man, Draco said with great solemnity, "I would have sooner chosen to die than leave England without Ginny. I love her, and I always will."
The serious and heartfelt response of Draco's answer seemed to allow Potter to finally let go of Ginny. Of course his heart was now broken, but he was sure that Ginny was in good hands of someone who could love her unconditionally, and that she loved back with equal ferocity.

Potter turned to face Severus. Glaring at his old Potions professor, he said shortly, "A word with you, Snape."

They decided to take their conversation out into the back garden.

Amid the hedges of large, bright red hibiscus flowers and the white feathery fronds of the blooming sugar cane, Potter asked, "Why did you seduce Hermione?"

"You assume I seduced her." It was an evasive answer meant to draw Potter out into giving away what he knew, and thereby what he didn't know.

"It makes perfect sense. Many of the key ingredients in Polyjuice Potion are highly regulated. Anyone who purchases them at an apothecary has their name registered. Smuggling is impossible. What better way than to get them when they come into the United Kingdom, as Hermione has access when she tests them? And what a coincidence that shortly before you disappear, she gets a Potions apprenticeship she has always longed for, but has, until now, been unable to obtain. And Lavender's Potions master, Sebastian Delgado, leaves to go back to Spain at a time that is also very coincidental. That's a whole lot of coincidences, don't you think?" Harry asked too innocently for the topic of conversation, a hint of bitterness underlying his series of deductions.

Severus said nothing, but continued to walk alongside Potter, his hand on his wand wondering if a Memory Charm would violate the local laws of his new home.

"What did you do to get her to agree to give you the ingredients? Seduce her first or dangle the promise of an apprenticeship in front of her nose to make her cave?" Potter asked snidely.

"If you think Hermione would cast her ethics aside for an apprenticeship or because of whom she bedded, then you do not know her at all," Severus calmly parried Harry's remarks. "And to think, she considers you a friend. One who evidently doesn't know her very well if you're making such accusations."

"Do you deny she gave you the ingredients?" Harry asked, wanting to at least hear Snape confess, though there was nothing he could have done about it anyway.
Severus pondered the choice of Potter's words and considered negating the boy's assumptions, based on a syntax error.

"Hermione gave no such ingredients to me," Severus truthfully answered, in a manner of speaking.

"Did she give them to Ginny?" Harry countered.

Severus was amazed the boy had picked up on his subtle use of language.

As much as Severus tried to play it cool, he was starting to get a pit of worry building in his stomach over Hermione's safety. Would Potter lash out at him and Draco by ruining Hermione's life by exposing her help towards helping two Death Eaters escape? She was guilty, without a doubt, but would Harry obey the law blindly, having Hermione brought up on charges before the Wizengamot and ruining her chance of finishing her apprenticeship, not to mention her whole life, over a grudge and a duty to obey the law, no matter how unjust it was? Or would Potter bend the rules like he had done to suit his own needs for so many years at Hogwarts, to justify his goals?

Severus stopped walking and turned to face Potter. "Do you remember when your godfather, Sirius, was accused of betraying your parents? How he was assumed to be in league with the Dark Lord? And when you found out the truth of how he was betrayed and unjustly punished, did you and Hermione not abuse the use of a Time-Turner to help a wizard who was wanted for the murder of Pettigrew – a murder that he did not commit? Even though many others were certain of his guilt, Hermione helped you to set to right a wizard who should not have been punished for crimes he did not do."

Harry took a step back, having the memory brought up. The wound from that memory and the loss of Sirius suddenly felt raw and torn open once more.

"Hermione does not defend those unless she is certain of their innocence," Severus said firmly and with conviction. "When you go back to England, ask Moody why he would not accept Draco’s and my request to take Veritaserum to tell the truth about the death of Dumbledore and regarding the supposed crime of Draco’s and my letting Death Eaters into Hogwarts. He refused our offer to confess our innocence under Veritaserum, for he would then have no suspicions to claim as fact and use to persecute us, though Draco and I were always true to Dumbledore and the Order. Ask him that, if you are truly the brave Gryffindor that you are heralded to be. Let's see what happens when Moody is confronted with your questions."
Severus turned to walk away from Potter, but stopped and turned to fix him with a steely glare, his eyes glancing quickly at Harry's scar. "And should you cause any harm to Hermione, I might just risk coming back to England to finish what the Dark Lord did not."

He turned once more and stalked away towards the hotel leaving Potter to contemplate his words and all that it implied.

"My God, he does love her," Potter muttered to himself before he went to walk back to the Portkey office.

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Hermione's Saturday was going to be very busy. She had a morning interview with Luna, where she would have to sit next to Lavender and Ron and recount something not only recent and painful, but very personal to be published for all of wizardom to see. She also had to attend the noon grand opening of The Sirens' Secrets, as the Christmas shopping season in Diagon Alley was kicking off.

After speaking with Lavender via Floo regarding Harry and his claim that he knew where Ginny, Draco and Severus had gone off to, Hermione took a vial of something that promised her a restful night's sleep in hopes that a different brand of elixir would deliver the promise of a good night's rest for once. The vial should have been more accurately labeled "Temporary Coma."

Waking, her body felt rested, but her mind still felt as if it have been stomped all over by Grawp during a temper tantrum. She then admitted to herself yet again the importance of dreaming to allow the mind to clear out the detritus that cluttered one's mind and decided that no sleeping potion, no matter who brewed it, was going to let her avoid nightmares and allow her to get a good night's sleep. She wondered if she could pick up a vial or three of Wit-Sharpening Potion at the local apothecary, since didn't have time to brew herself any in time before the interview started.

Lavender had suggested what Hermione should wear, as they would try to both dress in a way that one did not look better than the other. Her employer said it should look like Ron had not picked Lavender and ditched his wife due to looks, but because of matters of the heart. But as there was going to be a photographer, pictures spoke louder than words.

With a vial of Wit-Sharpening Potion tossed down along with a quick cup of tea and a piece of toast, Hermione Floo'ed over to Lavender's.

Upon her arrival, Wonkle greeted Hermione while Lavender was running about the solarium making sure everything was perfect. There was still a half-hour until Luna would show up.
Lavender stopped her preparations and came over. She looked Hermione up and down, checking her over, and then shook her head.

"Your clothes look perfect," Lavender began, "but may I fix up your hair and make-up?"

Hermione nodded, feeling like she was being primped like a dog for a show. She didn't even tell Lavender that she didn't even bother with makeup. All those years of working in a Potions testing lab required one's face to be in a natural state, because one's makeup might accidentally taint a testing batch.

After a few twirls and flicks, Lavender nodded with approval.

Checking in the large mirror in the grand foyer, Hermione saw that her hair was arranged in a well-controlled cascade of smooth waves while Lavender wore her hair down as well, smooth and straight, loosely curled at the bottom. Their eyes were both accented and a bit of rouge highlighted their cheek bones in a way that flattered both their faces. Hermione had to admit that perhaps she didn't look half bad with a bit of primping. At least the bags and circles under her eyes were gone after her mini-coma, but that still didn't take away the haunted look in the brunette witch's eyes.

Ron came out into the foyer, saying, "Which shirt did you want me to wear again, Lav?" He was holding a cream-colored, tailored button-down dress shirt in one hand and a pale caramel-colored one in the other.

He stopped short when he spotted Hermione.

Hermione noticed immediately that Ron was shirtless, since it was hard not to notice the rather impressive set of abs her ex-husband was sporting.

'Why didn't Ron have abs like that when we were married?' she momentarily thought to herself bitterly, now a little jealous that Lavender got an upgraded version of Ron while she’d had to deal with the one who had the meager salaries while holding down two jobs, had willingly dressed like a slob, and hadn't quite yet filled out.

Hermione couldn’t kid herself. Even towards the end of her marriage when Ron did have a body like that, the sex was still mediocre and they still fought like cats and dogs, more so with the influence of those potions he was taking for gaining muscle.
"The darker one, Ron," Lavender said, then paused to watch the exchange between the exes.

Ron stood there unmoving. This was the first time they had seen each other since Bill's party and the announcement of their divorce to the Weasley family.

Finally remembering that his fiancée had replied, he said, while pointing with the shirts in his hand back towards where he'd come from, "Oh, right, well, I'll just go... and... finish getting dressed."

Hermione turned away and went to look in the mirror to make sure she didn't look like she was about to start crying.

"The mascara is run-proof," Lavender said quietly.

"Thanks; I think that will be very helpful today," Hermione noted somberly.

Before Luna showed up, Lavender had Ron and Hermione sit together and air whatever they needed to say so that it would not come out in some dam-burst of emotions during the interview.

It was mostly polite small talk. Given that Ron was not having an apoplectic fit, she could only assume that he had not yet learned of Ginny divorcing Harry and running off with Malfoy, the Death Eater and his long-time nemesis, taunter, and pain in the arse. She would leave that privilege to Harry, to whom she was feeling a little less charitable. She certainly was not going to do it now, given that Luna was due to appear any minute and then all three of them had to later show up for The Sirens' Secrets grand opening.

At nine o'clock promptly, Luna Apparated to the edge of Lavender's property, which was a modest mansion located in Kent. After knocking on the door, the Editrix-in-Chief of The Quibbler was greeted at the door by Lavender, instead of the house-elf, Wonkle, giving the impression that she was not so haughty as to not answer her own door.

As Luna and Lavender entered the solarium, Ron and Hermione were engaged in polite conversation, Hermione pouring a cup of tea for her ex-husband in the process. It was all very staged.

Luna, with her keen perception and child-like honesty, said "You don't have to pretend for me. We're old friends. The photographer won't be here for another hour."
Hermione and Ron let out a huge sigh and sat a little farther apart, but not before Hermione finished pouring Ron a cup of tea.

Now that they were all seated, Luna began by saying, "I'd like to thank all three of you with giving me your story. I know there has been a lot of gossip printed in the other papers and magazines, but I promise you that I will do my best to accurately reflect what we discuss here today."

"It is because you have shown integrity in the past when it comes to publishing the truth that we thought of you," Lavender replied, in reference to how The Quibbler had been the forum for Harry to honestly discuss the return of Voldemort when the Ministry's propaganda rag, the Daily Prophet, refused to acknowledge the truth and had painted Harry in a bad light.

"So, why don't you or Ron tell me in your own words what happened?" Luna asked, looking at Hermione.

Hermione appreciated the fact that Luna did not make any accusations in her question and left it open-ended for them to begin.

"Well, Luna, I think what anyone reading about this should know is that Ron and I had a long and solid friendship to begin with, but friendship is not quite enough when it comes to marriage, at least for us," she began.

Over the next hour, Hermione and Ron took turns discussing how they both slowly realized over the years that though they did love each other, it was not the type of love needed to sustain a marriage, especially a marriage he wasn't ready for.

After some time, they reached a point where Luna asked how Ron's romance with Lavender began.

"I saw Ron sitting alone and looking miserable one day," Lavender began. "I remembered him from school and I struck up a conversation with him. He confessed that he and Hermione had just had a big fight, and he had confided in me marriage was a lot bumpier than he’d expected, having been married for less than a year.

"After we had been talking for several hours, I felt a sort of connection with him," Lavender confessed, excluding the part about him going over to her house and sleeping with her that night.
Ron jumped in, adding, "It was a natural and easy kind of rapport we had with one another. And as much as I felt terrible about it, Lavender and I developed a deep friendship and fell in love."

Hermione could not help but think about her and Severus had started with conversation, with him listening to her own martial woes at first and offering a shoulder to cry on at the beginning of their relationship. Hermione remembered how awful she’d felt falling for Severus while married to Ron, and how she’d battled with the conflict within her.

"But even though I had fallen in love with Lavender, I felt that my first duty was to remain with Hermione," Ron finished.

"And why is that, Ron?" asked Luna for clarification.

"From what I know in the Muggle world from Hermione," Ron answered, "divorce is pretty common, but I was raised that when you marry someone, it's for life. I felt I had to take care of Hermione. And that if I were to leave her, how could she live on her meager salary at the Ministry alone? I felt it was the noble thing to do, to stick through it even though we were growing apart."

Hermione nodded, her eyes downcast.

"If you understood that marriage is for life, Ron, why did you marry Hermione in the first place if you never were deeply in love with her?" Luna queried, her insight allowing her to go to the heart of the issue quickly.

"I suppose you could say that I caved into pressure from family, friends, and society, that this was what expected of me." Ron left out the part when Molly coerced him, as it would have been too humiliating to admit to being bullied by one's mother.

Hermione added her own comments, saying, "It seemed that we both felt that we were expected to marry each other. But we rushed into things too quickly, too young. The war had only just ended, and perhaps in a way of trying to put the sadness and loss we felt behind us, after losing so many people close and dear to us, our getting married was somehow a way of forcing ourselves to be happy with something joyous when it would have been more prudent to wait and be sure."

Luna nodded herself, looking a bit lost in her own thoughts before she continued with the interview. "Now, Hermione, since you are more familiar with Muggle divorce, maybe you can
"Certainly. As many, but perhaps not all of, your readers might know, I am a Muggle-born. As such, both my parents and their families are Muggles. In the Muggle world, when two people fall in love and get married but it doesn't work out, or they marry for the wrong reasons, they can undo the legal binding of their marriage contract. There is a petition to file for divorce with the legal system. If they do not part amicably, there is a process where they go to court and it is decided who gets what, of whatever property and monies that were accrued together during their marriage," Hermione said, recalling her aunt's divorce proceedings. "For example, let’s say the wife does not hold a job and the man does. Then, during the divorce, it would be decided how much the man must pay in alimony each month to help support the wife; the support is something that ends, should the wife marry another man. Or vice versa."

"Very interesting," Luna remarked. "After this interview is published, I would like to do an article explaining more about Muggle divorce for our readers. I hope I can talk to you more about that?"

"Sure, Luna, though I recommend you talk to the Muggle marriage counselor Ron and I went to through the Muggle Alliance Network," Hermione said. "He helped us get through some rough patches, and it was through our counseling that Ron and I discovered that we never should have married in the first place. Especially after I learned about children."

"What did you not know about children, Hermione?" Luna asked, looking a bit confused.

"In a Muggle household, divorce – even with children – is a legal matter, not magical. Should a Muggle couple with children get a divorce, the children go off to live with one parent or the parents have joint custody. In the wizarding world, divorce with children means death. Being initially raised in the Muggle world, I didn't understand that, nor was I told beforehand."

"Really?" Luna said, looking almost shocked, considering her naturally calm demeanor.

"Yes," Hermione replied, trying not to let the anger and bitterness in her voice rise, or go into a tirade blaming Molly Weasley for everything. "It seems that in the rush to plan the wedding shortly after the war, it was never explained to me about the magical binding property of children where marriage was concerned. You can imagine how stunned I was to learn that, after being married for almost four years. I can only say that I'm thankful that Ron agreed with me that we should wait to have children. Had I learned the facts – about children making the marriage permanent and irreversible – after getting pregnant, it would be been an even bigger shock to me then."

This wasn't entirely truthful, as Ron did bug Hermione about having children once or twice.
However, after hearing her explain the additional burden requiring time, money, and the thought of having to face nappy changes, Ron then agreed to wait, even with pressure from his mother.

Luna went on to ask about how Hermione learned about Ron and Lavender, to which Hermione and Lavender spun a believable but fabricated lie, saying that Ron broke the news about Lavender after they agreed to a divorce. Hermione didn't like having to lie, but it would be too embarrassing to have everyone know Lavender had told her about their affair in her office while discussing Hermione’s future employment. That would make Hermione look like she was giving up her husband in exchange for employment during her apprenticeship.

"And I understand you have an apprenticeship under Albert Dobmeir, Lavender's new Potions master? Did that make it awkward?" Luna asked, honestly curious as to how Hermione handled that situation, but not out of morbid curiosity.

"Yes, at first. I had already arranged to have my apprenticeship with him before Ron and I mutually agreed to a divorce, and before I discovered Ron and Lavender were in love," Hermione said, which was an almost true timeline of events, "but this apprenticeship is something I have longed for and sought for many years. So I decided to be professional about this and not let a personal matter interfere with a business relationship."

Luna then turned to Lavender, "But as Hermione's employer, as I understand this is a paid apprenticeship, does this make it difficult to you?"

"Well, Hermione came highly recommended to Albert Dobmeir, who himself is a very talented Potions master," Lavender said graciously, bending over to offer Luna more tea, which she declined. "And so far, even this early into her apprenticeship, Mr. Dobmeir has said that he is very impressed with Hermione's knowledge and skill level. It doesn't hurt that she has so much experience where Potions ingredients are concerned, considering her previous job at the Department of Standards & Regulations. She had proven herself to be an invaluable member of the company in the short time she has been here."

The interview seemed to be wrapping up, and Luna gave each of them a chance to have something to say in closing. Lavender espoused how she regretted hurting Hermione, and hoped that one day that they could become friends once again. Ron gave a cautionary warning about people not succumbing to pressure from anyone into something so important and life-long as marriage.

"And you," Luna said, turning to Hermione. "What would you like to say that you haven't had the chance to address?"
Hermione paused for a moment to collect her thoughts. "If it was me who had fallen in love with someone else during our marriage instead of Ron, someone with whom I felt a deep and visceral connection, who seemed to understand me and listened to me, who was the first person I thought about when I woke up and the last person when I went to sleep at night," Hermione said, her eyes far away, recollecting her own feelings and how she fell in love with Severus, "someone I was drawn to mentally, spiritually and physically, whom I could talk to for hours, be lost in their arms, making me experience the heady and delirious sensation of falling deeply in love..." Hermione suddenly stopped when she realized she was confessing her own situation. She amended it hastily with, ",...as I'm sure Ron and Lavender fell for each other, then I hope Ron would understand that I never meant to hurt him. Just as I understand he never meant to hurt me, but could not help whom he fell in love with along the way."

With her little speech, recounting her own experience of falling for Severus inadvertently, she better understood and comprehended how Ron and Lavender fell for one another. It was not something done out of spite, but two souls who just happened to come across each other at the wrong time, just like her and Severus.

"Ron's heart was never mine to begin with, no matter how much we tried to convince ourselves otherwise," Hermione continued. "This is why I hope Ron and Lavender have a long and happy life together."

Ron placed his hand atop Hermione's, which was resting on the couch next to him, and asked, "Really, 'Mione? You want us to be happy?"

Hermione felt herself get a little misty-eyed as she looked at Ron and Lavender sitting next to each other, comfortable and supportive in each other's presence, and recalled how she felt the same way with Severus. She would want Ron to wish her happiness too if the roles were presently reversed.

"Yes," she nodded, her smile a little bittersweet.

Just then the camera flash popped and captured the moment that would be featured at the top of Luna's exclusive, showing reconciliation, forgiveness, and understanding amid divorce and an unintended affair.

The photographer left promptly once the interview was over. Lavender was about to rise to show Luna to the door when the blond editrix suddenly confessed, "I can certainly understand about how people should not rush into marriage. It was because I still had trouble dealing with my father's death towards the end of the war that Neville and I called off our engagement. As you said, this is something life-long, especially once you have children. And Neville understood. It was better to wait while I sorted through some things, and we both eventually agreed that we were too young to marry. I think what you have to say is important for others to hear, especially if it might steer
people from jumping into marriage recklessly or without giving it enough thought. Thank you; this was most illuminating and should definitely make people think."

Once Luna was gone, Ron looked at his ex-wife and asked, "You really, really meant that you want Lav and me to be happy? That wasn't just for the interview, was it?"

"Yes, Ron," she assured him. "I do want you and Lavender to be happy. You fell in love with her. And perhaps if we hadn’t rushed into marriage, you would have married her instead of me and we both would have been happier these past four years."

Lavender showed Hermione to the dining room where a light lunch was served up. All three of them ate together, the air having been cleared a little, before they headed off to the grand opening.

As Hermione ate, she realized that some of the bitterness she held towards Ron had dissipated. Of course she hadn't completely forgiven Ron, but putting herself in Ron's place – had she fallen for Severus years ago instead of months ago and felt an obligation to stick with Ron for monetary obligations and familiar pressure – she could see herself carrying on an affair with Severus for years, wanting to leave Ron but unable.

It made her heart a little lighter, but her heart was still heavy with her guilt regarding Harry and her grief for missing Severus.

More than anything, she wished she could look forward to heading off to Severus’ flat, sipping a nice cup of tea and sharing her day with him before dining on something wonderful he whipped up for her. Then there would be snuggling in his arms on the settee afterwards, reading together in companionable silence or making love. As it was, she was already experiencing the mental and emotional equivalent of withdrawal from the man who had quickly become her best friend and lover, who knew her better than anyone, even Ginny, Harry, or Ron.

Swallowing a mouthful of salad, Hermione wondered what Severus was up to at that very moment and what it was like where he was.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: A huge round of thanks to my betas, JuneW and Cytherea. Give my betas some well deserved love.
Chapter Seventy-One: "Jumbo Cockroach Clusters" Join Severus, Draco and Ginny as they experience their first day in sanctuary. Hermione is worn out from the grand opening of the Sirens' Secrets.

Disclaimer: Miss Jo (Rowling) owns everything. I own nothing in this story, except a really dirty imagination.

If you want a soundtrack to go along while treading this chapter, then open this YouTube link and listen while Severus, Draco, and Ginny enjoy their first day in sanctuary:
https://youtu.be/fjbiKCzlFZQ

The first day in the town of Malu Palekaiko, which shared the same name as the island Severus now called home, was certainly a memorable one.

The new sanctuary seekers went out for breakfast, famished, especially after the "thrilling" excitement of the morning with Potter showing up unannounced and causing a scene.

Severus recommended Draco and Ginny take their welcome packets with them as they went about the town. Deciding to see if his hunch was correct, he told Ginny and Draco to place their packets on the table in front of them at the restaurant, and Severus would keep his hidden.

At the Ohana Family Diner, the waitress greeted them with a warm "Aloha" and asked if they were tourists.
Ginny informed the waitress they had all been granted sanctuary that morning. The waitress smiled warmly at the two young lovers, but gave Severus the stink-eye until he pulled out his packet and innocently asked if she could recommend someplace in town to buy new clothes. Upon seeing Severus had his own welcome packet, she warmed up to him immediately and pointed to one shop on the list, giving them a brief set of directions to get there.

"What was that all about?" Ginny asked Severus after the waitress left to get their food.

He clued the two into the nonverbal stamp of approval the welcome packet provided, letting the townsfolk know they were not just to be tolerated, but welcomed with open arms.

They would have to cart them wherever they went until the luau tomorrow night. That is when they would most probably be introduced to the community, and then wouldn’t have to carry them as some giant paper badge of approval.

Breakfast for Severus consisted of a couple eggs, Portuguese sausage, toast, and more of that delicious Kona coffee he was quickly becoming addicted too. The plate originally came with rice, but he opted for something he normally associated with breakfast since rice seemed like a dinner starch. He eyed the pineapple marmalade suspiciously; he tried some on a corner of his toast and decided he would stick to citrus-based marmalades.

Draco raved about the macadamia nut pancakes with coconut syrup, while Ginny decided to be brave and go with what was marked in the menu as the local favorite: rice, a fried egg, and a hamburger patty with gravy.

Severus noted there was a lot of Spam on the menu.

"What's Spam again, Severus?" Draco asked, unfamiliar with the “delicacy.”

"Spare parts of anonymous meat," he muttered with distaste. Growing up poor, his mother served it up frequently as a cheap source of protein, and he still could not stand the sight or smell of it to that very day.

The sight of Spam sushi on the lunch menu almost ruined his appetite.

Then there was the heaping pile of fresh fruit that came in addition to what was listed on the menu
of each dish they ordered. It was meant as garnish, but it seemed like a whole other entree by itself.

Ginny had slices of starfruit, a fresh navel orange, and a big piece of papaya on the side. Draco had a huge slice of mango, fresh pineapple which was sweeter than anything he had ever eaten before, and strawberries, which were a real treat since strawberries were never in season in winter or autumn back in England. Severus had his own slice of pineapple, a large chunk of watermelon, and sliced banana.

Severus could see that if this was what was grown locally, he was going to be including a lot more fresh fruit into his diet. It was all so sweet and flavorful, far more than the stuff grown in the hot houses by wizards for the farmers’ market in Diagon Alley.

After a filling breakfast, they headed off to go clothes shopping. Severus, in his lightest weight woolen trousers, coolest linen shirt, and black leather boots, was already beginning to sweat. The heavy breakfast didn't help matters, and he wished he had stuck with a pastry and some coffee instead. It was barely ten o'clock, and Severus was tempted to roll his sleeves up, as was Draco, but refrained, both self-conscious about their Dark Marks.

They reached the recommended clothing shop and entered.

A wizard, who looked like he was barely old enough to shave, welcomed them all with a warm, "Aloha."

"Yes, we just relocated here, and we need more appropriate attire for your local clime," Severus said.

"Dude, what?" he said, looking at Severus blankly. Noticing the welcome packets clutched in their hands, the shopkeeper suddenly brightened up and said, "Ah, sanctuary seekers. Sweet. I guess you'll be needing new duds if yer gonna live here, huh?"

"Yes, you could say that," Severus remarked dryly. The young wizard had a dark golden tan and light brown hair that was sun-bleached toward the tips of his unruly mop – but certainly did not speak like a proper Englishman.

"Alright, then. Wahine, this way," the young wizard said, his arm outstretched toward one side of the store.
Severus, Ginny, and Draco didn't know who he was referring to.

"Ladies," the shopkeeper clarified before showing Ginny over to the section featuring fashions for the tropical witch.

He even showed her different ways how to tie a pareo, which was nothing more than a large, patterned rectangle of cloth artfully wrapped around the body. It could be worn as a dress by itself, as a skirt, or just a cover-up while wearing a bathing suit. Then there were muumuu dresses of various styles from billowy with long sleeves to snug-fitting spaghetti-strap ones that would hug her curves. Ginny pulled out an armload of clothes and began trying them on in the fitting room, which was nothing but some hung cloth dividers.

From the radio in corner, the local Wizarding Wireless Network was playing some Hawaiian music. The sounds of a slack guitar gently strumming away while someone sang in the Hawaiian language was just loud enough to be heard, as soft background music. It was all very restful and relaxing, and Severus, though not accustomed to the music, did not find it grating on his nerves at all, but even a bit soothing.

"Kane... that means men," the young wizard said, directing Severus and Draco to the men's fashions on the other side of the store.

"Um, there certainly are a lot of short-sleeved shirts," Draco remarked.

Looking at them with their long-sleeved shirts and their pale skin, the shopkeeper said, "So where you guys come from, Ireland?"

What was it with these Yanks guessing they came from every country but England? Could they not hear their accent and tell the difference? Evidently not, based on a third assumption they were from yet another country other than England.

"England."

"Cool." The young wizard bobbed his head up and down for a bit, some nonverbal gesture showing he approved. "Yeah, my grandfather sought sanctuary from England back in 1945, but he doesn't talk about it. He certainly lost a lot of his accent since he doesn't sound anything like you guys."
Severus' back went straight. The only wizards from England who would be seeking sanctuary in Malu Palekaiko around that time would be Grindelwald's followers after Dumbledore defeated him. It was the exodus of Grindelwald's followers to this tiny island that cause Dumbledore to expunge the entire Hawaiian Island chain from every wizarding book in Great Britain. There were one or two books which referred to "The Sandwich Islands", but even then, it was in passing with no specifics. But as Mounga told Severus, people usually changed their ways once coming here, seeking to fit into society and not cause trouble anymore.

The former spy would have to see if there would be bad blood still felt towards them by Grindelwald's former followers, should they discover he and Draco were once Dumbledore's men.

Even Draco knew his history and gave Severus a fleeting glance that he too was concerned.

Most everything on the racks was bright and a bit obnoxious. The shopkeeper, who did know a bit about fashion, steered Draco towards the pale pastels, helping him pull out a pale blue and silver Hawaiian shirt with a subtle bamboo pattern. He said it would accent his eyes and not make him look so washed-out, considering the blond hadn't built up a tan yet.

Severus was directed to the darker shades. The shopkeeper pulled out a black Hawaiian shirt with an asymmetrical pattern featuring green foliage, and another in a dark wine-red with a hibiscus pattern in white.

As for trousers, the only ones were denim for those who wanted to go hiking out onto the lava bed. Severus bought a pair, as he knew he would be doing that while exploring the island. The denim was practical, since he read in his welcome packet some formations of lava were very sharp, with one type of lava called a'a (ah-ah), which is exactly the sound one would be making should one fall on it. Its texture was described as broken glass, and just as sharp from the lacerations one would suffer if one fell on it.

Severus and Draco knew they'd have to start wearing shorts, as it seemed to be the prevalent style and they would fit in better with the locals. Also, it was not even noon and they were dying to get into something cool and made of cotton, even if it meant their pasty white legs were exposed.

Severus came out of the changing room sporting a pair of beige-colored shorts with lots of pockets and a loop to hold his wand, and the black Hawaiian shirt that was selected for him.

The shop keeper said, "Whoa, that is some wicked ink there, dude. What is that? Wizard or Muggle?"
Severus uncomfortably noticed the young wizard was pointing to his Dark Mark. Severus decided not to make an issue out of it as that would only draw attention to it. "Wizard," he replied, his voice a bit clipped.

"That's totally sweet. I got this one bit of wizard ink when I finished school last summer. My mom had a total cow, but oh well," he said in his particular drawl that was not exactly like the others they had met, and seemed more American than the very slight hint of Hawaiian accent Halulu and Mounga spoke with. At that point, the shopkeeper started unbuttoning his shirt to show off the wizard ink on his chest of a shark surfing along the waves. "They call me Shark and I like to surf, so it only seemed natural."

The wizard tattoo of the shark was swimming with the wave, surfing along as it crested, its tail moving back and forth.

Severus politely nodded. He hoped they could finish shopping soon and move onto getting some footwear soon.

Draco came out and instantly looked like he belonged as a local, except for the blindingly white skin. His long hair, lean silhouette with a muscular form, and insouciant attitude made him look like he'd blend in once he got a bit of sun. Which brought up a whole new set of issues.

Malfoys burned easily to a crisp in the sun.

They would have to get some potions to help ease the tanning process, otherwise Ginny and Draco were not going to have any opportunity to be intimate if Draco was suffering from a sunburn. There were potions to take the pain away and ease the transition from days to a few hours, Severus had read that in his literature provided, but sunburns were not fun to suffer through even for a short period of time.

During Severus' Potions apprenticeship, Reginald Chuff had dragged Severus out into the deep deserts of Northern Africa, and had not warned Severus where they was going or to bring protection from the sun. Chuff, who had brought a hat and appropriate attire for himself, seemed to find some perverse pleasure in Severus suffering from a sunburn, feeling cold at night in their tent, and unable to pull a blanket over to cover himself as the blanket seemed to warm the skin and make the skin burn even more. Severus did not have any potions for sunburn or anything to ease his pain, so he had to deal with it for three days until he got back and could brew something himself. Severus would not let Draco suffer like he did.
Ginny emerged from her own dressing room in a bright green tight-fitting sleeveless muumuu that contrasted with her red hair nicely, as well as accented her figure.

The two lovers kissed briefly and remarked about each other's clothes before Ginny went back to put on the other clothes she had yet to try.

Severus wound up getting six pairs of shorts in the same style but in different colors, and seven shirts. There was surely more clothing stores on this island, as there were about a half-dozen listed in the welcome packet, but this would get him started without having to run off to have laundry done every day.

Shark didn't sell any shoes, but he directed them to some place three doors down that did.

Ginny paid for their clothes, since she was the one with the money and Draco had yet to visit the local Gringotts branch.

Once outfitted with new clothes and footwear – a mix of lightweight shoes, sandals and a pair of hiking boots for Severus – they stopped by the apothecary for sunburn and tanning potions, plus some mosquito repellent.

Suddenly, between the heat of the day that was building and their activities, all three decided to go back to their hotel and take a rest, feeling the effects of Portkey lag and an eleven-hour time difference. Their circadian rhythms had not reset to their new time zone.

Back at the hotel, Severus hoped he could sleep this time without being woken up by obnoxious Aurors or a screaming Justina.

As Severus lay in bed beneath the mosquito netting, he imagined Hermione wrapped in a pareo, a single knot tied around the back of her neck keeping her clothed, with nothing on underneath. How one simple knot could be undone and reveal her body to him appealed to him greatly.

Had the vial not slipped from her trembling fingers, she would be there with him, lying there nude, commenting on how warm it was.
His hand reached out and touched the pillow next to him, imagining her smiling back at him and asking if he liked her new outfits. They would be wondering what the luau would be like, both of them guessing how close Ginny's attempt at Hawaiian cooking from a cookbook back home really matched local cuisine.

Glancing at the clock, he saw that it was a little past noon, which meant it was about eleven in the evening back in Diagon Alley. The Sirens' Secrets would be having its grand opening in a little over twelve hours; and wondered how the reception would be, considering the sexual nature of the products to be sold, and the recent news of Miss Brown having an affair with Ronald Weasley, as it was known she was a co-partner in the store. He hoped that the scandal would not keep customers away, or just the sheer attraction of going to a store owned by the now infamous Miss Lavender Brown might drive even more customers to it. Either way, he hoped the Galleons from the potions he developed, especially for the store, would help line his vault, once Miss Brown did a bit of money laundering.

As he was falling asleep, Severus could tell that the two love birds had forgotten to put up a Silencing Charm. Instead, he cast his own so he could sleep without being disturbed.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Exhausted and with her feet killing her from having to stand around the entire time she was there at the grand opening of The Sirens' Secrets, Hermione kicked off her shoes and flopped face down onto her bed. She wanted desperately to get out of these damn tights, but wondered if she had the strength to do it.

"Fuck it," she mumbled into her pillow. Reaching for her wand, straining to pull it free, she finally waved it and all her clothes were off, folded over in a corner in a neat pile.

Hermione didn't use a wand in a way that she thought would be a sign of laziness, such as putting her clothes off and on, brushing teeth, chopping vegetables, and doing other simple tasks she could do herself, but she was thankful she knew the spell to undress.

Now she was nude without a nightgown on. She didn't care and crawled under the covers, recently having grown a likeness for sleeping au naturel. It was a habit she had picked up falling asleep Saturday nights at Severus' flat since he did as well, usually both dropping off after making love.

Now, instead of snuggling in his arms, she dropped off to sleep while thoughts of the evening’s events danced in her head.

Working at The Sirens’ Secrets grand opening had been truly work and not pleasure. She’d had to become acquainted with all the Lovely Lavender Company’s potions so that she could answer
questions about them, including potions she hadn’t helped develop. The only thing that helped her keep her sanity from the scandalous stares she received while standing around and answering those questions, was the fact that all the potions were flying off the shelves. Some people were buying four or five bottles at a shot.

Two potions nearly sold out by the end of the night. One was the Male Enhancement Potion that was given the rather obvious name of "Sequoia," which was the genus name for redwood trees. It was a rather obvious attempt to make men think that this potion would give them a big, red piece of wood. The other potion that flew off the shelves was the Arousal Potion Hermione had personally developed with Severus, that had been given the apt name of "Irresistible."

The two potions, besides being sold separately, were also sold together as a "Romantic Evening" package, with a very obvious warning no one was to take both potions that one was for men and the other for women. On the back was a long list of complications that would arise should some wizard get it into his tiny, little, sex-addled brain to take both. There was an emergency antidote included, should someone be thick-headed enough to try it.

With all those potions sold, Hermione could see the Galleons rolling in, which made her not quite so grumpy.

Ron had made a brief appearance and then had to go meet with Bascom regarding an update on the press and Luna's interview with him, which would come out Monday.

Molly hadn’t even shown up, most probably not wanting to be seen in such a shop. Arthur made a quick appearance as well to congratulate the twins on the launch of another business, and Lavender as well, who would soon be his new daughter-in-law. He gave an uneasy smile and glanced about with a nervous eye, no doubt wondering what wizardom was coming to for such a shop to open, but kept his opinions to himself.

Arthur had taken the news of Ron and Hermione's divorce a bit rough at first, but upon being informed about how Molly had practically kicked Ron in the pants into a marriage he neither wanted nor was ready for, and Ron's sincere intentions to be a good and very faithful husband to Lavender, Arthur warmed up to the new arrangement. He wasn't completely happy about the situation, but saw for the three persons involved in this love triangle, it was for the best.

Arthur greeted Hermione and apologized for Molly's behavior. He insisted that had he known that his wife had been so... peremptory with Ronald, he would have stepped in and said something. Hermione wondered if Arthur just chose to ignore his wife's overbearing attitude, instead of acknowledging it when it was a problem at the time. He certainly said or did nothing when Molly harped on about children at family gatherings in front of the whole Weasley clan.
But Hermione supposed that his love for Molly made him blind to her faults, accepting her just as she was. Just as Hermione accepted Severus for his own faults, willing to look past them and take them part and parcel of the whole package.

Bill and Fleur had a house-elf watching the children, since this was not a store for children. Also, the shop had a minimum age restriction of seventeen, the age of consent in the wizarding world, to enter – similar to the age barrier around the Goblet of Fire. Fleur asked about the "Romantic Evening" package; Hermione could not confess she had personally tested it out herself, so instead she answered that she’d read about the effects.

Charlie – who was upset with Ron, Hermione and Lavender, regarding the divorce scandal and siding with his mother, despite his otherwise carefree and contemporary attitude he exhibited – did not show up.

Percy found the whole idea of a sex shop to be beneath his brothers, and the idea that Ron's second wife to be was involved in this enterprise appalled the primmest and most uptight of the Weasley men. He made some excuse that he might come by sometime to check to make sure the shop was up to Ministry standards.

The twins had given Hermione a warm welcome and thanked her for the last-minute idea to add some seasonal flair to their wares. It seemed the bell nipple pasties with pre-spelled sticking charms were a big hit. The pasties rang out little Christmas songs once applied. The store sold out of them before the night was out. George had to run over to the workshop to make more, and they were selling faster than he could make them and stock them on the shelves. The twins had heard from Lavender about how Hermione was going to earn royalties on a few potions she’d consulted on with Delgado, and in return for her inspiration, they’d offered her five percent royalties on the profits from the bell nipple pasties.

Fred had cornered Hermione and asked her if Ron had been a guinea pig for any of the Potions she’d consulted on. Hermione truthfully answered she hadn't tried them with Ron, but Lavender might have, which could have happened; she didn't know, but wouldn't put it past her. Lavender had told Severus she tested them herself, which means Ron must have been part of the testing process as well.

The twins wished that Ginny hadn't arranged her holiday with Harry right before the opening, but couldn't wait for her reaction once she got back. Hermione smiled and nodded, not saying anything.

Hermione would have to check on her vault, the one that was in her name alone, and see how much she’d raked in over the weekend from royalties.
It seemed during the course of the day everyone who was there in Diagon Alley had swung by and checked out the newest shop. Of course the windows were discreetly covered in such a way that no one could see the wares that were sold, but tastefully rendered artwork indicated that this was a shop for adults only without making mothers cover their children's eyes when they passed.

The magical dildos were certainly an item of curiosity, with many witches looking about furtively as they hid one under their cloak to take up to the counter for purchase, so no one would see them traipsing through the store holding one.

A copy of the store's Owl order catalogs were included in all the bags so anyone who wanted to purchase more items, but were too shy to make a personal appearance at the store again, would not be denied the business of pleasure.

And how much more awkward would it have been had Hermione agreed to manage The Sirens' Secrets as she had once been offered by the twins? At least working for Lavender, she was now working on her Potions apprenticeship and not all the potions she would work on would be sex-related.

The *Daily Prophet* came to report on the opening of the new store, but given the nature of the items for sale, the article would probably wind up on the back page, beneath the obituaries. The placement would likely bring in complaints from grieving family members, who would be even more upset when the newspaper offered to post the obituary again at a reduced rate. That hadn’t stopped the newspaper from taking Lavender's money to do a full-page center spread advertising the store and its grand opening.

Before Hermione dropped off to sleep, Galleons dancing in her head, she made a promise to finally get around to buying an owl for herself and Owl her parents that she would be coming over for dinner some night soon. She had yet to tell them about her divorce and wondered how they would handle the news, though they had probably already read about it given they had a subscription to the *Daily Prophet*.

Dobmeir had said even though apprenticeships were a seven-day a week arrangement, he understood there were some things Hermione had to do for Lavender that would cut into their time to work together as master and apprentice. He was also amenable enough to let her ask for one day off a week, if she needed it for family and personal business. She would talk to Dobmeir about taking either Saturday or Sunday off next weekend in which to visit her parents.

Given that Wendy Granger's sister, Christine, was divorced, Hermione thought that her parents would probably take the news in stride. Luna certainly had been surprised to discover during the
interview earlier in the day that Hermione had an aunt that was divorced and was happily married to another man.

When the Monday edition of *The Quibbler* would hit the stands, it would be interesting to gauge the wizarding population's reaction to the story. Perhaps once the interview was read by nearly everyone, people would stop staring at Hermione as if she was wearing a scarlet letter.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

While Severus was passed out cold, suffering the after-effects of the Polyjuice Potion, Draco and Ginny had woken up and headed to the local Gringotts branch to check on Draco's vault, too excited to rest. The bank transfer had gone off without a hitch. There was enough money in the vault to last for many years, plus enough to lend Severus to set him up comfortably, but should it run low, there were other vaults all over the world Draco could visit. And hopefully Hermione would not take years to clear their names, as that would mean Draco’s being at risk for being caught abroad should Draco need to run off to another country to transfer funds back to the Malu Palekaiko Gringotts branch.

Then again, once Ginny was married and officially a Malfoy, she would have her own key and her name would be added to the list of people who could access the Malfoy family vaults, as right now Draco was the sole person. If anything, Ginny could go abroad and transfer funds without an Auror hauling her back to England to be brought before the Wizengamot, unless she was convicted in absentia of helping two Death Eaters escape – then all bets would be off.

Waking up, groggy and momentarily confused, Severus wasn't sure looking at the clock if it was ten past six in the morning or in the evening. The light was about the same with the sun down at that time, which meant the sun would rise in half an hour or it had set a half hour ago.

The sound of children playing in the distance and people chatting, filling nearby bars and restaurants with Friday night patrons, told Severus he hadn't slept the clock around. He had traveled by Portkey over different time zones before, but this was by far the hardest time shift to adjust to.

After rising, showering, and shaving, he dressed in some of his new clothes before going to knock on Ginny and Draco's door.

He was bid to enter and found the two engrossed in a game of wizard poker. Draco was winning. Wizard poker was a standard diversion in the Slytherin common room, since it taught Slytherins strategy, how to be more cunning, and to keep an impassive face no matter how good or bad of a hand they had. Ginny, having grown up with six older brothers, wasn't far behind.
Having skipped out on lunch, Severus was famished and suggested that they head out to dinner. Before going out into the night air to walk along the town’s main street, they remembered to bring along their welcome packets in order to smooth over the introduction process.

As they passed one bar called “Bongo's,” its front door wide open to the street, they heard someone call Severus' name out.

"Severus! Sev!" Mounga called out and waved the three of them inside to join him.

As they entered the bar, the bartender spotted new people and shouted "Aloha!" which the patrons mimicked in unison a beat later, greeting the trio.

"Sev, you don't mind if I call you Sev, do you?" Mounga asked.

Severus was about to protest and insist on his full name, but Mounga and the rest of the population had a very laid-back and relaxed attitude; it didn't seem like an insult or a way to diminish any respect for him, just a way of being friendly.

He replied, "It's alright, you can call me Sev, though I'm not used to it," he added hesitantly, hoping they got the hint.

Ginny almost burst into giggles.

Severus couldn't believe that the atmosphere was affecting him as much as allowing that abominable nickname to be associated with him, but he let it slide. If he found he couldn't stand it by the end of the night, he would ask people to use his full name.

"Great, Sev. I'd like to introduce you to my wife, Rainbow," Mounga said with great pride.

The witch sitting next to him on a bar stool was tall, with an average build. She was a striking-looking woman with wavy dark brown hair, skin almost as dark and golden as her husband's, and large brown almond-shaped eyes full of warmth and that spoke of a life of happiness.

"Aloha, Sev. I understand you just came here last night for sanctuary."
"Yes," Severus said, shaking Rainbow's hand, which didn't seem to be enough of a greeting as she got off her bar stool and gave Severus a welcoming hug. "And I'd like to introduce my friends who also came with me seeking sanctuary, Ginny Potter and Draco Malfoy."

"Drake, Ginny, pleasure to meet you," Rainbow said before – not even bothering with a handshake – she embraced the pair like they were old friends.

Severus wondered if the people were just this friendly in Hawaii, the alcohol was loosening polite decorum when meeting new people, or people in cultures of lower latitudes were always this affectionate. He remembered hearing Hermione's tale of the overly affectionate Italians she'd encountered during her honeymoon. Perhaps all three were true.

"Dra-co," the blond wizard muttered as he accented the second syllable, not wanting to have his name turn into a one-syllable nickname – Drake, like the duck – as his mentor was seemingly willing to put up with.

"I'm sorry, Draco," Rainbow apologized. "So what's this I hear from Justina about a wedding?" Rainbow's eyes lit up and Severus could have sworn that her eyes changed color from brown to gold, but given the dim light in the bar, it was hard to tell.

"Well, I just divorced my husband, who I was forced to marry by my mother, after being tricked by her into believing that Draco had disappeared," Ginny explained, trying to keep the long story as short as possible. "So now that I'm free to marry Draco, we want to get married as soon as possible."

"Why not a Christmas wedding. Ooh, or better yet, a New Year's Eve wedding! I hear those things are pretty popular in Scotland. You're from Scotland, right?" Rainbow asked.

"England," Severus corrected her.

'That's four. Yet another country to add to the count,' Severus thought.

"But ooh, it sounds like your love story is so romantically tragic, but with a happy end," Rainbow gushed with relish, placing her cheek in one hand, her elbow resting on the bar.
"Trust me, romantic tragedies might be fun to read in romance novels, but they are depressing as hell to live in real life," Ginny said somberly, her eyes diverted downwards.

"But you're here now, together, and it all worked out in the end. Drinks on us," Rainbow insisted, before waving the bartender over for a round of drinks.

Pointing to Draco first, she said, "A Sharktini for the blond, an Over the Rainbow for Pele's little twin sister, and a Wipe-Out for the Byronic hero," she finished, pointing to Severus.

Had Draco had a mouthful of beverage in his mouth already, he would have spit it out of his mouth. Rainbow seemed to have Severus' number to a tee – Byronic hero indeed.

Severus noted that while Mounaga was more of the silent type, his wife, Rainbow, more than made up in verbosity for the two of them.

"Pele's little sister?" Ginny asked for clarification.

"Pele, goddess of volcanoes, lightning, and wind; the one who made this paradise we live on and the Hawaiian chain with her fire and lava? Known for her power and passion?" Rainbow prompted them. "Lots of siblings?" Draco started sniggering. "Did you read that in your packet yet?"

"No, we've been trying to get some much-needed sleep, breakfast, and clothes," Severus explained for Ginny's lapse in knowledge. "Speaking of which, I didn't eat lunch. Did you?"

Draco and Ginny both shook their heads. They had been busy with Gringotts and each other to bother much with food.

"Well, it'll be one drink then," Rainbow said. Then she warned them, "But within your first week here, you must make a trip to the edge of the caldera and make an offering to Pele in thanks for providing you with sanctuary. To not thank her would be a great offense and bring bad luck." She nodded with great seriousness that she was not joking.

Severus had read about Pele in the Muggle tourism books, but wasn't sure how much of the myth transcended across to wizardom. The Muggle books included horror stories – as a warning – of those who had thought to take a piece of lava rock back home from Hawaii as a souvenir, only to have a string of bad luck, each incident more horrible and ridiculous than the next, until they
mailed the rock back and had the string of bad luck end.

Considering this sort of stuff was happening to Muggles, and myth was often based in fact, he wasn't going to risk it and would suggest that all three of them make the trip tomorrow to make an offering to Pele to ensure nothing went wrong. Severus was not superstitious and did not worship foreign deities, but he was cautious.

Just then, their drinks arrived. Draco's Sharktini drink was in a large martini glass; it had a couple blue gummi sharks swimming around that tried to bite his finger when he tried to fish them out to take a sip. Ginny's Technicolor concoction was a drink layered with various fruit juices, liqueurs, and spirits where the colors were exactly in the same order of a rainbow; the tall glass was as shapely as Ginny's silhouette. With each sip, Ginny's cheeks flushed rainbow colors before going back to her naturally freckled pale skin.

Severus' Wipe-Out drink was served up in a very large pineapple that was carved out in the center. Along the rim of the carved out pineapple was an array of various decorations, fruit, and accoutrement. First he picked out the umbrella, then the little plastic red monkey that had already eaten half of his maraschino cherry, a large hibiscus flower, a slice of lime, a sprig of mint, and lastly a zest curl of orange rind skewered with a shaft of fresh bamboo that had still had some leaves attached, but he left the straw.

Peering into the fruit hull container, he sniffed at it and scrutinized it.

"You're a Potions master, aren't you!" Rainbow piped up.

"How can you tell?" he wondered.

"Only a Potions master would analyze a drink like that before drinking it," she astutely observed. "Do you tutor?"

Severus had just had his first sip and he wasn't sure what it was that made him choke. It could have been her question about tutoring, having been glad to no longer face teaching children ever again, or it could have been the mix of distilled palm sap wine mixed with rum and vodka, topped with pineapple juice, coconut liquor, guava juice, and something else masked by the various fruit flavors, but it was most probably both.

As he was about to make it perfectly clear he no longer worked in academia, the first sip hit his
stomach and went straight into his veins and up to his brain. Suddenly, Severus was feeling calm. It was like taking a whole vial of Draught of Peace, but his face and fingertips were starting to feel a little numb. If he could remember later, he would have to figure out what that mysterious ingredient was that he couldn't identify.

'I better have another sip of this to see if I can identify that last ingredient,' Severus thought to himself.

Silly wizard.

Suddenly, he realized he was nodding as Rainbow went on about her twelve-year-old at home who needed help with Potions, since she taught her own children herself. She claimed their community was too small to support a fully-staffed wizarding school, and most people home-schooled, bringing tutors in as needed.

"So you might consider tutoring, Sev?" she asked as Severus was on his second... or was it his fourth sip?

"Sure," he said, his speech a little slurred.

Draco quickly took Severus' drink away, which made the older wizard give him a look that was a cross between being affronted and confusion.

"Drinks have been lovely," Ginny said quickly as she and Draco each put an arm under Severus. "So nice to meet you, Rainbow; it was good to see you again, Mounga. But we really need to get some food into him now."

Severus was practically carried out the door. His friends could have used a Mobilicorpus spell, but that would have been even more embarrassing for Severus and his yet untarnished reputation in this small town.

The Potions master had a high tolerance level of alcohol. What he was not used to was the mix of lots of sugar and alcohol together, but Draco suspected there might have been something a little extra added as well. The sugar fed the alcohol, amplifying the effect greatly. On Severus' empty stomach and the strength of the distilled spirits in that alcoholic-filled edible bromeliad, the normally formal Potions master would have danced a jig on the bar singing "I've got a lovely pair of coconuts" if you asked him to; or it could have been that last unknown ingredient(s) that now
sent him three sheets to the wind.

Draco was used to seeing Severus drunk on an empty stomach on scotch, gin, whiskey, and vodka, but whatever he’d drank certainly made Severus pissed in no time flat.

As they walked along the boardwalk, their packets rolled up and shoved in various pockets, while they used both hands to carry Severus, one under each arm, they spotted a noodle joint. Carting him inside and plopping him in the nearest chair at a table, since the sign said, "Seat Yourself", they asked the waitress for recommendations for something quick as their friend had just had a drink on an empty stomach and it had gone straight to his head.

"Eh, Eddie!" the waitress bellowed. "We got an empty bottle here! Ramen and fast!"

Before she’d even finished yelling across the small hole in the wall called a restaurant, a bowl of ramen noodles appeared right in front of Severus, topped with slices of pork, bean sprouts, green onions, and fish cake, all sitting in a rich pork broth.

Severus grabbed the chopsticks and tried to arrange them in his hands, but because his fingers were numb, the thin sticks of wood kept slipping out of his hands.

After the third try, one stick fell on the floor and Severus attempted to fetch it off the floor when Ginny huffed in exasperation, "Oh, for Merlin's sake!" She turned and was about to use her wand to Summon a fork when the waitress handed her a fork and spoon for Severus to use, giving her friend a look of pity.

Placing the fork in Severus' hand, Ginny watched with great difficulty as Severus forked a huge mouthful of ramen into his gob, but couldn't find the end of the long noodles, so he started chewing with a bunch of noodles still hanging from his mouth, draping into the bowl. He looked like Chtulu's idiot little brother.

Glancing over at Draco, Ginny saw that he was enjoying this immensely, trying not to bust up into fits of laughter.

"Oh Ginny, when we get a Pensieve, we have got to show Severus this."
Ginny glared at Draco, but then started laughing herself.

Once Severus got the hang of how to use a fork – again – they ordered a couple bowls of noodles for themselves. Ginny ordered a bowl of Vietnamese pho, and Draco ordered the Chinese wonton soup.

Half-way through his dinner, Severus started to come back down to reality.

"How did we get into this..." the confused inebriate was fumbling for the right word, "food-place."

"Restaurant," Ginny offered.

"Right, restaurant?"

"What was the last thing you remember, Severus?" Draco asked, wondering just what the hell was in Severus' drink, because Draco's Sharktini had also been potent, but it hadn't knocked him for a loop like Severus' did.

Severus looked around, no longer slumped over his bowl of ramen. "I just had a sip of that drink. What was it called?"

"Wipe-Out," Ginny answered.

"Perfect name," Severus commented. "Or was it two sips... then next thing I know I'm here and evidently have eaten some...?"

"Ramen," Draco answered this time, enjoying his own bowl of soup, using a spoon.

The waitress – a name tag that said “Flo” – came back over and looked at Severus with her brows raised and asked, "Feeling better, sunshine?"

"Yes, much. Thank you." Severus saw the way the waitress smiled a little sardonically and shook her head as she walked away.
Severus did not even want to ask what spectacle he’d made of himself before coming to his senses. Even in his blindest drunk stupor, he could usually recall everything perfectly, even that time Draco found him piss drunk the night after he’d revealed himself to Hermione, and the offering of gin to Draco. There was that time he’d told Hermione to fuck-off, but that was a rare moment he did not recall with clarity while completely blathered. But whatever he’d drank made his mind a complete blank when trying to recall the events between the first sip and just a few minutes ago.

"I think Rainbow ordered that drink to get you to agree to tutor her son in Potions. You seemed to keep nodding your head as if agreeing," Draco filled his mentor in on lost time.

Severus was in the middle of shoving a fork full of twirled ramen noodles into his mouth when he gave a look to Draco as if to say, "I did not agree, did I?"

After chewing and swallowing, Severus said, "I will just have to clear the matter up with her later. But for tomorrow, a trip to offer something to Pele will be on the agenda. And then I guess we’d better make our appearance at the luau tomorrow night, since it seems we are expected. Besides, once there, I doubt we'll have to haul these around everywhere we go," Severus said as he pulled out his welcome packet which was now curled up and a bit rumpled, having been shoved in his pocket and sat upon.

He tapped his wand on his packet and it was once again flat and no longer creased.

Once dinner was over, paid for by Draco since he did make a trip to the bank, they perambulated down the sidewalk. Draco and Ginny were arm-in-arm, and Severus walked next to them, three abreast. Ginny eventually placed her other arm through Severus’ and the three strolled along, enjoying the tropical breeze that blew up from the shore nearby.

It was nearly nine at night and Severus felt wide awake as if it was morning time. He would have to brew some Invigoration Draughts and sleeping potions until his body adjusted to the new time zone. Then he realized he didn't have any space to work, now that he could brew Potions, nor did he have any equipment except for some knives and a few kitchen implements he’d brought along. He would have to see if Justina had a spare cauldron he could use in her kitchen to do some simple brewing until his long-term housing arrangements could be ironed out.

Ginny and Draco, who had not slept nearly as much as Severus did, were ready to turn in early. Given all that had happened in the last twenty-four hours, they were ready to get some much needed rest.
Severus said he would return to the hotel later and wanted to drink in the night.

The shore was a few short blocks away, so he walked towards it along the beach that stretched along the harbor in the nearly full moon. Looking about, he noticed a strange movement in the sand and wondered if it was a trick of the pale silvery light. Holding his wand out down towards the ground, he said, "Lumos."

The beach was covered in a carpet of insects crawling in every direction. It certainly took away the romantic notion of wishing Hermione was there walking with him, with the palm trees swaying and the moonlight on the shimmering water.

Ignoring the insects, as they were crushed beneath his sandals, Severus could imagine Ginny and Draco finally reaching the room to see giant cockroaches on the wall and mosquito netting he had read about, and had just viewed by wand-light.

These weren't ordinary cockroaches that scampered for darkness when you turned on the light, these were the infamous giant Hawaiian cockroaches, approximately one to three inches in length, that practically told you to fuck off and would fly at you, should you try to chase them away.

Yes, he could almost make out the distant noise of Ginny’s strident shriek of terror, but the sound of crashing surf masked the sound. Maybe Severus should have warned Ginny not to banish the geckos from their room. Pity she and Draco didn't read far enough along in their packets.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I have commissioned Miokah to do a piece of fan art of Drunk!Severus trying to eat ramen. You can view it here: http://www.deviantart.com/art/Drunk-Eating-COM-598629023

Thank you to be betas, JuneW and Cygnuz for their excellent beta skills in cleaning up this chapter.

Ohana means “family” in Hawaiian, so the Ohana Family Diner is actually the “Family Family Diner.”

If you want a sample of what was coming over the WWN while Severus, Draco and
Ginny were shopping in Shark's shop, you can listen to some Hawaiian music here on YouTube: https://youtu.be/fjbiKCzlFZQ

I wrote this chapter in June 2014. So when I went to Kailua-Kona, Hawaii in April 2015, imagine my surprise when I discovered there was a restaurant called “Bongo Ben's” right in the heart of town, less than a year after I wrote about a bar called “Bongo's.” Talk about hitting very close to the mark.

If you think I am making up the cockroaches for my story, you are sadly mistaken. The cockroaches really are that big and aggressive in Hawaii: http://www.instanthawaii.com/cgi-bin/hawaii?Animals.roach

My mom recounted the story of her and my father's second honeymoon for their 25th wedding anniversary. On Kauai, they had a room right on the beach. On one moonlit night, they decided to sit on a long log on the beach by their room and enjoy the moonlight on the water.

As my mother sat there, she said, "Honey, the sand is moving."

My dad said, "You're imagining it."

Until he looked closer and they both noticed the entire beach was covered with crawling insects.

They promptly went inside.

It was in the middle of summer and the insects are less prevalent on the beach in winter. I know it is early December for this chapter, but this was too good a scene not to incorporate into my story.
Chapter Summary

Severus, Ginny and Draco attend the Christmas recital and luau: Ginny dances and Severus attracts a few admirers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Seventy-Two
“Friends, Food, and Flirtation”

Disclaimer: (in Pig Latin)
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Severus and Draco were waiting in the hotel lobby for Ginny to come downstairs The invitation to the luau said it would start at four o'clock, and it was already four-fifteen.

Draco's foot tapped impatiently while he muttered under his breath about Ginny planning her time better.

Even Severus did not want to show up late. It would not make a good impression to arrive late for introductions before the festivities began.

Ginny had to dig out all her belly dancing wear from the bottom of her own handbag that had been enlarged with an Extension Charm, plus find her music box that had all her belly dancing music on it. Then there was the decision of what to wear – the green or the red-orange-gold outfit? Or should she wear the peach-colored outfit? Maybe the blue one? Turkish-style belt or Egyptian-style? What finger cymbals did she want to use – her large ones or the smaller ones with the higher pitch? And then what caftan to wear as a cover-up until it was time to dance? At least all her scarves were easy to find and none of the silk had torn in transit, which she worried about despite her very careful packing.
Justina had already taken off for the luau, saying she had to get there early to help set up and get dressed, since she was dancing with the hula teachers at the beginning of the evening.

Draco was about to run upstairs and drag Ginny out, ready or not, when she finally emerged from their room and descended the stairs. Severus could hear her long before he saw her, with her costume sewn with rows of coins. Not that Severus could see them, as she was already wearing her caftan over her outfit. She had her long silk scarf wrapped around her neck to place it somewhere until it was time to dance.

She was wearing some bejeweled sandals and heavy make-up around the eyes, accenting them with lots of eye shadow, kohl, and mascara. When Draco asked why she needed more sandals if she already had the ones she was currently wearing, she explained that they were for her costume.

"But you dance barefoot. I don't see why you can't wear them besides when you dress up?" he lamented.

Ginny shook her head as they headed off to the community center, the wizards hoping they wouldn't be perceived as rude for showing up late.

They arrived at the large outdoor center, its sides open to the cool evening breeze. There was a large stage at one end and a communal kitchen towards the back. The tables were full of food, but hardly anyone was there.

"Did we miss it?" Draco asked, holding Ginny's music box that he'd carried from the hotel.

Someone who was placing some rice balls along the table, trying to find an available spot among the other dishes that packed the long buffet, just looked at Draco and laughed.

"The invitation did say four o'clock," Severus said, aloud.

The old wizard who had brought the rice balls came over, laughing to himself. "You must be the new folk. You're on Hawaiian time, haole. When they say four, they mean it might start by five, but will probably really get going at six. Aloha and welcome to Malu Palekaiko."
The old wizard wandered off snickering to himself, leaving the three alone amid the empty community center.

"I told you," Ginny hissed with irritation. "But would you two listen to me? Noooo. Justina even told me not to rush. But you two—"

Draco didn't want to hear her harping on, so he grabbed her and kissed her firmly. Ginny initially protested, but she eventually relented.

"Better now?" Draco asked.

Ginny gave him a satisfied smile, before her eyes went wide and she gasped, "My lipstick!" before running off to the toilet to fix it, rummaging around in her caftan pocket for her tube of lipstick and her wand to remove the smudges.

"Better early than late," Draco mused allowed.

Even though Severus agreed with Draco, he did feel a little foolish. Even the Muggle tourism books warned about the lax punctuality of the local population, but being from England and conducting classes for all those years at Hogwarts where every minute of class time was precious and filled with instruction, Severus was still a slave to the clock. It would take some time to get used to this new attitude regarding time and punctuality – or lack thereof.

At last, people began filing into the community center, bringing their instruments, dragging along children, many of them dressed in little ti-leaf skirts or muumuus for the big Christmas recital and show. The adults began introducing themselves to the newcomers, having heard through the grapevine about the three who were just granted sanctuary.

Eventually Halulu showed up and told Draco where to put Ginny's music box. But before she went to begin coordination of all her dancers for the evening ahead, she presented Ginny with a lei of purple and white orchid flowers. Following the more formal tradition, Halulu held it aloft about mid-chest and allowed Ginny to take it from her and place it on herself, followed by a kiss on the younger witch's cheek.

Draco was also quickly thereafter greeted by Gary, who presented him a lei of white orchids and white double Arabian jasmine flowers, a palette of white to match the wizard's pale features in the same manner. The blond wizard had to bend down a little to receive his kiss from Gary.
Mounga greeted Severus with another great hug and clap on the back, but without the same bone-crushing quality to it. Rainbow was standing next to her husband, holding the lei for him while he greeted the Potions master. Severus was presented with a double twist lei of white and green orchids and kissed upon the cheek by the wizard who knew his secrets. Rainbow also greeted Severus and gave him a kiss.

"I helped make your lei, Mr. Snape," piped up one child next to Mounga, holding her father's hand and smiling up at him expectantly.

"Well, thank you. It's very pretty," he told her. This child had helped in making him feel welcome, and it stirred something in Severus.

As a Potions master at Hogwarts, and Head of Slytherin House, Severus was used to the prejudices of the other children against his House. Even Ron Weasley had made the blanket statement that only bad wizards came from Slytherin. And his reputation as a hard task master and demanding instructor often preceded him, so children had already formed their own opinions about him before first seeing him at the head table during the Welcoming Feast. Those attitudes were usually either hostile, disrespectful, or full of fear, as in Longbottom's case. This small child held no preconceived notions of him and treated him respectfully and with a little kindness.

Severus was introduced to Mounga and Rainbow's children. The oldest was a witch, Akela, who was fifteen; she looked very much like her mother, and was almost just as tall. Rainbow was nearly Severus' height, it was surprising to see a young witch who was almost eye to eye with him. She greeted him with a handshake, and he could have sworn she was blushing.

Their second child was Iakona, the twelve-year-old wizard in need of some Potions tutoring. The boy was looking a bit shy, but stuck his hand out and said, while looking Severus in the eye, "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

The third and youngest of their children, the one who'd helped make Severus' lei, was Kaimi, who was eight. Upon Severus learning her child’s name, Rainbow muttered to her husband as an aside, "I still can't believe you named our child after a Quidditch position."

"Kaimi means 'The Seeker',' the young witch volunteered. "Do you like Quidditch, Mr. Snape? It's my favorite sport, more than swimming!"

Severus smiled at this child and spoke to her with the same respect she had shown him. he said, "I
"Really?" Kaimi beamed brightly. She turned to her father and said, "I really like him, Papa. He's even nicer than you said he was." She then found her attention drawn to a gaggle of her friends of the same age and then ran off to play with them, before they would have to line up in groups to dance.

The two other children went off to join their own friends, and Severus was left standing with the parents.

"You have a lovely family," Severus said a little wistfully.

Rainbow grasped Severus' hand and thanked him for his compliment.

Standing next to each other with no one listening in, Mounga said to Severus quietly, just enough so that only Severus could hear, "Perhaps if that witch of yours sees you again, you can have a family just as wonderful as mine. It just takes lots of love, Sev. Remember that love is the most powerful thing in the universe."

Severus' heart stopped for a moment in his chest. That last sentence was the same exact words his vision of Albus had said to him as Severus fought his growing affections for Hermione; Severus never made mention of that sentiment during his recent interrogation.

"Did you ever have a chance to meet Albus Dumbledore, Mounga?" Severus asked, just to be sure.

"No, but it sounds like he was a pretty cool dude who knew what he was talking about, even if he did try to wipe all memory of Hawaii from everyone in Great Britain." Mounga patted Severus on the back before excusing himself to go talk with some other friends.

News of Severus being a Potions master had spread, no doubt from Rainbow's lips since Mounga was less likely to gossip, as he was bound to hold Severus' secrets confidential. The two other Potions masters on the island introduced themselves and they began an animated discussion about their favorite subject, asking what Severus did before arriving to the island. Learning that he had taught at Hogwarts for so many years and had experience in commercial manufacturing, research, and development, led to a promise to meet next week to talk shop some more.
Ginny and Draco were swarmed by others, fascinated by Draco working in advertising and marketing, since that seemed such a Muggle pursuit. However, given the heavy Muggle influence in the community, as many of the other sanctuary-seekers over the years tended to be predominantly Muggle-borns, it was not looked down upon.

As Severus was talking to one witch who inquired about Potions tutoring, a small child, approximately five years old, came up and yanked on the edge of his shirt.

Looking down at the moppet, he was met with a pair of honest dark brown eyes and a head of straight black hair.

"Are you an albino?" the child asked curiously.

Severus was flummoxed by this child's question, and before he could formulate a diplomatic response amid the crowd of people – trying not to snarl at the urchin for posing such a rude question – a witch ran over and apologized profusely, grabbing her child by the hand to lead him away.

"I am so sorry. Miguel, you apologize to the man immediately," she lightly chastised her son.

"But Mama, he's so white. I read about albino animals and you said it was because they didn't have any pigment in their skin," Miguel protested, unaware of the social faux pas he committed.

"Well, that wasn't a very nice way to ask him if you were curious," she told him. "Besides, if he was really albino, his hair would be white like his skin. He has black hair, see?"

"I'm sorry," the small boy apologized to Severus, sniffling as he buried his head against his mother's skirt, ashamed. Then spotting Draco, he pointed at him and said, "Then will you ask that wizard if he's albino?"

Severus suddenly found humor in the child's question and began to laugh against his better judgment. He could just imagine how Draco would react to some random brat asking if he was an albino, and Ginny bursting into fits of laughter.

"Hi, I'm Maria," the mother of the socially awkward child introduced herself as she extended her hand. Her accent sounded like she spoke Spanish, but it had a South American flavor to it that he
had trouble placing.

"Severus," he replied, and shook her hand.

"I know. Well, I guess I'll be seeing you around," Maria said.

As she left, he could have sworn she was almost batting her eyes at him, as she guided her child over to meet Draco and Ginny. Hopefully they would make a smoother introduction than the one he had just experienced.

The buffet line finally opened and everyone herded over to sample a little bit of everything people had brought to the potluck. The food was as diverse as the town's population. There was chicken satay from Thailand, Japanese rice balls, American southern fried chicken, and a spicy Ethiopian vegetable dish with okra, potatoes, onions, garlic, ginger and pepper sauce. There was also Peruvian Papa a la Huancaina, bowls heaping with chop suey or glass noodles mixed with sesame oil and finely sliced vegetables, Russian pierogies, meat and vegetarian Indian dishes, Mexican pork and beef tamales, stuffed chilies smothered in a mole sauce, German sauerkraut with smoked Hanover sausage, and Italian veal stew. And then there was the seafood! Fish and shellfish of every type locally caught, prepared with teriyaki sauce, soy sauce, chili sauce, lemon sauce, garlic sauce, and tomato sauce. The fish was grilled, baked, fried, poached, sautéed, cured, and sliced raw as sashimi with pickled ginger and freshly grated wasabi on the side.

And then there were nearly a dozen different versions of macaroni salad, as well as the ubiquitous poi. The gray-purple goo, made from taro root, looked as appetizing as wallpaper paste, and the Muggle tourism books warned that to some it tasted the same as well. The books said that poi was a “local delicacy” that was a bit of an acquired taste.

Severus had a hard time choosing. He tried to get the equivalent of one small bite of each appetizing dish, but considering the copious number of dishes, even he wound up with a heaping pile of food he knew he would have trouble finishing that night.

While standing in the buffet line, as he selected from the various dishes, a Chinese witch stood next to Severus and began chatting excitedly in Mandarin with another Chinese witch on the other wise of the buffet table.

"So this wizard next to me is a Potions master," said one witch with a slightly weathered face, wearing a bright red silk jacket with a Mandarin collar.
"Really? Do you think he takes commissions? Arnold won't take it since he knows my husband, and he's such a blabbermouth," said her friend, who was wearing a floor-length pale olive green cheongsam and was about the same age.

Severus listened in, since he spoke, read, and wrote Chinese, classical and vernacular – the latter similar to Mandarin. He let them continue on with their conversation, pretending he didn't understand them.

"Couldn't hurt to ask," the witch in red urged her friend.

"Yes, but would he brew a vial of Iron Mountain of Marital Happiness for Bao?"

Severus secretly smiled to himself, listening to these two wonder if he could brew a potion for the witch in the green dress to improve her husband’s virility.

Speaking in vernacular Chinese, Severus piped up, "Of course I can take commissions, but I need to purchase some new Potions equipment first. I have recently developed a Potion just as potent with a duration of up to three hours, or as mild as two, whereas the Iron Mountain of Marital Happiness only lasts for a little over one hour. If three hours is too long, I can always brew the—"

Severus was familiar with the Chinese virility potion as he had used it as a reference, along with the Beam of the Red Oak potion, for creating the potion now sold under the name "Sequoia" at The Sirens' Secrets.

The two witches’ mouths initially hung open in shock that he could not only speak Chinese, but had heard their entire conversation. Upon hearing Severus boast about a potion with more than twice the duration of the Iron Mountain of Marital Happiness potion, they cut him off when he considered brewing the shorter-duration potion.

The witch in the green dress excitedly said, "No! No, three hours would be wonderful! Please let us know when you can make some! Please, any price."

Between this request and the requests for Potions tutoring, Severus began reconsidering them as a source of income, should the small fortune he earned working for Miss Brown be tied up for an undetermined about of time. He would think more on this later; for now, there was food to consume.
At the end of the buffet line was a huge pig that had been slowly cooked in a pit for at least twelve hours. There were wizards at the end carving it up and placing the tender cooked meat on plates as people passed. It wasn't so much as carving the meat – it was shredding it, since the pig had been cooked until the meat was falling apart.

As Severus received his own portion of luau pig, he was told desserts were going to be laid out later. Severus was going to be stuffed; he didn't think he would have room for any sweets.

Joining Ginny and Draco at the communal-style picnic benches that would be easily transformed into forward-facing seating later on, he noticed Ginny had little food on her plate, then remembered she would be dancing in the show.

As they ate, people continued to come over and introduce themselves to the three. Some of them spotted a little bit of their own contribution to the potluck, asking the newcomers if they liked their dish.

In the middle of working down the heaping pile of food, the lights dimmed towards the front of the pavilion and spotlights were focused on the stage. A group of middle-aged women, including Justina, took the stage and began a slow hula, dancing along to the witches and wizards on the side of the stage playing guitars, ukuleles, mandolins, a didgeridoo, a piano, and various native percussive instruments and drums.

Ginny watched with rapt attention, noting the similarities and differences to her own belly dancing style she knew. Severus admired the graceful movements and slow purpose to each placement of their hands, the gentle sweep of an arm, the turn of the head, movement of hips, and position of the feet. At the end of each dance, there was applause. After two dances, the troupe of witches left the stage to make room for the next dance group. There were lots of performers, and Severus noted that it looked like half the crowd would be performing on stage whether singing, dancing, or playing music.

The next group were the keiki, or the young children's group. A string of little witches, all between the ages of three and five, walked on stage, all holding hands. As they began to dance their hula – some showing a natural talent more than others, some turning in the wrong direction before correcting themselves once they noticed – there was a collective murmur and cooing from the audience. The children were quite adorable as they performed on stage, doing their best to make their parents proud.

Glancing over at Ginny, Severus noticed how her eyes were glowing, as she was pointing to Draco to notice one small little witch who seemed to show a little more sass and confidence than the rest. Ginny looked smitten, like she was going to ask Draco if he could pick one out for her, like a kitten from the litter.
Severus could tell that Ginny would be going off contraceptive potions before their first wedding anniversary, and by the way that Draco seemed to be gazing at the little witches with the same adoration, he didn't think it would take any convincing for Draco to agree.

The keiki were doing a Christmas hula, placing their hands above their heads like antlers, with the singer to the side singing about Santa and his reindeer. Their second hula was a story about giving and getting presents, and Christmas wishes, where the boys joined the girls on stage, dancing the more masculine style of hula.

Once done, the next succession of groups came up and took turns doing two songs before leaving the stage, each troupe rising in age, in different brackets. There were a few boys-only hula troupes. There wasn't a lot of children, since the island didn't have a population of more than five-thousand, but it seemed that nearly most of the children were involved in some form of the Hawaiian performing arts. Kaimi performed with the six- to eight-year-old group, and Akela with the fourteen- to seventeen-year-old group. Iakona was one of the musicians who rotated in and played guitar while his older sister danced.

Before the adult women's groups came on, Halulu signaled to Ginny that it was time.

"Wish me luck," she nervously whispered before walking over to the corner of the stage.

Halulu put her wand to her throat and cast the Sonorus Charm. "Aloha, everyone!"

Everyone chanted Aloha back.

"Let's have a round of applause for all our children's groups and our hula teachers who started out the program tonight."

There was a round of applause that eventually died down.

"As most of you know, we have three new additions to our community. Severus, Draco and Ginny. Why don't you stand so everyone can see you," Halulu urged them.

Severus and Draco stood, gazing about as all eyes turned to them.
"Let's all give them a warm Aloha!"

The crowd loudly chanted a hearty "ALOHA!"

Severus and Draco knew the call-and-response protocol, and said back as best as they could muster, "Aloha" before promptly sitting back down, hoping to never be the center of attention quite like that ever again. Severus could address three-hundred students at Hogwarts without batting an eye, but this was far different.

Halulu continued with her introduction. "Now I personally interviewed Ginny here when she asked us for sanctuary. And she has agreed to let me share with you that she does Middle Eastern belly dancing. I have asked her to perform tonight and she has agreed, so let's welcome Ginny to the stage."

There was applause and murmurs of excitement now that Ginny had taken off her caftan. She was wearing her red, orange, and gold-colored outfit. Her red bra was covered with intricate beadwork of the three colors, a couple rows of coins, and fringe in orange and gold that hung freely down from the band of her bra, brushing the edges of her rib cage as she walked.

Her belt was adorned in the same pattern of beadwork, coin, and fringe. Ginny's skirt, which came down to the floor, was a custom dye pattern of red at the top blending to orange in the middle and golden yellow at the bottom. She had her silk scarf – dyed in the same red, orange, and yellow color-bleeding pattern – floating free behind her. She decided at the last minute to ditch the finger cymbals, leaving them on the table with Draco, and just dance with her scarf.

She was shapely with a full bust and a long fall of red hair. Ginny looked like a fire-made human.

Striking a pose, the nervous dancer signaled to Halulu to begin her pre-selected music.

There was a swell of violins, the plucking of an oud, and the sweet call of a wooden flute holding a sustained note in the air for a long introduction before the melody began.

Ginny began by swirling her silk scarf around, its light gossamer fabric floating without the aid of magic. Her arms moved with a serpentine grace, and she controlled the direction and movement of her scarf as if dancing with a lover.
She held it in front of her, as a partition between her and the audience, lowering it slowly, revealing her chest and stomach more and more as she began to undulate her hips and stomach muscles with precision, her shoulders and bust slowly rotating and swirling in time to the music.

Severus had never thought of Ginny in a sexual manner, even though he was fully aware of her and Draco having a very satisfying sex life, but until that moment, he had never seen the sensual side of Ginny that she was expressing on the stage, her eyes glancing about with long sultry stares. He had viewed Ginny like an adopted daughter or a favorite niece, but he could certainly understand the temptation of a witch like that and could not deny he found her quite alluring at that moment. Now Severus knew why Draco got that far-away look in his eyes when he would tell him that Ginny had recently danced for him.

As the intro ended, the keyboard and drums picked up and the beat quickened. Ginny twirled her scarf behind her and held it behind her, draped behind her back. She began to shimmy her hips and move her chest, making it rise and fall in sharp movements, moving her rib cage independently from her stomach and hips.

In the middle of the song was the short drum solo in which Ginny shook her hips up and down, back and forth, making her stomach roll like waves on an ocean, alternating with her chest and shoulders, and sometimes moving them at the same time. It required a lot of coordination and practice, and Ginny had been dancing for ten years. Her experience showed, and she was a mesmerizing vision to behold. There were a few shouts from the men in the audience in appreciation of Ginny's dancing abilities.

As the dance came to a close, she twirled faster and faster until striking the final pose with the final beat of the song.

The whole community center erupted in raucous and jubilant applause, most standing and clapping, many of the men whistling, a few sending sparks shooting out of the ends of their wands and into the air where tiki torches floated above.

Severus leaned over and said quietly to Draco, "You are a very lucky wizard indeed."

Draco beamed with pride, smiling to himself, and said, "I know."

Ginny bowed, her hands in front of her with her palms pressed together, and nodded in gratitude of their applause before she exited the stage. There were a great many sounds of disappointment from...
the audience that Ginny wasn't going to perform a second song, until Halulu told the crowd that at
the next community show, Ginny would perform two songs like the rest of the groups. Halulu
reminded them that Ginny had traveled a great deal recently, and that they should not over-exhaust
her on her first week there.

A group of young witches ran up to Ginny and began excitedly asking the new belly dancing star
about her dancing style and if she taught.

"You have to dance as Pele at the Summer Pele Festival!" one young witch gushed.

Ginny put her caftan back on, answering questions, but then suggested that the girls talk to her later
since she didn't want to miss the adult women's performances.

The women's group came on, and they danced with precision and grace. There was one group who
danced Tahitian-style with the quick swirling and twist of the hips, in time to fast drums and
percussive beats played on gourd drums and wooden logs carved to create a certain sound. Some of
the moves were similar to Ginny's dancing.

The men's group came out and danced their hula as well, knees moving together and apart, arms
strong and forceful in their movements. Severus nudged Draco's arm and jutted his chin in the
direction of the shirtless men dancing on stage, silently asking Draco if he would take up hula. The
pale blond wizard gave him a look that said it was not bloody likely.

Once the men finished there was one more request for applause for all of the dancers who had
performed tonight. Then they announced that dessert was now served at the other end of the
pavilion.

Severus was still stuffed to the gills, but he did have a cup of Kona coffee. As a young couple was
talking to Severus, Akela, Mounga and Rainbow's oldest daughter, came up with a small plate with
a dainty coconut tartlet on it.

"I made these for the luau," Akela said demurely. She was glancing down, but looking up through
her lashes at Severus in a shy yet flirtatious manner. "I was hoping you would try one."

Severus graciously accepted her offer and took the plate, taking a bite out of courtesy so as not to
hurt the young girl's feelings, despite feeling overly full from dinner. It was very good and he gave
her his honest opinion that it was delicious. She smiled sweetly at him before running off,
obviously smitten.

Draco sidled up next to his mentor and with a sotto voce voice said, "They have a term for that in the States. It's called 'jail bait.'"

Severus fixed him with a furious glare and growled under his breath, "Don't even joke about that. Not ever."

The former older gigolo had bedded many a young witch who had reached the age of consent, straight from the halls of Hogwarts. They had wished to have their first time with someone who would be gentle and knew what they were doing, versus the boys their age who were selfish, impatient and clueless as to what to do with a woman's body. He had taken enough maidenheads, and that chapter of his life was now closed and over with.

It was a long evening of food, meeting new people, song, and dance. Severus couldn't wait to get back to the hotel and fall into his bed, as he was finally starting to synchronize with the new time zone.

Draco and Ginny stayed behind and chatted with people, while Severus excused himself by explaining he was still suffering from Portkey lag.

Back at the hotel, lying nude upon the bed, Severus imagined Hermione dancing the hula for him. He envisioned the slow graceful movement of her arms, the movement of her hips in time to a softly strumming guitar.

His hand reached down and began to stroke his own flesh, his body missing Hermione and the release and comfort that she brought him. As Severus’ eyes slowly closed, he envisioned her in a simple ti-leaf skirt, topless, her hair falling down her back and along the tops of her breasts, moving in time to songs Severus still had echoing in his mind from earlier in the evening. He could almost imagine her there in bed with him, a garland of orchids in her hair, her breasts swaying and bouncing as she rode him, telling him that she loved him.

Severus came with a strangled gasp, as he realized he had forgotten to put up a Silencing Charm; he remained as quiet as possible. The sticky semen was splashed across his stomach, clinging to the black hairs that trailed from his chest to his pubic region.

This was going to be hard. From an active sex life to a non-existent one once again.
He hoped it wouldn't be too long before Hermione cleared his name and finished her Potions apprenticeship. Not only did his body miss her, but his heart as well.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Please give some praise towards my betas for this chapter: JuneW and Hope. All my betas are wonderful unsung heroes that deserve some of the praise you people give to me in your reviews. Betas make fanfic a much better experience for you readers.

Haole (howl-lee) is a Hawaiian word for “stranger” that is now used as a term for tourist or white Caucasians. Often used in a not very complimentary manner.

Ti-leaf skirts are made of large green leaves from the ti (tee) plant. The skirt is often called a “grass” skirt but it is not made of grass; the ti leaves can be finely shredded so that the skirt looks like grass.
"The Child Is Gone"

Chapter Summary

Harry returns back to England, while Ginny sends a special delivery to the Burrow. Pull out some marshmallows for this spectacular roast.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Seventy-Three
"The Child Is Gone"

Disclaimer:
Here's the story by a lovely lady
Who was writing about Harry and his tale.
All the characters belonged to Rowling, which I acknowledge,
The lawyers stay away.

Here's the story, of a fanfic writer,
Who was busy playing with fanon on her own,
There was lots of smut, and an endless story,
Yet she kept writing on.

Till the one day when the writer finally finished
And she knew it was much more than a fic,
That this story became really fucking epic.
That's the way it all became the long fanfic.

The long fanfic,
The long fanfic,
That's the way it became so bloody long.

A/N: Disclaimer a parody of The Brady Bunch theme song.

==============

Hermione intended to sleep in as long as she could, since it was Sunday, and Albert wasn't expecting her to show up at his home until noon to work on his garden. She was still worn out from the interview with Luna and the grand opening, which went late, closing at ten o'clock the night before.
The hooting of an owl by the kitchen window woke her up.

Throwing on a terry dressing gown, she shuffled out to the kitchen to find Hedwig waiting for her. She opened the window and Hedwig hopped right in, helping herself to the bowl of owl treats Hermione always had at the ready despite her not having an owl any more. Pig had left when she’d kicked Ron out of their flat, following his master to their new home.

Picking up the letter, she opened it and found a note from Harry as Hedwig took off into the cold morning air.

------

*Hermione,*

*I need to talk with you. I'll be over at your flat around 9 this morning.*

*Harry*

------

Glancing at the clock, she noted that he was due any minute. She wondered how long Hedwig had been waiting.

Just as Hermione was quickly putting something on, with not even a cup of tea in her yet, the Floo flared a brilliant green, and Harry stepped out.

"In here, hang on. Be right there," she called out as she threw on some jeans for her work later in Albert's garden.

Stepping out of her bedroom, she spotted Harry looking defeated. She offered him a cup of tea, as he looked like he needed it more than she did.

Sitting in the kitchen, the gloom of the overcast sky was as dark as the ominous feeling Hermione had building in her stomach; Harry kept his gaze firmly on the mug in front of him.
"I found her," he said, his face impassive and voice bleak.

Hermione's insides began to churn. Her heart beat faster with anxiety at the thought of what had transpired between them to make Harry look the way he did. When Harry left Hermione's Friday night, he was angry, bitter, and full of venom. Now there was this deflated sense of resignation from him.

After being called out on keeping Ginny's secrets from Harry, she felt she had no right to ask him what happened. It was a quid pro quo. If Harry decided out of spite to keep secret what he and Ginny had said or what happened, she would accept that, as much as she yearned to know.

"I saw you that night," Harry began as a non sequitur. "You were all dressed up for your anniversary. I saw you enter the Red Ginseng looking as beautiful as ever in that red dress. I later found out why your dinner ended so early with Ron, but at the time I couldn't believe that on the night when you were supposed to be with Ron drinking and dancing the night away, you were going off to that place."

Hermione's stomach fell through the floor. She remembered that night quite clearly, uncertain until now if she had been spotted.

"I was supposed to watch that block of flats under orders for Moody. He was suspicious as to the types of people who were going in and out of the place. I had my Invisibility Cloak on so I wouldn't be seen, but I saw you. And then not fifteen minutes later you ran out of there, cloak missing, hair mussed. and in tears. I could only assume the worst. But I guess since you admitted to having sex with Snape, my guess wasn't far off."

Hermione was not about to recount the finer details of the timeline and correct Harry until he asked, "Was it a fuck out of revenge?"

"When I offered to wait up for Ron after he was done dealing with the bar fight, he rejected me with a snide comment. Though that was my original purpose for showing up there that night, I left before it went that far with Severus. It was because I suddenly realized I didn't want our first time to be out of revenge that nothing happened that night," she admitted.

"Over three months fucking Snape?"
"And it was over three years for Ron. We're both guilty for falling in love with people other than who we were married to during our marriage, Harry. Even Ginny was in love with Malfoy, but she was in love with him before you two had even dated." Hermione took a sip of tea, tasting the tears that had silently slipped down her cheeks.

They sat together in silence for a while before Harry said, "It was a little while after you left the Red Ginseng that night I heard the scream and found Pansy Parkinson's body in an alley. It was because of her murder I began to take your insistence over Snape and Malfoy's innocence seriously."

Hermione put her mug down and regarded the man next to her. He looked haunted, and she recalled the way Ginny said he was quite disturbed by what he had found.

"The bastard who killed her claimed to have come upon the scene, but I saw the last of the spell come from his wand as I rounded the corner," recounted the young Auror, who now looked far older than he should have. "Had this been any other witch who had died, procedures would have been done differently. As it was, Moody did not cast a *Prior Incantato* on the sick fuck's wand, I was reassigned to another case quickly, so I could not follow up on her murder. He had this damn smirk on his face, I swear, as if he knew he was going to get away with it."

Harry shook his head, and a small shudder made his body momentarily quake.

"I can't even describe what he did to her body," he whispered with horror. "I still have trouble sleeping some nights; it was as bad as some of the things I had seen during the war. And they wouldn't use Veritaserum on him at all. I wonder if it was because he'd killed a Death Eater that he got away with it, or his possible Ministry connections. Probably both."

The table thumped and wobbled a little when Harry's fist came down on the tabletop in anger.

"I may have not liked Pansy and hated her for being a Death Eater, but even she should not have died in that manner," he said with more force in his voice. "It was as if her life mattered less, and therefore the murderer got away scot-free. What makes us any better than the Death Eaters then, to do something like that? Even when I testified in court, they disregarded my testimony and said I had not seen him cast it, so it was purely circumstantial."

Hermione’s tears fell faster. She wondered if the murder victim had been Severus, would his death at the hands of a murderer be treated so callously and flippantly? She was sure of it.
"Snape told me that he and Malfoy offered to confess their innocence to Moody under Veritaserum regarding Dumbledore's death and the Death Eater attack on Hogwarts. Did you know that?" he asked.

She mutely nodded. Severus had told her when she told him of her plan to find some way to clear their names. Severus doubted she could, if a confession of innocence under Veritaserum would not even be granted.

"So you were right. You did know where they went," Hermione said with subdued amazement.

"And I would tell you, but considering how much you're involved with this, the less you know the better," Harry said, refusing to tell Hermione their location. "Should Moody put the pieces together and you're in his cross-hairs, you will not be spared. But I did talk with Kingsley this morning, so that might help."

Harry didn't elaborate on what he'd said to Kingsley or how he might help. Instead, he said he had to go. Since he was supposed to be on holiday for the next couple of weeks, he would just carry on as if everything was normal, despite the fact that the Ministry would now have on record Ginny's divorce from Harry.

She could just imagine what the headlines of the *Daily Prophet* would scream on Monday once that bit of news in the magical registry was discovered.

"*Wife Leaves Boy Who Lived!*"

It certainly would be a busy day for the papers on Monday, since news of two escaped Death Eaters hadn't made it into the papers on Saturday or Sunday, and the interview with Luna was coming out that day as well.

Hermione looked up at Harry who was now standing. He hadn't even finished his tea.

"Where will you go?" she asked.

"Somewhere I can clear my head for a while. I should be back before Christmas, since I only scheduled two weeks off."
Before he went to reach for a handful of Floo powder, Harry stopped and looked over his shoulder. "Will I ever find someone who loves me as much as you love Snape, or Ginny loves Malfoy?"

"I don't know, Harry." She rose from the kitchen table to lean against the doorjamb, observing the wizard with the slumped carriage of someone who was browbeaten and world-weary. "Love finds us when we least expect it. I certainly wasn't looking for it, but there it was, as much as I tried to fight it. And I don't regret one minute of it."

Then Harry was gone.

Hermione didn't even have time to sit back down and finish her cup of tea (that had gone cold) before there was a gentle knock at the door. She wondered if it was more people from the press seeking to interview her and offer her money for an exclusive.

As she opened the door to tell whoever it was to sod off, she blinked back in surprise at the sight of Kingsley Shacklebolt waiting on her doorstep.

"May I come in?" the senior Auror asked.

"Yes, please," she replied as she stepped aside to allow him in. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes, that would be lovely."

They moved into the kitchen and Hermione began to make tea for them both, making herself a fresh cup.

Seated at the table, Kingsley said, "I saw Harry this morning."

She only nodded, unable to speak, wondering what Harry told him. Harry had only said that he had gone to see Kingsley and that the older wizard might help, but that didn't mean he still might not arrest Hermione. Harry's cryptic remark also could have meant that Kingsley would make sure Hermione wasn't punished too harshly.
"Harry told me about how he found where Draco and Severus went," he began, adding, "and about Ginny."

The kettle began to whistle and Hermione poured the water into the mugs, wondering if he would allow her to finish her tea before hauling her away. She offered him milk and sugar, which he declined.

As she swirled the spoon in her mug to keep her hand occupied and prevent it from shaking, Kingsley said, "I saw your name on the Portkey office register for departure Friday morning. Along with Harry's and Ginny's."

Hermione was not going to talk unless it was necessary to answer one of his questions. And she would be truthful since there was little point in lying. Moody wasn't afraid to use Veritaserum, much like Umbridge's liberal use of it in Hermione’s fifth year, if it suited the purpose of their designs. Kingsley... would he just have Moody do the dirty work for him?

"Did you give Severus or Ginny your hair willingly for the Polyjuice Potion?"

He knew. She might as well ask him now, to quell or feed this pit of panic in her gut.

"Are you going to take me to Azkaban now?"

"Is there a reason I should take you there?"

"No more reason than why two innocent wizards had to flee to escape unjust persecution despite a clear lack of evidence, and the denial of them to prove their own innocence," she replied, her back straight and eyes full of defiance.

"I once told Severus that if there is anything I could do for him and Draco legally to just ask," he said, his voice devoid of any accusation. "Well, during the war, I did many things illegally to fight against Voldemort and darkness. Injustice is a darkness, and the legality of the Death Eaters Decree is a line I am willing to finally cross in order to help Severus and Draco."

Hermione was filled with relief and hope that someone else besides Lavender and Harry was willing to step up and help clear their names. She let out a huge sigh, releasing the breath that she had not realized she had been holding.
"Which is why I removed any record of you, Harry, and Ginny taking a Portkey Friday morning. I Obliviated the three Portkey officers: the one who Ginny dealt with when booking it, the one who saw your Polyjuiced version, and the one Harry talked to that night when he followed them."

Kingsley was momentarily caught by surprise when Hermione leapt up out of her chair and rushed at him, clasping him in a hug of gratitude, her sobs heaving and expressive.

"Thank you, thank you," she cried into his shoulder.

The Auror patted her back soothingly. "It's all right," he assured her. "I'm glad that there was someone capable of helping of them. Though Harry didn't say it, I suspect you helped provide the materials for the Polyjuice Potion through your old work at the Ministry, is that correct?"

"Oh, shit," she muttered into his shoulder.

If Harry and Kingsley could both figure that out, then the chance of Moody figuring it out was even higher.

"So I take that as an affirmative?" he asked, raising one brow at her as she lifted her head up to regard the Auror.

Had Kingsley not already eased her fears and said he was willing to help, she would have phrased her answer with obfuscation and careful wording.

"I pretended to botch the tests for two key regulated ingredients, but the last one, fluxweed, the box was already destroyed when I came in the Monday after the Ministry's ball," Hermione confessed as she let go of Kingsley to sit back down with her tea once more. "But you already witnessed that with Mr. Dushka having kicked the box aside after using it as an impromptu stepping stool. Or did you miss the fluxweed clinging to his trouser legs when you found him in the lab with his wife and Trevor Spawn," she said, jogging his memory that it was her by the door when she slapped Severus for show.

The Auror placed his forehead in his hand to look down at the table. She wasn't sure if he was embarrassed by recalling discovering the three in a sexual act or found it funny, until he lifted his head suddenly after remembering something else. "Was that Spanish lothario..." Kingsley began to ask, but trailed off.
"Was Delgado what, Kingsley?" Hermione asked back blankly, unwilling to give away Severus' nom de guerre and confirm it was him.

"Severus, you sly, old Slytherin," he remarked to himself, stunned with growing amusement. "There is no way even Moody would think Delgado and Severus were one and the same."

Now Kingsley understood what they did on the side, since he’d always suspected Severus was not going to work as a gigolo for his sole source of income.

Hermione was not going to confirm or deny Kingsley's correct guess. There were enough secrets spilled between the two of them to damn them both, had Moody stolen Harry's Invisibility Cloak and spied on their morning conversation.

"I made a promise to Severus that I would clear his and Draco's names. I will figure out a way. Some way, somehow, I will see to it," she assured him.

"I hope you do, Hermione. I certainly hope you do."

The way that Hermione had promised to clear their names made him wonder if this particular witch and Severus had a relationship beyond the procurement of a few ingredients, but the Auror would not pry.

"I will do my best to make sure Moody cannot factor you into their escape," Kingsley promised. "As it is, Harry, Miss Brown, you and I are the only ones who know about the Polyjuice Potion."

"Actually, it is just Harry, you and I, as I was instructed by Lavender to do a Memory Charm on her to that bit of knowledge, since having two of her employees who were Death Eaters escape will put her in line for questioning, so you don't have to worry about that."

Kingsley nodded his head with approval. "And with Harry gone on holiday to someplace, it will just be you and I who truly know how they escaped for the next few weeks. Which means the Department of Magical Law Enforcement can still pursue them fleeing by boat, based on an 'anonymous' tip we got the morning before the alarms went off. And as this same 'anonymous' tipster had proven useful with correct information about a Death Eater who had tried to procure an extra wand for illegal purposes, it will continue to be regarded as a solid lead until proven otherwise." He gave a great theatrical sigh when he added, "Who knows if we'll ever find them. So
He tsk-tsked as he lifted his mug and took a long sip of tea. Hermione wondered if Severus was this particular anonymous tipster, but decided that was a question for after their names were truly cleared.

"I didn't see the report of two missing Death Eaters in the paper yet." Hermione gave a sigh of relief, heaving her shoulders before slowly exhaling.

"We're trying to keep it out of the papers," the Auror admitted. "Fudge is suppressing the news for as long as he can, given that there is an election next year. Amelia Bones, Moody's and my superior, is ready to run against Fudge in the next election. I have talked with her; she is open to a fully accounted exoneration and public apology to both Severus and Draco if they can be proven innocent by some legally recognizable means, so you can count on one more ally in your quest to clear their names."

The task of trying to clear their names no longer seemed quite so insurmountable, given she had three people now who were in agreement regarding the ex-Death Eaters' innocence. It was three more than when she woke up that morning.

"Do you think you can suppress the papers from writing about Ginny divorcing Harry until at least Tuesday?" she asked. "There is an interview Lavender, Ron and I did with Luna that will be published in The Quibbler on Monday that might change a few minds when it comes to divorce."

"I'll see what I can do, as that is public record," he said, one large hand nervously rubbing the back of his bald pate. "It'll be hard to stop the press from latching on to that. Perhaps an exclusive for the Daily Prophet with Amelia making her announcement to run for Minister might make them decide to wait until Tuesday. I'll owl her."

"Thanks, Kingsley."

As Hermione walked Kingsley to the door, she gave him one more hug in appreciation for all that he had done. It was nice to know that Severus had more allies looking out for him than she initially knew of.

Once the door was shut, Hermione went to the kitchen to cook herself a large and proper breakfast. With her hopes up, her appetite had returned. Given that she would be doing a lot of late autumn
chores in Albert's garden all afternoon, she would need something solid to keep her going through the day.

As she fried up some eggs and mushrooms, Hermione began to run through the list of the different types of cuisines Ginny had cooked as of late, as Harry said it was her cookbooks that gave away their locations.

"Spain?" she wondered aloud, given that "Delgado" had gone back to Spain and Ginny had done a lot of Spanish cooking at one point. Hermione would have to do some research if there was someplace in Spain that offered sanctuary.

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Bill, Fred, and George were helping their father with a major chore that weekend.

A recent storm had blown over the shelter in the pig sty and a new one needed to be built, especially since it was old and the posts were partially rotted.

As the twins were busy digging post holes, jabbing and twirling their wands in the air with a Defodio spell, Bill and Arthur were corralling the pigs into a temporary structure to hold them, so they wouldn't get in the way.

Meanwhile, an owl was flying with the swiftest of speeds, intent on delivering its payload to its intended recipient as soon as possible. The letter it was carrying was beginning to smolder.

As the great horned owl flew over a copse of beech trees – now bare of leaves, its branches looking like skeletal fingers reaching up as if to pluck the bird from the sky – the owl began to descend.

Molly was in the kitchen cooking up a nice hot lunch for her husband and boys, pleased that they had come over that day, despite having been up late the night before with the grand opening of that lewd business. To think that the twins were in business with that witch, who had the gall to show up at Bill's party and insist she was going to marry her son. That witch who sold the company of men on the side, a service that Molly shamefully took advantage of herself.

But she felt she was in the moral superiority, since she had just paid for a sympathetic ear. She wasn't the one peddling men's favors; some indulgences she had heard about involved more carnal pursuits.
Just as Molly opened the window to call the men in to lunch, she spied the great horned owl barreling towards the window.

She ducked just in time. The bird barely slowed down as it tucked its wings alongside its aerodynamically evolved form while it passed through the window frame. Dropping off the letter with haste, the owl spread its wings once more to brake, its speed still a blur to any human eye that could have tried to follow, and turned sharply as if chasing a hare between the pines. It went out of the kitchen, around through the parlor, swerved again, and tucked its wings in once more as it exited through the same kitchen window. The owl began to pump its wings furiously, trying to get away from the house before the letter it delivered would go off.

The brief shriek Molly gave in fright in reaction to the bird made the Weasley men make haste to run towards the house to see what was the matter.

They ran into the house to see Molly staring at the red letter that was beginning to smoke around the edges. Ginny had arranged for her Howler to be time-delayed. The postponement put the Howler into a stasis that would not go into effect until it was delivered. However, with all the seething rage and vitriol that Ginny had poured into her Howler, it began to wear on the stasis charm during delivery. Had the Weasleys lived farther away, it might not have made the trip.

As Molly reached out with a tentative hand, wondering who had sent her a Howler, a large flock of starlings took off from the great oak tree next to the Burrow, as if startled from a gunshot.
Molly and the Weasley men stood in shock as Ginny's Howler cited chapter and verse of Molly's interference in her life, from stopping Harry from pursing her during the war, to lying to Draco and threatening him the day the Death Eater Decree came out. Ginny's Howler went on to recount how her mother had lied to her, saying that Draco had never come to the house. The Howler was an
exceptionally long one considering how much Ginny needed to vent and set the record straight. Ginny bellowed on about how Molly had encouraged Harry to date her despite her lack of interest, and Molly's threats to Ginny that she had better accept Harry's courtship, or the matron would slip a love potion into Ginny's food sometime to hasten her along. It was another instance of bullying into yet another marriage, like Ron. And then to add icing to the piping hot cake, there was the retelling of Molly telling Harry of her assumptions that Ginny had been sexually abused by Tom Riddle, which Ginny's Howler vehemently denied, taking umbrage with her mother's presumption, and interference with her sex life with Harry. But the cherry on top was the final news that she had divorced Harry and had run away with Draco Malfoy in order to marry the wizard she has always loved and should have married in the first place.

Molly fell to her knees, mortified and angry. Fists clenched in the air, she screamed with hysterical fury that her plans had been subverted. Malfoy had got Ginny in the end. Her precious little girl was in that monstrous Death Eater's clutches now. She began to rend her clothes in her frenzy, a near madness overtaking her. First Ron and that gigolo peddler, Lavender, and now this. The scandal of it all, reflecting solely back on her. It was more than she could bear.

The Weasley men stood around, unable to move, ignoring the smoldering pile of ashes on the table from what had been Ginny's Howler. Even Arthur could not move his legs to run to his wife's side to console her, shocked by Molly's coercive interference in yet another of their children's marriages, and the news of Ginny's departure and sudden divorce, even with Molly’s wailing lamentably on the floor.

George noticed that lunch was beginning to burn, and he used his wand to remove the pot from the cooker.

It didn't matter. No one wanted to eat.

Bill, still slightly stunned from the bomb that was dropped at his birthday party with the announcement of Ron and Hermione's divorce, shook his head with pity as he gazed at his hysterical mother.

In the years to come, no matter how much Molly scrubbed that kitchen table, used every potion, charm or spell, the singe marks from Ginny's Howler would never disappear. Even with an opaque tablecloth placed over it, the singe marks still showed through. It was a constant reminder to Molly and the rest of the Weasley family of Ginny feeling betrayed by her own mother and her mother's selfish manipulations.

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Justina had gone with Severus, Draco and Ginny up to the caldera to bring their offerings to the goddess Pele. Justina had taken them out shopping to help them pick out the right flowers and Pele's favorite fruits to offer as their show of thanks for providing them with sanctuary. It was
Pele’s magic that was imbued into the island that safeguarded them, so she was, in a sense, their protector.

There were red lehua flowers and strawberries from Ginny and Draco.

Justina explained the symbolism behind the red flowers, involving a tale of two lovers who had been separated, then joined together once more.

Considering their own tragic love story and their reuniting, it was a most fitting offer for Ginny and Draco to make, as the lehua tree is a favorite of Pele’s, one of the first plants to grow and bloom after a lava flow.

Severus was to offer red hibiscus blossoms and 'ōhelo berries. The curious Potions master was about to try one of the delicious looking red berries he’d bought from the local store’s produce section before wrapping up his purchase. Instead, he was soundly slapped on the back of the hand by Justina before he committed a great insult to Pele. “We could all get lost in rain and fog on the way to the volcano as punishment for not offering one to Pele first,” Justina admonished.

The local witch told Severus and his companions the story of the 'ōhelo berries, which were an incarnation of Pele's sister, Ka'ōhelo. After Ka'ōhelo was buried by her son on Kilauea volcano, Pele's home, the bush grew along its slopes. When walking on the way to Kilauea crater, one must offer the first 'ōhelo berry to Pele, tossing it in the volcano, then – once the offer is given – one may enjoy as many 'ōhelo berries as desired on the walk back down.

It seemed there were a great many things the three of them still had to learn to avoid breaking local customs, but they were all fast learners and the townsfolk were more than happy to teach them.

As the four of them trekked up the side of the mountain towards the top of the volcano and island, they had a glorious view to the island below and the vast ocean that surrounded them. About thirty miles to the north north-east lay the Big Island, where Kilauea volcano was currently erupting.

The volcano for Malu Palekaiko erupted periodically too, as Justine explained that Pele also makes her home here sometimes to keep company with those who have magic like her.

Malu Palekaiko was invisible to Muggles, as most magical places in the world are. Ships sailed around the island unaware they had veered off course and then back to their original headings, and people in planes never saw it.
Once at the top of the island, Justina said a heartfelt prayer to Pele on behalf of the newcomers who had come to seek sanctuary and were offering her thanks for her shelter.

Severus, as instructed, tossed a small handful of ‘ōhelo berries into the caldera, leaving the rest on a small, primitive altar, which was nothing than some artfully arranged lava rocks. Ginny and Draco did the same, also leaving their offering by the edge of the caldera.

They all said "Mahalo," which was Hawaiian for "thank you." All of them were sincere in their thanks that they had found sanctuary and were free.

As they began to descend from the top of the island, Severus was also thankful he’d purchased a good set of hiking boots, while Ginny and Draco each wore a sturdy pair of trainers.

Justina warned them that should they come across a beautiful woman with long flowing hair or an old woman with long white hair, that they should always offer her help and respite, and always say "Aloha" to her. Pele had been known to take human form once in a great while.

Scrambling over the rocky lava flows, he asked Justina about the offering of gin to Pele.

"Pthth! That's just a stupid made-up story by a Greek Muggle," the tiny witch said scornfully. "He wanted to get her drunk so she'd put on a show for the tourists that ate at his restaurant. As if! If you really want to please Pele with something alcoholic, you must brew or distill from the fruits or vegetables that grow along the slopes of this island, from the very soil that she made."

Feeling more confident now they had the blessings of Pele secured, they headed back into town for some lunch, Severus picking more ‘ōhelo berries along the way to stuff in his many pockets or pop in his mouth. During lunch, the trio began to scan the local rag listing of properties for sale.

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That Monday, the house-elves did a good job of keeping people out of the lobby if they did not have business directly dealing with The Lovely Lavender Company.

*The Quibbler* hit the stands early that morning and was all that anyone could talk about throughout all of British wizardom. Even the European wizarding press had latched on to this exclusive, as The Lovely Lavender Company had a strong presence on the continent.
As Severus was not there Sunday night to meet Mrs. Paxton, Mrs. Paxton sent an owl to Miss Brown; this was Lavender’s cue to notify the Aurors that not only was Severus missing, but Draco as well. Madam Agatha had canceled her Saturday appointment, which delayed telling the Aurors by another twenty-four hours that two of the “boys” from her stable, who were Death Eaters, had gone missing.

Now that the Aurors had finally identified which two Death Eaters had fled England, they were still focusing on ports and marinas. Posing as Muggle policemen, Aurors swept through every major port, showing pictures (the non-moving Muggle kind) of Severus and Draco's faces to port authorities, shipping companies, and anyone else who might have had an unknowing hand in their escape. When nothing turned up at the major ports, the medium and small ports were then canvassed.

Moody and several inept junior Aurors swarmed over The Lovely Lavender headquarters that Monday. The house-elves were very put out when the young Aurors were accidentally knocking over drums and barrels of items, which then had to be picked up and decontaminated, should it ruin a batch of some potion.

Hermione and Albert were working together on a potion for removing age spots when they were rousted from the Potions master's office. They had to wait in the hallway while their office was tossed for any clues to the two Death Eaters' disappearance.

When Moody interrogated Miss Brown, she could be heard bellowing loudly through the door that she was just as upset as Moody since now she was down two wizards for her side business and would be losing out on money, not to mention her reputation with the clients who she had already pre-booked and would have to be told of the cancellations. There were Galleons to be returned, and apologies to be owled, and it was all a great inconvenience to her.

The demand by Moody that Miss Brown turn over her ledger containing names and amounts paid by people to visit her gigolos was met with a harsh glare and a firm no.

"Should some of the names on this list be discovered by you, or – much worse – made public, let's just say you won't be working for the Ministry for very much longer. You can just start working on your resignation letter right now if you keep pushing it," she promised him.

There was absolute truth in her statement, and Moody, who had interrogated enough people over time to know when someone was telling it, balked. He wondered if it was Fudge, McPeebles, or Amelia Bones who was listed on that ledger, or some close family member whose exposure would cause great embarrassment.
Moody delighted in going after Death Eaters. There was a thrill of adrenaline, plus a never-ending, never-satisfied streak of vengeance that made him so driven to find Severus and Draco, but he loved his job more and the pay was good. He wasn't a man to be bought easily, but given the potential political nature of Miss Brown's secret client list, even he could see that he could do more good by staying in the job and letting this one lead drop by the wayside. Besides, other clues were out there, bound to be discovered and explored.

With nothing left to comb through, Moody and his team of Aurors left. Lavender promised extra butterbeer for the house-elves as compensation for the inconvenience, which was met with wee cheers about the building.

Hermione only hoped that while the Aurors searched Draco and Severus' old flat, that Severus' old place would not be trashed too badly, and any damage done could be repaired. She did intend to move in once the Ministry had peered and spied into every nook and cranny of the place for more clues to their disappearance.

As Severus, Draco and Ginny began to settle into life, still living in Justina's hotel until they could find new homes, the young lovers spent more time apart from Severus. They still all went to breakfast and dinner together most of the time, seeking each other's company daily. But other opportunities to expand their social circle began to draw them apart into their own daily routines.

Severus had bought a new swimsuit, since his musk-ox hair swimsuit, which had the properties to keep him warm even when he was wet, was not suited for swimming in warm ocean waters, versus the chilly lake at Hogwarts. Arnold, one Potions master Severus had become acquainted with, took him diving in a particular area; Arnold pointed out the many potions ingredients that could be collected, while also pointing out that which was protected and could not be collected.

Most days after breakfast Severus would go for a swim in the clear crystal blue waters of the sheltered bay. The vibrancy of the fish swimming close enough to touch was fascinating to him. His afternoons were spent hiking among the jungle forest, becoming familiar with local plants and studying the local wildlife. Ranjit, the other local Potions master, had given Severus a guide book he had written regarding the local birds, insects, and animals; it included a guide for collecting, as some birds were protected on the island.

Ginny had begun spending a lot of time with Halulu after her performance at the Christmas luau. The hula teacher wanted Ginny to start teaching belly dancing, and Ginny started taking private lessons from Halulu who wanted the young redhead to dance the part of Pele at the Summer Pele Festival. There was a lot of dancing to learn and new moves to master.

Draco was busy looking for a place for Ginny and him to call home. He latched onto this notion that he didn't want to marry Ginny until he found them a proper home and could carry her over the
threshold, instead of going back to the honeymoon suite at the hotel. The suite was a fine room and it was romantic, but Draco wanted to make their first night as husband and wife the first night in their new home as well. It was really quite old fashioned and gallant, when one thought about it.

All three of them had finally gotten around to buying new brooms since Draco and Severus both had to sell theirs in order to make ends meet under the Death Eaters Decree before Miss Brown hired them. Once working for Miss Brown, the revocation of their Apparition license made it pointless to buy another one.

Ginny had left her broom back at Number 12 Grimmauld Place, as it was a present from Harry. In fact, she had left behind all the jewelry, fancy lingerie, and gifts he had given to her over their courtship and marriage. When she packed to leave her husband, she took her plain clothes, her cookbooks and personal library, a few photos, and her music box and belly dancing materials; she left behind everything else they had accrued together during her marriage, or they bought together. It was a way of breaking from the past and making as clean of a start as possible.

Even Draco had sent all the monies Ginny had spent to see him as a gigolo back to Potter, transferring the funds through Gringotts, though there was a question of if Potter would even notice since his vault was also rather full.

They had made a date that all three of them would go flying one afternoon. It would be the first chance Severus had had to fly a broom in years, and he was anxious to ride the wind once more. He’d bought a slightly cooler and lighter-weight version of Quidditch gear for casual flying, purchased at the Pililani Broom and Quidditch supply store in town.

Dressed in his new flying attire, Severus went over to the honeymoon suite and knocked on the door. He wondered if the couple was ready to go, as they had arranged.

There was the sudden change in air pressure and Severus noticed that a Silencing Charm was just brought down. The door cracked open a few inches. Ginny was peering through with a blanket clutched to her person in a way that indicated she was probably nude underneath.

"Yes?" she barked with impatience, glaring up at Severus.

"We were to go flying this afternoon?" Severus reminded her.
Uncharacteristically, Ginny rolled her eyes and turned her head back toward Draco. She said shortly, "You forgot to tell me that was this afternoon."

"Well, I'm sorry, but I forgot when you suggested--" Draco cut off when Ginny hurriedly shushed him.

Turning back to Severus, Ginny said, with a smirk that was similar to one Draco would sport, "Come back in three hours."

Severus smelled the Polyjuice Potion on Ginny's, or should it be Draco's, breath.

The door was shut in Severus' face and the Silencing Charm was put back up, as he could hear "Draco" beginning to giggle, but then it was suddenly cut off.

There would be no way either would be up for flying in three hours. They would be up for lots of sleep if they were going to make the most of the Polyjuice Potion and a bit of role-reversal.

The Potions master contemplated the possibility of playing a joke on them when next he saw them; he would ask them if they had taken precautions, as otherwise Draco was at risk of becoming pregnant. Of course it was impossible, as Ginny's body on contraceptive potions would be just as effective for Draco. There were, however, two previous recorded cases of male pregnancy due to couples playing around with Polyjuice before the witch knew she was pregnant. It would still make for a good trick, especially considering how they had ribbed Severus often about his growing base of female admirers, including Justina, Maria, Antonia, Svetlana, Gretchen, Tina, Miyuki, and the under-aged daughter of Mounga, Akela.

Ginny told him it was his nose that was the advertisement, indicating the old saying about noses and men's endowments. Severus choked on his coffee over that comment.

He wondered if he should wait for Ginny, Draco, or both to have a mouth full of beverage before he played the male-pregnancy joke on them over breakfast.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks to my wonderful betas, JuneW and Hope, for cleaning up this chapter and making it presentable for public consumption.

Jade Hallett/k6034's DeviantArt page here: http://k6034.deviantart.com/

The title for this chapter was inspired by the Fiona Apple song, “The Child is Gone.”

I know so many of you who have read my fic have told of your loathing of my interpretation of Molly. I hope this chapter satisfied you.

Here is the story behind the Lehua flowers:
http://www.lehuaukulele.com/lehua_flower.html

The legend of 'ōhelo berries can be found here.
http://www.mauimagazine.net/Maui-Magazine/November-December-2012/Oh-Hello/
and
http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2006/May/19/il/FP605190309.html

Strawberries and red hibiscus flowers have also been listed as favorite offerings to Pele.

Here are some more stories regarding Pele:
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/10/hawaiian-legends_n_3898664.html

Here is the real story behind the myth of offering gin to Pele:
http://www.kaahelehawaii.com/pages/culture_hookupu.htm

Pililani means "close to heaven." Fitting for a broom store, don't you think?
Chapter Summary

Severus and Draco both find what they have been looking for, while Lavender has a big favor to ask of Hermione.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Seventy-Four
"Love Finds Us When We Least Expect It"

Disclaimer: I could torture you with a parody of a disclaimer with altered lyrics from the Gilligan Island's theme song, in some long and convoluted way, to say that Rowling and various corporate entities own Harry Potter, and I do not, but even I have limits on how cruel I am to my readers... But notice how Severus and Draco are sort of stuck on a tropical isle?

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The day after The Quibbler came out with their exclusive interview with Hermione, Ron, and Lavender, the news broke in the Daily Prophet of Harry and Ginny's divorce. The paper reported accounts of seeing the Potters together Friday morning in the Ministry, without specifying it was at the Portkey Office, and that neither were available for comment, since it was reported they were on holiday. There was a great deal of speculation if they went together or separately.

The tone of the interview in The Quibbler certainly set the way Ginny's divorce was written up in the Daily Prophet. There were questions by the reporter if the Potters married too young or if there was pressure to marry.

One Daily Prophet story about her ex-mother-in-law certainly caught Hermione's attention.

"MOLLY WEASLEY: Bad Mother Or Bad Luck? Two divorces in one week for Weasley children!"

It was sensational yellow journalism at its finest, courtesy of Rita Skeeter. Hermione felt little pity
for Molly. Ron's mother had taken Skeeter's words as truth when Hermione was painted in a poor light during the Tri-wizard Tournament coverage and snubbed the young witch at the time. Now it was Molly's turn to be the center of falsely speculative gossip and wallow in it for a bit. Hermione didn't bother to read it, but could imagine all that was contained within the printed lie.

Lavender sent some flowers over to St. Mungo's since it seemed Molly had to be admitted because of her nerves. It was advised by Arthur that Miss Brown avoid her future mother-in-law until things settled down.

Some of the witches' fashion and social advice magazines began to run stories with checklists of things witches should think about before accepting a marriage proposal. One of those things listed was pressure from family and friends. There were also exposés on Muggle divorce and even talk about introducing a mandatory two-week marriage and family supplemental course for sixth years at Hogwarts, for the Muggle-borns and half-bloods who were just as unaware as Hermione about the magical bonds of marriage and children.

One proponent of the new Hogwarts coursework put forth a hypothetical question involving two Muggle-borns with children who had no knowledge of the life-long bonds of marriage; what would happen if they were to divorce without knowing such things? The opposition countered that this talk of divorce might make witches and wizards put off children for so long that birth rates would plummet. Or possibly witches and wizards would take up the Muggle practice of living together and having children, but not marrying in order to give themselves an escape clause for marital and parental responsibility. There were plenty of married witches and wizards who were doing that already, leading separate lives and engaging in infidelity in high numbers, so that the argument was groundless.

Hermione, Ron, Harry, and Ginny jointly set off wizardom's questioning of one of the basic societal customs and turned it on its head, making people reexamine things which had been taken for granted for decades, if not centuries.

Some witches came up to Hermione in Diagon Alley in the subsequent weeks and shook her hand, exclaiming that after reading her interview in *The Quibbler*, it made them reconsider their engagement they had felt pressured to accept, even if they were already aware of the magical bonds children brought. There was a new section in the *Daily Prophet* of broken engagements, located under the obituary section. The death of love was considered as tragic as death. However, not treated as something just as tragic would be if those witches and wizards had gone through with the wedding, neither party sure of their choice, only to deeply regret it later.

Hermione's parents took the news of her divorce rather well, though both of them were initially shocked when they first read about it in the paper. Wendy Granger asked if her daughter would like to talk with her Aunt Christine about what she was going through. Hermione said she might later, but not now. She even found the bright side to the bad news saying that there wouldn't be any
question about her coming over for Christmas and other holidays, as the Weasleys would not be demanding her time anymore. She made a promise to visit her parents more often.

Lavender gave Hermione her own lab space adjoining Albert's, since she needed a place to work on both potions for the company and her apprenticeship.

A trip to Eeylops Owl Emporium resulted in the purchase of a Northern Hawk-Owl. The bird – with brown and off-white spotted markings on her back, and banding on her front – spoke to Hermione’s spirit. Its large and intelligent looking eyes connected with the witch. She felt an instant kinship with the bird, similar to the way she had taken right to Crookshanks upon spying him. The owl did not have a name, so Hermione gave her one: Calleo.

It was a boy’s name, but Calleo didn't mind. She had a new master who seemed to appreciate her and bought a nice large cage for her, larger than the one the shop owner was keeping her in beforehand. The new master also bought her some of her favorite owl treats and a few mice.

Hermione and Calleo didn't live in her flat for very long, as Severus' flat was now available to move in to. The Aurors had done all they could to discover more clues, and had declared the place cleared for habitation once again. Hermione's landlord was more than happy to not have one month's notice she was moving out, eager to have the divorced witch out of her block of flats.

Marf was thrilled to see Hermione, helping her move from her old flat with packing and setting up house. The house-elf had restored the flat to the way it looked before the Aurors took the place apart – tearing up floor boards, ripping out wall paneling, and tearing away wallpaper. Now everything was the same again, right down to the rickety kitchen table the couple had destroyed while shagging like rabid Pygmy Puffs, and the settee she had grown very attached to.

The bed curtains were a different color, she asked Marf, who then found out about the aura-projecting properties of the curtains, which had been imbued with powdered moonstone and certain charms. Hermione had always wondered if she ever imaged them a different color at some point, and her suspicions were finally confirmed. She could have changed them to stay black as she remembered them, but decided she could live with the color-changing properties for a while.

Marf was thrilled to cook for Mistress Hermione, as the witch sometimes came home very late from work, tired and appreciative of the wonderful meal he had cooked her. There were nights she stayed up late studying her Potions books or some new language she was learning, and he was always happy to provide a cup of tea to invigorate or relax her as she needed. Marf took care of her as he’d promised Master Severus he would.
He didn't even throw out those nasty old lemons Mistress Hermione demanded to be left alone to be tested and analyzed when she had a bit of spare time, which was not much. Besides, Marf knew they weren't really lemons anyway.

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Tina was getting a bit exasperated. She worked part-time at the local apothecary in town and supplemented her income with a little real estate work and crafts on the side. She had practically jumped through Quidditch hoops to get the blond British wizard to agree to let her be his real estate agent. There were two others in town, who were also part-time real estate agents, since properties in Malu Palekaiko didn't sell very often.

The houses that did come onto the market were usually owned by second-, third-, or fourth-generation sanctuary seekers. The original owners had sought sanctuary, and then the children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren inherited the house. Because the inheritors usually had a house of their own or they were not being sought after by foreign governments, some of them moved outside of the sanctuary of Malu Palekaiko to live elsewhere, usually the mainland United States. That was when the homes were then put up for sale.

There were houses that had been on the market for months, in some cases years. Tina received a small fee to help maintain them as part of her contract with the seller to keep them in a presentable state, sometimes renting them out. Of course there were properties she didn't maintain that she showed to Draco, because regardless of which house he bought, there would be a commission in it for her.

Besides, right now her biggest concern wasn't a sale so much as that deliciously tall, dark wizard who was Draco's friend – a wizard she wanted to snag for herself.

Tina figured that if she got to meet with Draco every day, she would have her chance to flirt and flaunt her feminine wiles at that brooding wizard with the piercing black eyes and pale skin, that yummy accent that practically made her swoon, and that nose that promised a man who was built for her appetite below.

Severus was the freshest piece of meat on the market, and the youngest and best looking thing that had come around in years, as that Draco boy was already taken. Tina was already battling with half the single witches in town for Severus' attentions. She was set on catching his eye, hell or high water.

In her sweetest American southern accent, she tried to make conversation with him when she would see him in the mornings, when she was picking Draco up to go about town and to more remote properties on the island. However, Severus was certainly playing hard to get.
It was the thrill of the chase that made her not want to drop Draco and tell him to go with another agent in town. When they'd look at one house after another, Draco kept sticking his nose in the air like a wizard whose farts didn't stink. He couldn't name what he wanted, but complained of the plumbing system on one house, the architectural layout of another, the rotted siding of yet a third house, which was decomposing and she would haven't let it get that far if she was in charge of taking care of that house, but the list of complaints went on. This one “cozy vintage cottage” (*read: tiny dilapidated shack*) smelled of rancid curry and onions; that one he claimed he wouldn't even let a house-elf live in.

She was getting close to giving up and was ready to tell Draco that if he didn't help her finagle a date with Severus, then the deal was off and he could find his own damn little hoity-toity castle himself.

Draco couldn't believe the hovels this witch was trying to pass off as domiciles. Some of them were mere shanties that should have been condemned long before he was even born. Many were large enough for his needs, but some of them seemed so flimsy, built with nothing more than some dried-up palm fronds along the side of a rickety frame and some posts. And there was one that was made with wood so punky, his foot fell right through the floor. The witch had the audacity to say he should watch his step and that this is what happens when anti-termite charms get stale.

It seemed all the habitable homes he would have gladly picked out were already occupied. He knew there was at least one decent house out there for him and Ginny to call home. Draco was getting quite antsy to marry her, and a delay in finding a house was a delay in finally being able to call Ginny his wife.

One late humid afternoon, after a quick rain shower had just passed through, Draco and Tina trudged back towards the center of town. It was yet another day with no luck or even hope of finding anything.

"As I heard through the grapevine, Severus is unattached," Tina began, hoping to use this as an opening salvo to get Draco into setting her up with that hunk of a wizard she wanted for herself.

Draco knew what Tina was up to. You couldn't out-Slytherin a Slytherin. Of course he had known from the start that one of the main reasons she'd begged to be his real estate agent was for a chance to jump Severus’ bones. Draco knew she was getting fed up and was ready to lay down the ultimatum of a date or no more house-hunting.

"Well," Draco hemmed and hawed, spinning his tale to suit his purpose while trying to avoid promising her a date and keeping her as his real estate agent. "One *could* say that he is available."
"Did she break his heart? Did he leave her behind? Is he a widower? Divorced? Omigawd!" Tina began chattering on like a monkey.

The rumors were already flying about Severus' past. It was known he was officially unattached, but that was the only information out there, which gave the witches in town hopes of snagging him. Draco did not allude to any woman in Severus’ past. For all anyone knew, Severus could have never dated and was still a virgin. No one wanted to even entertain the notion he preferred wizards.

"That's not for me to say. He is a private man, that I can say." Draco valiantly tried not to smirk, and barely succeeded.

Tina was hooked now, and would never stop showing Draco properties until he found the right one.

The rain clouds drifted across the sky just long enough to let the sun peak through. It caused a rainbow to suddenly appear in a grand arch in front of them, hovering above the town with one end of the rainbow cascading onto a white cottage, set back from the road a bit, just up ahead.

It was a moderate-sized home with a broad front porch. It had proper windows they could close to keep out the elements, but that could open wide to allow the cool ocean breezes to enter, and had shutters. The witch was out on the front porch using her wand to move things out of the house, past the front lawn and garden and down to the curb.

Draco raised his hand up and called out, "Aloha, Sumiko!"

"Aloha, Draco. Tina." Sumiko came down to the road to chat, eager to take a break.

"Cleaning house?" Draco ask.

"More like clearing out house of curbside freebies," Sumiko confessed. "My husband's case has been reviewed and he's been fully exonerated. They found the wizard who killed those Muggles in that faked industrial accident years ago, and we can go back home now."

Feeling empathy over being unjustly persecuted himself, he exclaimed, "That's wonderful!" He
gave her a brief hug in congratulations.

"So I was wondering, Draco, you still looking for a house?" the Japanese witch asked, a look in her eye.

"Yes!" Tina and Draco eagerly answered in unison.

"Come on in. I'm in the middle of packing, so forgive the mess. Take a look around and see if this is what you are hunting for." She beckoned them to follow her up to the house.

"It's four bedrooms. Our children were all grown when we had to flee for sanctuary, but we hoped they would come visit so we bought it a little larger than what we needed for just ourselves. Unfortunately, they never did visit," Sumiko said, a little sadness in her voice.

"Here's the kitchen," she pointed out as they walked through the room, Draco noting the mix of American cottage style with Japanese influence. "The dining room. The living room," she said. Sumiko suddenly noticed Draco had stopped at the sliding glass door that went from the living room out to the garden she and her husband built.

Draco stood there at the sliding door staring out onto the little semi-enclosed Japanese garden in the back. It was almost as if they had plucked the garden he’d created for Ginny in his flat for their romantic picnic and placed it there. A few of the plants and trees were different because of the tropical climate, but it was essentially the same. The engawa, the steeping stones, the small stream that burbled and babbled, meandering slowly through the middle of the garden. There was a beautifully pruned Royal Poinciana tree instead of the cherry tree he had created, but the tropical tree that was substituted would be covered in glorious red blossoms in the summer, given that the Hawaiian climate wasn't cold enough for cherry trees.

Sumiko saw the way he looked lovingly at their garden. "It's almost like the one we had at home. But we had to get something different than a cherry tree."

Draco could almost feel the tears brimming in his eyes. "It's perfect. Name your price."

He would spend any amount he could to bring his bride home to this ideal patch of land in paradise.
"Well, the Japanese Ministry of Magic has agreed to compensate my husband handsomely for convicting him based on false testimony, sloppy Auror work, and an over-zealous prosecution, so it's not like we'll need the money. And you and Ginny are such lovely people, so much in love. A young couple should have a nice home to raise a family. How about I sell it to you for a discounted price as a wedding present," Sumiko offered.

Draco was touched by her offer, but he wanted to pay her a fair market price, as she and her husband had created the perfect future home for him and Ginny.

"I have plenty of money," he assured her.

Tina let out a sigh of relief, as a discount meant less of a commission for her.

"No, I insist on it. Consider the discount price as a wedding present for you and Ginny. How about fifty-thousand Galleons," she offered.

"Done." Draco turned and shook Sumiko's hand. The place was worth at least sixty-thousand. He was prepared to pay ten times that amount, just to have this place.

"We'll be moving out on December 22nd, so you can have the place on the 23rd. Will that work for you, Draco?" she asked, as he was still shaking her hand, not so much that they had closed the deal, but in thanks for her selling her quintessentially perfect home to him and his bride.

Tina was fuming. Not only was her commission going to be less than she had hoped, thanks to Sumiko's "generosity," but she hadn't even blackmailed Draco into getting her a date with Mr. Mysterious.

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Hermione read the article over again. It amazed her how much Fudge still had influence over the paper to publish what they did. Fudge did a lot of the same manipulation of the Daily Prophet and other papers during the early days of the war, until public opinion swayed in favor of believing Harry, so it didn't surprise her.

Near the back of the paper was a small article with equally small print. She knew the real story behind it, and this one time she was a little happy that it was not known to everyone yet.

"Two Wizards Sought For Questioning"
Two wizards are sought by the Ministry for questioning regarding an ongoing investigation. No photos of the wizards could be provided by the Ministry, but they are described as follows:

- 6', approximately just over 13 stone, shoulder-length straight black hair, black eyes, prominent nose.
- 6'2", approximately 14 stone, long straight light blond hair to below the shoulder, gray eyes.

Should you see these two wizards, please contact the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Auror Division. Do not approach."

It did not miss Hermione's attention about the omission of any "tattoos."

Hermione didn't want Severus or Draco named as the suspects until she found evidence to exonerate them, or at least make them no longer subject to the Death Eater Decree.

Hermione folded up the paper and placed it in a stack she had put aside for when she saw anything of interest that might apply to Severus or Draco, or anything regarding the last days of the war. Just then, there was a knock at her lab door.

"Come in."

Lavender poked her head in the door, looking almost sheepish. "I was wondering if you would come over to talk with me regarding something personal." Then she added quickly, "When you have a moment."

"Is now all right?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, by all means."

Lavender had the tea service ready.

Severus had warned Hermione that anytime Lavender had tea ready for you when you already came into her office, then it was a clue that she was going to ask you for something you might not like and this was her way of softening you up before delivering her request. The nicer the nibbles,
the worse the news.

'There is no alcohol around, so that's a good sign,' Hermione dryly thought to herself, remembering the presence of it when she was given the upsetting news about her then husband.

Once Hermione had been served tea by her boss, she waited for Lavender to start the conversation.

"Ron and I have set the wedding date," her boss began.

'Okay, here it comes,' she thought, bracing herself.

"We're getting married Christmas morning. And I'd like to ask you if you would be my bridesmaid."

Hermione blinked back in shock at the request, stunned that the witch who had been having an affair with her husband for so many years was now asking her to be her witness at her wedding. It was unorthodox to say the least.

"Well, what about Padma?" Hermione asked, knowing that Lavender's best friend, Parvati, was in a perpetual vegetative state, when she wasn't screaming.

"Padma blames me for Parvati's condition. She said I should have offered myself first instead to save Parvati. On several occasions, Padma has said it should have been me who wound up in St. Mungo's, not Parvati. As if Padma knew what happened. Parvati and I both were doomed to the same fate, if it wasn't for Blaise helping me to escape." Lavender's hand shook a little, and she put her tea cup down in order to regain her composure; she was on the verge of tears, remembering the horror.

Hermione knew Lavender felt some sort of obligation towards Blaise, but didn't know the reason until now. Blaise had been barely civil to Hermione, still holding a dislike for Muggle-borns. He behaved, but was curt on the few occasions where they crossed paths during work.

"Well, aren't there any other friends? I mean, it seems a bit strange that you would ask me when..." Hermione trailed off. She didn't want to bring up details.
"All the other witches I would call friends are dead. And for other witches I’ve met after the war, none of them are what I would call anything more than business associates or acquaintances," Lavender said, her voice steely and firm. "I may look like I talked to some of these witches at the ball as if we were old friends, but it is nothing of the sort. It is a game of chess, playing social standing against others, parleys of alliances towards goals, business arrangements for Galleons, and networking opportunities. They are not friends. I wouldn't trust them as far as I could throw a troll without my wand."

Hermione hadn't thought about it that way. She had lost a great many friends in the war too. Ginny was her only close female friend, but now she was gone as well. There was Fastrada, the witch who had replaced her at her old work. They had been meeting for lunch every few weeks and felt a sort of kinship bond, but Fastrada was certainly not what she could consider a close friend as of yet.

"You and Ron are the only true friends I have. And Harry and Neville, but I don't know Harry well, like you do," the blonde witch admitted.

Hermione felt a little sadder now. She and Harry were close, but it seems that this business with Ginny – and his initial request for Hermione to spy on his wife to see if she was cheating on him – was the beginning of a wedge that was driven between them. The situation made their friendship more strained and less unconditional. Harry had now been gone for two weeks, and she wasn't even sure how long it would be before Harry could trust Hermione, if ever again. And if there was no trust, how could one truly be friends?

"Yes, Lavender, I'll be your bridesmaid. I'd be honored," Hermione agreed.

Considering all that had transpired between the two witches, Hermione was humbled that Lavender would request this of her when Hermione had every right to refuse.

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Severus really needed to find a place of his own. And fast. Justina was now offering to bring his coffee up to his room in the mornings. She also knocked on his door at night to see if there was anything else he needed, sometimes offering him a nightcap, which he politely declined.

He was doing a lot of polite declining lately.

Now that Tina was done with her one client, Draco, she offered to help Severus find his own little cozy cabin, an offer he politely refused as well. Severus had already made arrangements with a wizard to start looking for a home of his own. Severus had something very specific in mind in regards to what he needed. He didn't want to waste time with a witch who would drag him to the other side of the island to some rat-infested lean-to just so she could pounce on him. She might
even be taking fertility potions in hopes of entrapping him, for all he knew.

So far, there were no leads. Severus needed one bedroom for himself, but at least two other rooms as well. One room needed to be a library, and one a Potions lab; he was willing to convert bedrooms into those rooms to meet his needs. If Hermione came to join him some day, he could add on as needed. The house construction needed to be solid, not some bits of woven bamboo mat nailed to some unfinished posts. The site also had some very specific needs, since Severus would be having his very own Potions master's garden. He'd never had one of his own, as the gardens at Hogwarts were Pomona's domain and she helped grow whatever Severus needed; and since the Death Eater Decree, his own garden was certainly not a possibility.

Then there were the requests that began pouring in for Potions. Many of the requests seemed to be from people who didn't want to deal with Arnold, who didn't exactly hold to the Potions master credo of discretion. Also, Severus did not have the puritanical streak that Ranjit had. The Indian Potions master was Muggle-born and had grown up with many of the uptight Victorian mores from British empire colonialism that had seeped into the culture, which was ironic because this was the same culture that had produced the *Kama Sutra*. As a Muggle-born, Ranjit had grown up with the more socially conservative mindset of Indian Muggles versus some of the Indian wizarding populations, which was much less influenced by British Muggle “morality.”

Severus was tired of working in Justina's kitchen. It was undignified for a Potions master to brew in a kitchen, though that's exactly what he and Hermione did in his own flat.

So in addition to looking for a home, he also was looking for a small shop in which to set out his own shingle. It would be better if he had some place in which to conduct business, as he didn't feel like having to conduct business in the sanctuary of his home. He'd spent years having his own flat as his place of business when selling his own company and flesh, and he wanted to separate those two aspects of his life so he could get away from work while home and vice versa. Besides, he could even do tutoring at his shop and not in a home with other children running about as distractions. His one-on-one sessions with Hermione proved that being undisturbed by others led to much more progress.

Draco had found his little dream home and was preparing to move into it like a male bird putting a whole lot of effort into preparing an attractive nest to captivate a mate. The wedding was in a little less than a week and he still had much to do, while Ginny was busy getting her dress and picking out flowers.

While joining Draco on one of the many shopping excursions to the local homewares store – Hearth, Hale & Ho'okipa – in order for the groom to set up his house, Severus expressed his concern.
"Shouldn't you let Ginny pick out her own furniture, china, flatware patterns, bed linens, and such? Witches tend to be very territorial and want to impose their own style on their home instead of adopting someone else's," the older wizard warned his friend.

"First of all, I want this house ready for Ginny the day we move in, right after the wedding and dinner. Speaking of which, I made reservations for the seven of us at Mario's, and he promised us a room in the back for our reception," Draco said. The group of seven included everyone in the wedding party: Ginny, Severus, who was going to be his best man, Halulu, as Ginny's matron-of-honor, Greg, Halulu's husband, Mounga, who was going to be the officiant, his wife, Rainbow, and himself. It was going to be a very small reception.

"Second, right after Hermione introduced Ginny to that Muggle bookstore in July, Ginny went back multiple times and bought a lot of those Muggle magazines that feature houses in tropical locations. They had titles like *Aloha Style* and *Island Dream Home*. So while you two were busy with dance lessons and Potions experiments, Ginny and I poured over these magazines, talking about our dream home and all the little touches it would have. I know Ginny's style and what she likes as well as I do her body. I know she'll be thrilled with what I'm picking out for her," Draco assured his mentor.

Severus had no idea that they had been doing that and was a little surprised. It was very domestic of Draco to involve himself in such things that normally were considered the domain of witches in their society. But given how much Ginny and Draco had dreamed to be together, it was a way to fill the time and keep hope alive while they waited until the Polyjuice Potion ingredients were gathered and their escape was possible.

He had spent enough nights lying awake over the years imagining how his own home would look, from the view he would have from his Potions lab, to the location of his kitchen garden just off the kitchen and his Potions garden on the other side, adjacent to his lab. The Potions master had even pictured exactly where the sink for his lab would go, and how many feet of shelving he would need for his various ingredients.

As Draco and Severus headed back from the homewares store, they walked along a small side street as a shortcut back to the hotel. In a nearby alley, a small sun-faded sign caught Severus' eye as he passed by.

It said "For Lease or Rent."

Using his wand, Severus cleaned away what looked like years of accumulated dirt and grime on the glass window. He put one hand up to the window to shield his eyes from the glare of the sun, as the awning over the obscure storefront was torn and threadbare.
The front part of the store seemed narrow and cramped, but Severus had good night vision. He could see that beyond the first ten feet of the vacant store, it opened up into a much larger area. The front of the store seemed to give a false impression that the whole store was just as narrow and cramped as the front.

There was contact information on the sign and Severus noted it was the wizard he had hired to find him a home and store. He wondered why his real estate agent, Manny, hadn’t shown this place to him yet; he would have to ask him about it.

If he was lucky, the Potions master could get a lease agreement signed, get the awning fixed, and have his shop cleaned up and set up in time for the New Year.

As Calleo dropped off her Friday morning copy of the *Daily Prophet*, Hermione remembered that Harry was due to come back the next day. It was two weeks since Ginny had left Harry. She stood there waiting for the kettle to boil and pondered if she should go visit her friend, or if she should wait until Harry came to see her, if he was still upset with her regarding everything that had passed between them.

With a hot mug of tea in hand, Hermione opened the copy of the *Daily Prophet* and saw the front page.

The mug fell from her hand and crashed on the floor. Small shards of crockery cut her ankle as they flew across the room, and hot tea splashed her feet.

"*Harry Potter Injured in Transcontinental Broom Race*"

Quickly scanning the article, she saw the accident had happened three days ago and the news had only just reached England. Evidently, while flying at night during the Istanbul to Vladivostok Bi-Annual Broom Race over the Pamir Pass, where the borders of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan and China join together, Harry had fallen off his broom. The high terrain, freezing temperatures and heavy snowfall, low oxygen levels, lack of light during a waning crescent moon, and exhaustion were possible factors behind the accident. The Pamir Pass was known as the 'Roof of the World' since it was part of the Himalayas.

There was no news of Harry's condition, how badly he was injured, if he had been treated yet or when he might recover, as he had lain exposed to the elements in sub-zero temperatures for hours before another flyer spotted him lying unconscious on the snow once the sun rose in the morning.
There was no news if Ginny Potter was on the scene or reports of her presence during the race.

Her broken mug of tea forgotten and unaware of the small bleeding cuts on her ankle, Hermione dressed as quickly as possible and Floo’ed directly over to the Ministry.

Running into the section where the Aurors had their offices, she knocked urgently on Kingsley's office door.

The senior Auror was already there and was packing quickly, having read the news shortly before.

"Harry!" Hermione said frantically, seeing a copy of the *Daily Prophet* on his desk as well.

"I know," Kingsley replied as he was packing a traveling Healer's kit to take with him. "I've already sent a memo to the Portkey Office for an emergency Portkey to be ready and waiting."

Glancing over at the distraught witch, he said, "I'll take care of him and bring him back, Hermione. I promise."

Hermione remembered Harry's promise to bring Ginny back only then to return empty-handed and defeated. It made her heart sink to think Kingsley might bring Harry back, possibly not alive.

Manny twisted the key in the lock. The lock had been spelled so kids wouldn't be able to use their wands to unlock the place and get up to trouble away from parental eyes. It was only the key that could open the lock.

Severus liked it since he would be storing a great many potentially dangerous potions and ingredients, should idle hands try to break in and do a little unsupervised brewing. He had enough experience with his stores being pilfered by various students and magical creatures back at Hogwarts.

There were a few candles in the hanging chandeliers that were mostly burnt down, but there was enough wax to light the place for a little while. There were also some skylights to let some natural light in during the day; they were shuttered closed to keep it dark for now.
Just as Severus expected, there was a narrow area towards the front that would serve nicely for a waiting area. Once past the narrow section, it opened into a large area that was plenty large enough for his needs. There was space he could partition off for private tutoring, another section he could partition off for his office and private consultations, two areas for brewing, and then an area for his stores. There was even a back section that was large enough to hold all the ingredients he would need for a fully stocked Potions master’s shop.

"Why didn't you show this place to me before?" Severus asked Manny.

"Well, I thought you wanted something along the main street, so you'd be more visible to customers. More foot traffic. And this place is a bit run down, and I didn't think you'd want to put that much effort into cleaning it up," he confessed.

"This is exactly what I need. It's actually preferable that I don't have a lot of people peering into the window to see who is waiting. My profession requires a certain amount of discretion–" he explained, but was cut off by Manny.

"Something Arnold seems to have forgotten over the years."

Severus was not about to disparage another Potions master to someone who was not a master or mistress of the art. Arnold ruined his own reputation by shooting off his mouth, which is why he had a brisk business making potions for the local clinic and standard potions at the apothecary, instead of doing commissions. Severus had, during his conversation with the two Chinese witches at the buffet during the Christmas luau, discovered his niche. And Ranjit seemed to think himself above taking certain commissions – his rejections based on their being too simple, too small, too time-consuming to complete, morally questionable, and a long list of other conditions – which left a lot of people in need of someone who was not above such things and could keep their big, fat mouth shut.

When Severus told the two Potions masters about the last few potions he’d developed for Miss Brown, Ranjit was appalled that Severus had lowered himself to do "those types of potions." Arnold wanted to know who he tested his potions on and with.

Severus would tell Manny nothing. It was none of the real estate agent’s business

Severus agreed to take the place starting with a two-year lease with an option to renew afterwards a year or more at a time. Now he had to talk to Draco about drawing more money from his vault, since Draco had promised to cover him until money matters abroad with Miss Brown were settled. Draco even refused the interest that Severus offered to pay, as Draco had told Severus that if it
wasn't for him, he'd probably be dead or a soulless husk in Azkaban, and Ginny would still be stuck in a miserable marriage with Potter.

Once money was drawn, Severus could begin cleaning up the place, building and setting the interior to his needs, and buying equipment he was still missing and ingredients he couldn't collect himself. Then, he’d finally feel like a proper Potions master once again.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

It was three days until Christmas, and three days since Hermione had read about Harry's accident in the Daily Prophet. It took until Sunday to report in the paper that Kingsley had found Harry and was working to heal him, but updates on Harry's condition were unconfirmed and the severity of his injuries unknown.

Hermione busied herself with shopping for a Christmas present for her parents over the weekend, hoping the cheerful Christmas carols that played over the loudspeakers in Muggle shops and the bright and colorful decorations might lift her spirits. It was all she could do to not burst into tears in the middle of the store, surrounded by Muggles who were jostling about in their own rush to finish last-minute shopping.

There was little Christmas shopping to do this year at all. Ron and she were no longer married, Ginny was gone, having found sanctuary and happiness with Malfoy, Harry was likely to be gone still, if Kingsley didn't come back with him soon, and Severus was gone as well.

She did get Fastrada a little something for when they would meet for lunch on the 23rd, and Hermione got some guidance from the bookseller at Flourish and Blotts on appropriate gifts from an apprentice to the Master they were studying under. She bought Albert a very nice blank journal in which to record his notes and experiments. Journals were always needed and welcomed; a Potions master could never have enough of them.

Hermione could have bought something for Lavender, but it still felt too awkward. What does one buy for their very rich employer who is marrying your ex-husband?

With her nose in a book on advanced Greek grammar and sentence structure, the young Potions apprentice did not hear the knock on her door.

Hearing no response from her, Albert popped his head through their adjoining door to their offices. Then the elder wizard called out, "No, she's here. She probably just didn't hear you knock."
Albert’s apprentice recognized his voice.

There was another knock on her door and Hermione bid whoever it was to enter.

Kingsley entered her office with a smile on his face.

Hermione got up from her desk and ran around it to rush into his arms. Hugging him fiercely, she asked, "I take it from the look on your face Harry is okay?"

Pulling herself away after realizing she was jubilantly affectionate with the imposing Auror, she looked behind him and asked, "Where's Harry?"

Kingsley began chuckling to himself before asking if he could sit down.

Hermione offered him a seat and asked if he wanted a cup of tea, which he declined. He still had to check back in with the Ministry, but came to see Hermione first since she was the closest one to Harry, and Ron and Harry had a momentary falling out over Ron's long-term affair with Lavender. In addition, Hermione was the first and only one who came to his office once the news broke before Kingsley had left to take an emergency Portkey to Dushanbe in Tajikistan. That was where he’d expected to find Harry, as that was the closest major city with a significant wizarding population to where his accident happened.

"So where is Harry? Is he all right? What happened?" she asked, her curiosity turning into speculative fears, expecting the worst.

"I found Harry. He's all right. There was little left for me to heal once I arrived there. Fortunately, Harry seemed to wind up being taken care of a very competent Healer. Although I doubt she's old enough to have had any formal training, she is skilled enough," he said with a smile upon his lips.

"So where is he? Is he all better or does he need time to heal some more before he can come home?" Hermione asked, still worried about the fate of her oldest friend.

"His body is perfectly healed," Kingsley assured her, waving his hands in a way to assure Hermione that she could sit back down and calm herself. "But you could say there are other things that are being mended right now as he remains in the care of the people who took him in when Yuri Novgorodich, the wizard who found him, brought him there."
Hermione gave the Auror a very puzzled look, unclear what else was wrong with Harry if his body was healed.

"Let's just say his heart is being mended by a certain nomadic Kyrgyz witch who was initially taking care of him until I showed up, and she seems to be equally taken with him. Even her father seems to like him. Their yurt is quite lovely." Kingsley smiled to himself once again and shook his head.

"Harry, this very instant, is in a yurt in the Himalayas, being tended to by a nomadic Kyrgyz witch, and he's all healed, and he didn't come home?" she asked, seeking for clarification, in case she missed any of the finer points already covered.

"Yes." His grin got even broader, and he nodded his head up and down. "Oh, and Harry has a message for you. He said you were right. 'Love finds us when we least expect it.' I guess that's referring to a conversation you two had."

Hermione smiled to herself, happy that Harry had found a little bit of love. She hoped this would last, and be as deep and glorious as the love she had for Severus, but it also disturbed her Harry could fall in love so quickly while still getting over the shock of Ginny leaving him recently. She wondered if this was just a temporary rebound romance.

Kingsley, noting the slightly faraway look in Hermione's eye, cleared his throat. "If I may ask, how close were you and Severus?"

Hermione felt a sudden lump in her throat, and the tears began welling in her eyes before she could stop herself. Her lips were set in a grim line, refusing to let them wibble or frown.

Kingsley's suspicions were confirmed. And he had a sense that Severus' feelings ran just as strong as hers, having noticed the changing attitude of his parolee over the months before he fled. One couldn't be an Auror without noticing these types of small changes in the disposition of someone you knew for years.

He rose and patted her hand, telling her Harry promised to be back the day after New Year's Day. Now Kingsley had to go to work and fill out a disability form for Harry, given he needed an extra two weeks from his accident.
Once Kingsley let himself out and shut the door, Hermione threw her head down on her desk and began to sob. In part from relief that Harry was okay, and in part because she suddenly missed Severus so much it felt like her heart was breaking in two once again.

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BONUS SECTION:

The Daily Prophet
Rite Skeeter Exclusive

MOLLY WEASLEY: Bad Mother Or Bad Luck?

Two divorces of in one week for Weasley children!

December 10th, 2003 – Anyone with a pulse above an Inferi and intelligence above a troll will have no doubt heard the scandalous news that Harry Potter, the boy who eventually defeated You-Know-Who and was raised by Muggles under tragic circumstances, and Ginny Potter (née Weasley), the youngest in an overly long line of children, have filed for divorce!

The Potters were spotted together last Friday morning walking towards the Portkey Office, where they left to go on holiday, but Ministry records show by the time they were reported to have departed they had already severed their marital bonds that morning. One wonders if they went their separate ways upon arriving at their destination, a destination kept under wraps for some secret reason.

This divorce is yet a second one that has recently rocked the wizarding world. The first noteworthy divorce was when Ron Weasley, star Keeper for the Chudley Cannons and pin-up eye candy for the Mercury Broom Company's 2004 calendar, left his shrewish wife Hermione Weasley (née Granger) for Miss Lavender Brown, founder and owner of the cosmetic beauty empire. The Weasleys' divorce is the first one recorded in decades, the last one being when Tom Riddle Sr., Muggle and father to You-Know-Who, divorced Merope Gaunt, descendant of Salazar Slytherin. Let us all hope that the former Mrs. Weasley is not pregnant and history does not repeat itself with yet another forsaken magical child, damaged by divorce, eventually wreaking terror upon the wizarding world in the decades to come. It would not surprise this reporter that Hermione Weasley would be capable of spawning such an insidious monster.

As for the Potters' divorce, was the Weasleys' divorce the impetus? Or is there someone with whom the blame of these shocking events should be placed? Since Harry Potter and Hermione Weasley were both raised by Muggles, it is through no fault of their own pitiable upbringing and blind ignorance that they were not more careful when entering upon marriage, given their backgrounds. However, that does not excuse Ron Weasley and Ginny Potter, the two youngest children of Arthur and Molly Weasley, both children pure-blood.

In wizarding society, witches are often given the responsibility to raise, educate, and ingrain the next generation with the values, customs, and mores of wizarding society. So how is it that two pure-blood children from the same family wind up filing for divorce within a week of each other? Let us look to Molly Weasley, matron of the Weasley family and mother of seven children.

Mrs. Molly Weasley is a pure-blood witch of the Prewett family, whose brothers, Fabian and Gideon Prewett, died during the first war. Unfortunately, they passed before marrying and producing any offspring of their own. Could the loss of two brothers in the flower of their youth have driven Molly Weasley to produce enough children to ensure the continuation of the Weasley line? Given all of the Weasley children survived the second war, it is safe to assume her plan succeeded and the Weasley name will not die out, unlike so many other old and prestigious pure-
blood families that are now forever gone. One could say she went a bit overboard and should have stopped after producing the financially successful twins, Fred and George.

One must wonder, though, having so many children, did she have too many, and in doing so fail to instruct her two youngest children about the importance of marriage in our society? From Ron Weasley's interview in another unnamed publication, he stated he felt pressure from family to marry. Did Molly Weasley harangue her youngest son into proposing to Hermione Granger? Or was there a love triangle during the war between Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, and Harry Potter that caused Ron to propose first, given the history of Hermione Weasley toying with Harry Potter's heart years before, during the Tri-wizard Tournament at Hogwarts. Could Ginny Potter, knowing her husband pined away for Hermione Weasley, been driven to seek a divorce from a wizard who didn't love her?

This reporter thinks there is more behind the story that what the public has been allowed to glimpse from the interview that Lavender Brown, and the formerly married couple Ron and Hermione Weasley, so carefully meted out, like a carefully rehearsed lie. How could it be that Hermione Weasley did not know her husband and her now current employer were carrying on for so long. For a witch who had been crowned the brightest in a century by her instructors at Hogwarts, it seems the former Mrs. Weasley wasn't too bright – to have not known her husband was having an affair for so long. And then to go on and take a job working for her ex-husband's mistress? Either Muggle morals are even stranger than we have suspected, or there is something more going on.

As a reporter seeking the truth for her loyal readers, I promise to get to the bottom of this story and won't rest until it is laid out clearly and truthfully, as if dictated under Veritaserum.

Chapter End Notes

Big round of applause to JuneW and Cygnuz for their always helpful and excellent beta work!

Before you take me to task for remarking about Indian culture being more reserved regarding sexuality, I am taking a nearly verbatim quote from an Indian friend of mine regarding Indian culture's attitude towards sex and sexual ideas/items. She referred to her own culture as puritanical and unreasonably prudish. This was her very own assessment about her own culture. She even told me the story about how she was nearly an adult until she finally learned where babies came from, being the youngest in her family and having been told the “story” that she’d been bought for a quart of rice and that how babies came to be, being purchased by a family. Had she been a middle or older sibling, she would have learned about where babies came from since she would have been around when younger siblings were born, but given she was the youngest, she was not informed of this biological fact.

An engawa is a Japanese veranda, a wooden platform border that runs around the outside of the house, usually under the roof line. Often a place in which to relax, sit, and enjoy the garden.
Hale is Hawaiian for home.

Ho'okipa is Hawaiian for hospitality.

I have no idea if there are magazines with the exact titles of 'Aloha Style' and 'Island Dream Home,' but it seemed like the sort of magazine titles one would come across.

There are two ways to spell Kyrgyz. The other way is Kirghiz. A Google fight determined which one I should use.


There is a movie about them called "Roof of the World" that I highly recommend: http://www.theroofoftheworld.com/themovie.html
Draco had finished preparing the house and outfitting everything they would need in time for the wedding. During the ceremony and reception dinner, a free house-elf that Draco hired would finish taking the last of their things from Justina's hotel and setting it up before Draco carried his new bride over the threshold.

House-elves were free on Malu Palekaiko, as some had sought sanctuary once being freed. They often made money by helping people with their cooking, laundry, gardening, and other household chores, which allowed many witches to focus on home-schooling their children and working. Some of the elves on Malu Palekaiko were house-elves that Hermione had freed during the war with her ruse of clothing Transfigured into common items that some Death Eater witch or wizard handed off to their diminutive slave, only to turn back into clothing.

The day before the wedding they picked out their wedding bands. Draco complained that he didn't even have a chance to buy Ginny an engagement ring. She replied that she didn't need diamonds for him to prove his intent, but that diamonds were still welcome and he could buy them for her later. She was more intent on getting a simple gold band on her finger than something sparkly.

Ginny had made it clear she didn't want a big wedding like her first wedding. In fact, she wanted everything to be the opposite.

Harry had been prevented from seeing Ginny and her dress before the wedding ceremony. She also had a veil on and a blusher signifying her virginity, at her mother's insistence. Ginny had been so disinterested in the planning of her wedding to Harry, that Molly took over; it was the wedding Molly had always wanted. All the old wizard traditions and superstitions were observed, an auspicious time was picked, from the rising of the clock hand to the waxing of the moon. And the guest list was huge, resulting in a large and very formal reception that was tightly scheduled to have all the right dances in the right order with the right people and the right traditions observed,
from the garter to the bouquet and the tossing of rice at the right time.

Today, Ginny and Draco dressed for the wedding in the honeymoon suite together. Ginny had long ago lost her virginity and she didn't want a veil anyway. If anything, Ginny eschewed many wizarding traditions and wanted to go the more casual Muggle route. Draco was happy to let her have it her way, as he was just glad to be able to marry her in the first place. And if making her wedding to Draco nothing at all like her wedding to Potter made her happy, he was just fine with that.

As sunset neared, they descended the stairs together. She had a simple white gown made of the lightest silk, as she still found the middle of December to be quite warm and was glad it would be nice and cool by the beach. There was a crown of plumeria, jasmine, and orchids in Ginny's hair, and a bouquet of pink and red anthuriums and white orchids in her hand. She remarked how the anthuriums looked like hearts and chose them to symbolize her love for Draco.

Draco was in a Hawaiian shirt – white with a subtle cream-colored maile lei pattern – and a pair of long white linen trousers.

In the lobby, they exchanged leis.

Draco and Ginny presented a lei to Mounga, who was not only the local judge but also a priest. Severus presented Draco his lei made of white ginger, while Halulu presented Ginny with her lei made of jasmine and orchids. The bride and groom in turn presented their witnesses with leis made of carnations and orchids.

A few days prior, Severus had asked Ginny if she wanted him to give her away to which she said that her own father passed her off like a piece of chattel, putting her hand in Harry's during her first wedding, as if transferring property from one owner to another. She had said she was walking to her wedding with no one passing her off as something to be owned, as this time she was going to marry of her own free will. Having been forced into an arranged marriage himself, Severus could definitely respect her wishes and admired her symbolic choice.

As they exited the hotel to begin to walk the short distance to the beach to be married by the sea, the ocean was the music to their own wedding march; people started coming out of their businesses or were already waiting along the sidewalk to watch the bride and groom. The whole town had become enchanted about their story of love denied and regained. Though no one else was invited, many in the town followed behind the bridal party to watch the two lovers finally unite, in a marriage that no one, especially a certain mother, could put asunder.

Once upon the sand, Ginny and Draco faced each other while holding hands. Neither paid much attention to the glorious sunset that blazed in the most vivid of hues, coloring the bridal couple with shades of orange, pink, and gold. They only had eyes for each other.

Rainbow handed Mounga a large conch shell, which he blew three times, a Hawaiian tradition for asking divine presence at the start of the ceremony.

Upon seeing the nearly two-hundred who had followed them down to the beach, Mounga had to cast the Sonorus Charm on himself to be heard – over the sounds of the waves upon the beach – by those who had come.

Ginny didn't mind that the town had come out to watch them be married. All that mattered is that she was there with Draco beside her.

"We are here today to officially join Ginny and Draco in the eternal bonds of marriage. Marriage is
a step I would caution all young lovers to consider greatly, but as Ginny and Draco have shared
with me in preparation of the ceremony all that they have suffered and fought to overcome to
finally be together, I know that they understand the seriousness and commitment to which they
enter. Even Severus has allowed me to share a little bit of how he helped these two lovers be
together and here in sanctuary where they are finally free to marry."

Severus saw only the back of Draco's head, but he knew the blond was smiling at Ginny. Ginny's
face was aglow from the sunset and the love she had beaming for her groom that she could not
contain. She was truly a radiant bride. Should Severus see Hermione again, he would have to share
this memory with her in a Pensieve.

The best man was wearing a red Hawaiian shirt, as Halulu said that red and pink are the preferred
Hawaiian wedding colors as they symbolize love; red was a color normally shunned in European
wizarding cultures to wear to a wedding. He was also wearing a pair of long linen trousers like the
groom, but with a different cut and in cream instead of white. The matron-of-honor was in a pink-
and-red muumuu, holding a bouquet of pink orchids and white carnations.

"They grew up together as they attended the same school. They were no school sweethearts, for at
the time they had a rivalry between their families that was not that different from Romeo and
Juliet," Mounga said. "Ginny even told me about a particularly interesting Bat-Bogey Hex she cast
upon Draco."

There was a murmur of laughter among the crowd, amused that two people so in love were once
hostile towards one another.

"It was not until the war drove Draco to some very dark places, where he was saved by Severus,
that their friendship began to bloom. During the war, it was Ginny's friendship and their growing
love for one another that gave him hope to strive to live to see the end of the war. But as the war
ended and their romance resumed, they were driven apart once more by lies, deceit, and injustice."

Ginny began to wipe away at a tear, and Draco gave her a handkerchief to dab at her eyes. Severus
noticed how Draco's own hand moved to wipe away an errant tear from his own face.

"Hope was temporarily lost, but their love did not die. Eventually, Ginny and Draco were reunited
and that hope was renewed. At the time, Ginny was trapped in a marriage she did not want from the
start and had been pressured into accepting against her will. Draco was unjustly punished for
criimes he did not commit. But as long as they had each other, they had hope. With the help of a
mutual friend of Severus and Ginny’s, all three of these people here before me were able to escape
and come here to find sanctuary. And now, after so many years of waiting, there is nothing to stand
in the way of Ginny and Draco declaring their love for one another, and being joined in marriage."

Severus could hear several witches behind him blubbering on and blowing their noses.

"And since they have waited so long," Mounga said with a bit of levity, "I think it would be a
shame to make them wait any longer to exchange their vows."

When Ginny married Harry, it had been an abysmally long ceremony, as her mother had arranged it
all it was nearly an hour long. Ginny could still remember her feet hurting while she stood in heels
her mother had picked out – shoes that were too high to stand in for long periods of time. This time,
Ginny picked something low and sensible, especially since she would be walking on sand, and she
wanted to keep the ceremony as short as possible.

Severus handed Draco Ginny's wedding band, while Ginny was given Draco's by her matron-of-
honor.
The bride and groom promised each other – in front of Severus, Halulu, and about two-hundred impromptu guests – to love, honor, respect, and cherish each other, and to support and stick with each other through the best and worst of times to come.

Mounga even added an extra comment that if they had already stuck with each other as long as they had and after all they had gone through, then marriage would be a piece of cake for them, since they seemed to have dealt with the worst of it already. This seemed to make the bride and groom laugh a little as they still gazed adoringly at each other. The crowd even laughed a little and Severus smiled, moved by Mounga's simple and eloquent interpretation of events during the ceremony.

For the next part, Mounga had beforehand helped the bride and groom pick out what they would say.

Mounga guided them slowly through the last part of the ceremony. "Now if each of you will please repeat a few words in Hawaiian: Ku'u lei..."

Draco and Ginny both repeated the words in unison, the bride slightly stumbling over the pronunciation.

"Nau ko`u aloha..."

This time Draco had a little trouble repeating the words. Severus could see the younger wizard's hands shake a little bit, due to excitement that the ceremony was almost over and Ginny would truly be his.

"No keia la..."

The bride smiled even wider, if that was possible, as she repeated the words with her groom.

"No keia po..."

Severus could sense the building excitement in Draco's voice.

"A mau loa."

They repeated the last of their vows.

Mounga translated for the crowd. "For those of you who don't speak Hawaiian, they said 'My beloved. My love is yours from this day, from this night, forever more.'" Mounga pause before adding, “Well, go on. Kiss her, dude, she's yours."

Draco didn't have to be told twice and swept his wife into a passionate kiss, not caring who saw them. Ginny kissed her husband back, tears of joy streaming down the side of her face. They pulled apart and Ginny was laughing, the tears refusing to stop, as she dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief Draco had given her. Halulu gave Ginny her bouquet back.

"It is with my utmost pleasure that I have the privilege to announce you as Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy," Mounga said with great pride, a huge grin across his wide face.

Severus clapped decorously, while others in the crowd cheered, whistled, hooted, and hollered.
It was then that Ginny and Draco noticed that someone had been taking pictures of them during the ceremony.

The crowd, which had gathered around the couple in a semicircle, parted. As the newlywed couple began walking up the makeshift aisle, the small children who had come to watch began throwing flowers at them in a shower of petals. Witches and wizards held their wands aloft and sparking shapes erupted from their wands. Hearts, orchids, a few cupids, and showers of sparks, twinking and fading, like brilliant fireworks in the dimming light of the sun that had just set, shimmered above the bride and groom's heads.

Severus followed behind the bridal couple, with Halulu and her husband behind. Moungea and his wife were the last to follow the bridal couple.

As Ginny and Draco began the walk up the center of the main street towards Mario's, the townsfolk still following behind, Mario came running out of his restaurant, looking a little panicked.

"I'm so sorry. I cannot serve you dinner right now. Something has happened," the restaurant owner with an Italian accent said, bowing at the bride and groom, his head hung in shame. "Please, this way. Please come with me," he insisted. "I must show you."

He guided Ginny and Draco a couple blocks over and away from his restaurant, Mario apologizing for his mistake.

Ginny and Draco tried to get Mario to say what the problem was, as they would not let a kitchen fire or a problem with reservations ruin an otherwise perfect day.

As they rounded the corner, Ginny and Draco stopped in their tracks and stood, their mouths open
in shock. The town had decorated the community center with flowers and streamers, and there was a big buffet table brimming with food, nearly as much as the night of the luau. There was a big banner with a picture of bells ringing back and forth, and flowers blooming on it, that said, "Congratulations Ginny & Draco."

"I'm so sorry I cannot serve you your wedding feast in my restaurant," Mario explained, "when the town was insistent upon throwing you a proper wedding feast to celebrate a love such as yours."

Ginny turned to Draco and buried her face in his chest, unable to find the words, overcome by the generosity of the people who had welcomed them so warmly and made them feel at home from the moment they were granted sanctuary. She clutched the handkerchief to her face and wished desperately she would stop crying, regretting not packing a vial of Lovely Lavender's Puffy Poof Eye Crème into the pocket where her wand was, or into her bouquet.

Draco looked back at the expectant crowd of faces and said jovially, "I think she's happy and is trying to say thank you." Even Draco was feeling a bit overwhelmed at the moment.

Some of the people close to them laughed and clapped.

The bridal couple walked into the community center and were ushered to their seat of honor by those who had helped set up the place while the ceremony was happening.

Turning to Severus, Ginny asked, "Did you know about this?"

Severus smiled and shook his head. "I'm as shocked as you appear to be. I know you wanted a small, quiet wedding, so I hope this is not--"

"No, no!" Ginny protested. "I think this is perfect. I was happy with a small reception, but this is even better, because..." The bride felt the tears come once again.

Severus reached into his pocket and discreetly produced a small tube of Lovely Lavender's Puffy Poof Eye Crème and handed it to Ginny. The former gigolo was very familiar with witches and their fits of crying regarding emotional situations, and he'd come prepared.

Ginny thanked him and ran off to the restroom to freshen up.

Severus took this time, while Ginny was not attached to Draco's side, to shake the groom's hand and congratulate him.

"And thank you, Severus. If it wasn't for you..." Draco trailed off, the history so well-known between them that no further words were required. The groom went to reach to give Severus a hug, but backed off suddenly after remembering they all had leis on and he didn't want to crush them.

Severus patted Draco on the back, showing that he understood the feelings of gratitude felt by the younger wizard.

Ginny emerged from the restroom looking as fresh as when she’d descended the staircase at the hotel, her make-up restored.

Some people ran off to get their instruments from home. They came back to serenade the bridal couple and all the guests at the reception.

This time, Severus restricted the amount of food he put on his plate so it was something more manageable. The townsfolk had even roasted a whole pig, which was being carved up at the end of the table.
"I told you I smelled pork," Severus heard Ginny say to Draco. "I knew I wasn't crazy."

The band was a rotation of people, some playing several songs before someone else took over so the first person could go grab something at the buffet. Others played a few songs before letting someone else take a turn at playing.

Tiki torches floated high above the guests and bridal party, illuminating the reception as dusk settled in and moved towards twilight.

Severus was sitting next to Draco when Mario came over.

"I hope this is an acceptable substitute for the dinner you had reserved," the restaurant owner asked.

Ginny and Draco thanked him profusely for his part in making their wedding all that much more special.

"If there is anything I can do, Mario," Draco offered.

Mario nodded his head about as if contemplating and suggested, "If you could pay me for your wedding cake, that would be all I would ask."

"You made us a cake?" Ginny said, in shock that everyone seemed to have thought of everything.

Mario shrugged and said it was coming out later once the dinner buffet was cleared away.

People began to clap and clink their glasses, demanding the couple kiss, which Ginny and Draco did not hesitate to fulfill.

Though Severus would not let a crowd goad him into kissing Hermione, had he been marrying her that day, he could not fault the bridal couple for expressing their affection and getting caught up in the infectious moment.

Once most of the guests had finished dinner, Halulu coaxed Ginny and Draco out onto the dance floor. Neither of the newlyweds were counting on dancing, but they gladly went out into the middle of the floor that had been cleared with a few flicks of a few wands of the communal picnic table seating, after people had taken their plates to the kitchen area in the back.

"What'll it be, Draco? A foxtrot? Cha-cha?" called out a large, portly Polynesian wizard of Samoan descent with a ukulele in his hands.

Gazing at Ginny lovingly, the groom said, "A waltz, please, Jimmy."

The wizard talked to a few other band members before replying, "Well, this is an anniversary song, but I think this fits the mood right now." He gave a count to the band to begin.

Jimmy and another wizard, Lamar, sang the melody in harmony, accompanied by the simple playing of Jimmy's ukulele and a stand-up bass played by a witch.

The bridal couple swayed back and forth before they began to spin about the floor. Their eyes never left each other's gaze.

Severus recognized the familiar melody of Iosif Ivanovici's "Donauwellen Walzer," also known as "Waves of the Danube," but was surprised when the Tongan wizard began singing words to the melody. Severus sat and listened to the lyrics, and how perfectly they did seem to fit the moment.
"Oh, how we danced on the night we were wed,
We vowed our true love, though a word wasn't said.
The world was in bloom, there were stars in the skies,
Except for the few that were there in your eyes..."

Severus remembered how Hermione would look at him – with the same loving intensity that Ginny was looking at Draco with as they danced – especially during their last days together. As much as Severus felt happiness for Draco that he and Ginny had had their storybook ending, the best man wondered if he would ever live happily ever after, or if he was doomed to the typical bachelor uncle-like figure paradigm, never pairing off himself with his own true love.

As the song ended with the slow strumming of Jimmy's ukulele and the gentle deep plucking of the bass keeping time, Draco spun Ginny about, lifting his arm up high so she could pass under it before sweeping her up into a kiss at the end.

Halulu leaned over towards Severus and said just loud enough to be heard over the crowd's applause, "Everyone loves a happy ending to a good love story. Wouldn't you agree?" she asked, catching the slight undercurrent of melancholy on Severus.

"Unfortunately, there are not enough of them in this world. I'm glad these two had theirs finally."

Halulu put out her hand and said, "Come on. It's tradition that you and I have a spin on the floor."

"As long as it isn't the cha-cha," Severus warned her. He reviled that dance. Severus was a tango man, if Latin music was involved.

To his relief, the band struck up a moderate tempo foxtrot and Severus guided Halulu to the floor, using all the grace and manners his mother had instilled in him for dancing.

Halulu was a very good dancer with an excellent sense of time and grace. Ginny glanced over and smiled, seeing Severus out on the floor enjoying himself.

Halfway through the song, Halulu's husband, Greg, stepped in and said, "Mind if I cut in?"

Severus bowed out and removed himself; Greg and Halulu danced away.

As Severus was making an exit off the dance floor, weaving between other couples who were moving to and fro, Rainbow stepped in front of him.

"Not so fast, I think I'm entitled to at least a half a dance," she insisted before Severus obliged. He took her hand in his, and placed his other hand delicately upon her waist.

It certainly was a change to dance with a woman as tall as himself, especially since she was wearing heels with a few inches on them and was now taller than him. It wasn't bad, it was just that he was used to dancing with Hermione, who was shorter in stature.

"I hope you put on your dancing shoes because I think your dance card is going to be full tonight," Rainbow warned him, her eyes darting to the side, directing Severus' to the various women around the edge of the dance floor. They were obviously looking for an opportunity to bolt onto the floor and snatch up Severus as a dance partner, once Rainbow was done dancing with the most eligible bachelor on the island.

Tina, Gretchen, Miyuki, and Svetlana looked like they were flyers at the starting line of a broom race waiting for the cannon to go off.
As the song came to an end, Rainbow curtsied to her dance partner and thanked him. On the way off the floor she did her best to delay a couple of the witches who were making a beeline by stepping in front of them and then stepping to the side, continuing to be in their way, apologizing with believable sincerity.

Fortunately for Severus, Ginny stepped in front of him and said, "My turn."

He let out a slow sigh of relief that he had a stay of execution. Some of the witches at the edge of the dance floor gave an impatient huff that they had to wait a little longer.

"Thank you, Severus. Thank you for doing so much for us, and especially keeping Draco safe all these years," Ginny said, her hand placed upon his shoulder and her other hand lightly in his other as another foxtrot with a slower beat began.

"There was a time after the decree where I should have taken better care of him, before Miss Brown found him," he said.

"But you had yourself to look after too," Ginny reminded him. "I can't fault you. It was a hard time for you both. I'm just glad that you were there for him during the war, that's when he needed you the most. You've helped make our dream come true, and that's the best wedding present I could have ever hoped for."

"Then I guess you won't be needing the wedding present I got you both then," he joshed lightly.

"Of course we'll still take it. If you gave it, it must be something we really need or that we'll really like. Or both. You've been very thoughtful and considerate, Severus. I think Hermione would agree with me on that matter."

Just at the mentioning of her name, a small cloud of darkness dimmed the smile on his face.

Ginny smiled a little less and said, "I know. I miss her too." After forcing herself to smile a little more than the bride felt at the moment, she added, "I left a little present for you in your room, when you get back later tonight."

Mounga and his daughter, Akela, danced up alongside Severus and Ginny. Rainbow was busy dancing with Draco while chatting up a storm, the groom nodding his head unable to get a word in edgewise.

"I was wondering," Akela asked, with a little uncertainty, "if I could have the next dance with you, Mr. Snape?"

Severus weighed his options and considered whether a young witch with a schoolgirl's crush was a better option than the other witches – who were of the age of consent and willing to battle each other to get their hands on him first. He wondered who would cast the first hex between the witches anxious to dash onto the floor if an opportunity presented itself.

"I'd be honored," Severus replied gallantly.

"I guess that means I finally get a chance to dance with the bride," Mounga added, implying he was Ginny's next dance partner.

The song soon ended, and before the anxious single witches could even step onto the floor, Severus took Akela up as his new partner, swapping with Mounga.

The music started and Akela said, "Oh no, it's a tango. I don't know how. Maybe the next one?"
"Nonsense," Severus replied as they stood there, the other couples moving about the floor around them. "I'll teach you. It's easy. Just pay attention to my hand on your back to guide you, and my other hand will help direct you when and where to turn."

He began moving slowly, letting Akela find the rhythm, giving her small verbal cues as to whether he was going to move forwards, back, or sideways.

"That's it, you're getting the hang of it," the teacher encouraged his young pupil. "Eyes up. Look at me in the face," he said in order to teach her the habit of not trying to watch their feet. "There, you're dancing the tango. That wasn't so hard, was it?"

Severus saw the look of adoration wash over her face, and he wondered if he praised her too much. She was a sweet girl and Mouna's oldest, so he felt an obligation to be extra patient with her, something he never was back at Hogwarts. He just hoped his extra patience wasn't mistaken for something more. He did not want to toy with her fragile heart, remembering what it was like to be young and his own crush on Lily, only to be dashed later.

It was a short tango, and as the song came near the end, Severus guided Akela into a simple pose that was appropriate for a young witch, versus the leg curl around his thigh Hermione would often end with. His list of safe partners to dance with was nearly exhausted, and he faced the fact that he would have to excuse himself from the floor soon.

Gretchen and Tina were closest to Severus and practically bowled over other dancers to get to him first. The sought-after bachelor saw Tina cast a tripping jinx, and Gretchen went face down onto the floor, other dancers helping her up from her fall.

Without asking his permission for a dance, Tina thrust herself into Severus' arms and proudly crowed, "You're mine now."

Severus spotted Draco changing partners to dance with Justina, the hotel owner. The groom gave him a look of pity, but failed as a smirk crept across his face. Severus narrowed his eyes at Draco, indicating there was nothing funny about this at all.

The music the various assortment of musicians played was an equal mix of wizarding favorites and Muggle songs, a few of the Muggle ones even Severus was familiar with.

A wizard waltz started up and Severus began dancing with Tina, out of obligation to not verbally eviscerate her and make a scene at Ginny and Draco's wedding. He could have easily torn her to shreds with a few multi-syllabic choice words and a sneer upon his lips, making her run off into the night crying. He chose, however, to play the part of dutiful best man and be gracious, not wanting to ruin one moment of the wedding for the sake of his dear friends.

Severus was a Slytherin and was not going to be bested by this Southern fried upstart tart. Spinning her around in a grand arc, he managed to "accidentally" bump up against another couple while forcing her to spin under his arm, his foot placed a little too far out. Tina went down like a sack of potatoes.

After apologizing profusely at his clumsiness, his sincerity almost believable, Severus bent down to help her up, to which she complained and winced. Tina had lightly sprained her ankle. He graciously helped her to a chair, at which point, Rainbow, who worked as a Healer part-time at the local clinic, came over to take care of the injured witch.

"Oh, my," Rainbow said, a bit over dramatically. "What happened?" She shook her head back and forth in sympathy.
Severus could tell she was biting the corners of her mouth to stop from smiling.

"I guess I got carried away in the moment and Miss Angstrem suffered the result of that," Severus lied sweetly. "I do hope you accept my apologies."

Tina plastered on a saccharine smile, now quite less enamored of her prey. "It's all right, sugar. Rainbow will have me fixed up in a jiffy, and then you and I can have another go at it."

Severus bowed lightly and quickly made his exit.

As he made his way back towards his seat, begging off other offers from other single eager witches for a dance, the next song started up.

The words may have been sung in Hawaiian, but he recognized the melody instantly. It was the same song he'd requested at that lounge in San Francisco; it was also one of the songs he remembered teaching Hermione to dance to, the night she was blindfolded and he first begged to have her as they ground against each other desperately while fully clothed in the kitchen. It was the song she requested the most when they danced at his flat.

Suddenly feeling as if there were too many people and not enough room to breathe, the atmosphere too oppressive, Severus exited the open-air pavilion out the side towards the grassy area of the town's central park. The park had a giant Norfolk pine decorated with Christmas lights at one end, and a tall bronze menorah with six large white candles burning away at the other end since it was the fifth night of Hanukkah.

Listening to the song he knew so well, he didn't notice Mounga walking towards him until he was standing beside him.

"You all right, man?" asked the large wizard, who had become Severus' friend in his short time there.

"This was our song." That was all Severus had to say for Mounga to understand.

Severus suddenly remembered that London was eleven hours ahead of their time. He pondered if Hermione had awoken yet, as it was Christmas morning by now, and if Marf gave her the small box as instructed. It was his last gift to her in the hope that he could help fulfill her wish.

Before the song ended, Avi ran out to look for the two wizards who stood in silence before the town's Christmas tree.

"It's time for the Hora," he informed them.

Avi was one of the Jewish wizards in Malu Palekaiko. He and his friend, Saul, were Muggle-born wizards who came seeking sanctuary right at the end of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Avi and Saul had both used their magic to influence the outcome of the war, breaking the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy of 1689, as well as several other international laws restricting wizards and witches from using magic to influence politics and wars where Muggles were concerned. But as they had been born into Muggle society, these two wizards felt an obligation to help their Muggle friends and family in the fight, Magical Ministry rules and sanctions be damned, by which they were. At the close of the war, the Palestinian and newly-formed Israeli Ministry of Magic both went after the two wizards for interfering with Muggle politics and governments with the use of magic.

There were also a few Palestinian witches and wizards on the island who likewise became sanctuary-seekers after the same war for the same reasons. It seemed that both groups of witches
and wizards, though on opposite sides of the war, wound up becoming friends over the years after moving beyond their initial hostilities, though it had taken some time.

It seemed that some of the Muggle-borns who’d sought sanctuary on Malu Palekaiko had used their magic in similar ways during many Muggle conflicts over the decades, including a few Irish Muggle-borns during the Irish fight for independence, and India's struggle as well, in which Ranjit had done the same as Avi and Saul. There were many other countries over the world, besides those four listed, where Muggle-borns had become involved in Muggle political concerns and later needed to seek sanctuary. This explained a lot of the Muggle influence of music and a few adopted traditions into the local Hawaiian wizarding culture.

Avi and Saul had fled Israel as bachelors, but their sweethearts followed them shortly afterwards. They had the full traditional double Jewish wedding, and many friends from Israel Portkeyed in for the wedding. One bounty hunter, who thought this would be a good time to bring back at least one of the wanted criminals during the wedding, wound up getting transported three miles out to sea, where he accidentally kicked a shark that happened to be swimming by at the time. The shark, aggrieved that he had done nothing to provoke the kick, bit the wizard's foot off. The wizard was able to grow it back, but the blood in the water certainly put the shark in a more aggressive mood until someone rescued the wizard and sent him on his way back to Israel with a newly re-grown foot.

Avi and Saul's double wedding was so memorable that one of the traditions the local population adopted immediately was the Hora. Tonight, the dance was about to begin, but could not until men with strong backs could come help. And as Severus was a capable wizard, and the best man, of course he had to participate.

Severus, Mounga, and several other wizards stood round in a circle while the two Jewish wizards gave a brief set of instructions for those who had forgotten the finer points and for Severus' education. Once that was done, they could begin.

As the song that was currently playing finished up, two chairs were pulled into the center of the dance floor. Ginny and Draco had no idea what was going on as everyone cleared away from them, and the newlyweds were encouraged to sit in the chairs provided.

Saul stood to the side, his wand ready, just in case, while Avi positioned five of the strongest men around Draco and four more around Ginny.

"Hold on tight," Avi warned, as he handed a large white handkerchief and instructed Draco and Ginny to hold each end of it.

The women surrounding the couple began to titter, knowing what would happen next, some of them remembering their own weddings.

Severus asked, while he was getting his mini-lesson in Hora chair-lifting, why they didn't use wands instead of their backs to lift the bride and groom, to which Avi merely said, "It's tradition!"

As the band struck up, playing "Hava Nagila," all the wizards simultaneously lifted both chairs, lifting Draco and Ginny high into the air.

Ginny squealed and Draco made some noise about the sudden change in elevation. It wasn't the height that surprised them, both being excellent broom flyers; it was the unexpectedness of it all.

Severus was helping Mounga, Greg, and a couple other wizards whose names he had yet to learn, hold Draco aloft in his chair. Draco let go of the end of the handkerchief as he tried to hold on and
stop from sliding off. Saul, with his wand, guided the end back to Draco so he could grasp it once more. The wizards began to move them about, the bride and groom circling each other, while the witches at the reception circled the bride and groom, holding hands, dancing around in a circle clockwise. The wizards made another circle outside of the women, holding hands and moving in the opposite direction, counter-clockwise.

Ginny and Draco laughed as they tried to hold onto their seats with one hand, and holding onto the handkerchief with another. Since the bride was wearing a silk gown, Saul had to help hold her in place on her seat, with his wand, as they moved about to keep her from sliding off.

It was certainly the most unexpected and thrilling wedding ritual the newlyweds had ever encountered and they loved it. It was yet another surprise in an evening full of them.

When the song ended, the men lowered the bride and groom, who fell into each other's arms laughing and out of breath.

It was time for the toast and cake now. Normally, a wedding reception would have more dancing before moving onto these two traditions, but it was Christmas Eve and parents needed to get their children off to bed or, as they warned their children, Santa might pass by their house that night if they weren't tucked in and fast asleep.

Severus, noticing the crowd starting to thin a little as some people had already wished the couple good luck and excused themselves earlier, decided to keep the toast short and sweet. Even if he had all the time in the world, he would rather embrace brevity than bloviating.

Holding aloft a glass of passion fruit-flavored champagne, Severus said, "To Ginny and Draco. May all your sorrows be behind you, and all your days ahead be filled with love, joy, and blessings. To the bride and groom. Cheers!"

There was a wide variety of people who said cheers in response to Severus' toast, including prost, sláinte, salute, l'chaim, na zdorovie, gan bay, kan pai, chok dee, and yamas.

The cake was a towering confection that could feed two-hundred, as that was about how many people said they would show up when Mario secretly polled the townsfolk. It was a moist yellow cake with a whipped cream frosting and beautifully arranged fresh locally-grown fruits atop each layer.

Draco and Ginny cut the first piece and fed each other their first bite. At first they were very delicate about it, but a little whipped cream astray on the nose wound up becoming a mash of cake in each other's face. Draco took a whole slice and shoved it down the front of Ginny's dress and then grabbed her in a tight embrace, smashing it up against her chest and up the front, smearing cake all along Draco's shirt as well. The bridal couple kissed fiercely, battling for supremacy until Ginny submitted and surrendered in her husband's arms.

Severus could not help but recall the time he'd roasted duck and the pair were late to a Saturday dinner at his flat. He went downstairs to Draco's to find the pair in the midst of a nude food fight, in which Severus wound up getting food splattered all over his boots and trousers when Ginny violently yanked up a picnic blanket to cover herself in the process. Even Severus and Hermione had experimented with a bit of food play, so he could certainly understand, but this mashing of cake at one's own wedding reception seemed unseemly, especially for Draco.

The bridal couple spent the next five minutes spelling cake out of various orifices, hair, clothing, folds of skin, and undergarments while the guests were served cake, until they were as clean and unsoiled as before their sophomoric outburst.
Some families wrapped their cake to go, wishing the bridal couple the best, as it was time for bed and tomorrow was Christmas. Ginny and Draco thanked each and every person there with heartfelt gratitude and thanks for making their wedding and reception better than they ever could have imagined as they bid goodnight and a Happy Christmas.

Once the cake was finished, it was time for Ginny to toss the bouquet. She hadn’t bothered to wear a garter, and Draco was more than happy to forgo that tradition as he didn't feel it was very dignified for a wizard to be flashing his wife's legs for the entertainment of the bachelor wizards in the crowd. Severus thought this was a bit incongruent from the same wizard who had just mashed cake into his wife's cleavage not fifteen minutes prior.

All the witches who had set their sights on Severus, plus other ones who were single while in a committed relationship, and some young girls, made a loose group at one end of the dance floor, while Ginny stood at the other.

Ginny held her bouquet aloft in the air with her wand, her back turned towards the single witches ready to catch the bouquet. The bride placed her other hand over her eyes and flicked her wand, sending her bouquet arching over her head towards the witches who began to frantically jockey for the best position to catch it.

Severus could have sworn that a few of those witches played professional Quidditch, as there was elbowing and bumping in a manner that Severus would have called foul, had he been refereeing the match. A gaggle of them tripped over each other and landed in a pile as they dove for the falling bouquet.

When it was over, Kaimi, Mounga's youngest child who had helped make Severus’ welcoming lei at the luau, was holding the bouquet aloft as her prize, as if she was showing off the Snitch at the end of a game.

Severus could tell that Mounga's youngest was going to be a very talented Quidditch player, as he’d watched how she daintily leapt over the pile of witches who were barreling towards her, ready to crush her. She dodged them, jumping up to catch the bouquet as skilled as any Seeker he had seen play professionally. She certainly did live up to her given name.

"Did you see me? Did you see me?" Kaimi shouted with delight as she ran into her father's arms, as he scooped her up and swung her about, his pride and joy.

"Like a champ!" Mounga praised his daughter, beaming with pride.

Severus went over and congratulated the budding Seeker. "That was very impressive!" he told her sincerely.

"Really?" she said with awe. "Did you hear that, Papa?" Turning back to the wizard her older sister was always swooning over and talked dreamily about, she asked, "We always go flying Christmas day. Will you come with us, Mr. Snape?" She turned to her father and asked him as well, "Can he, Papa? I bet he's a really good flyer if he has refereed games."

"Yes, he is welcome, that is if he doesn't have any other plans for the day," Mounga warned his daughter, trying not to get her hopes up if Severus wished to decline the invitation from the eager child.

Severus didn't have to think long, as Draco and Ginny would certainly not be coming up for air within the first twenty-four hours of their honeymoon, nor did he have any other plans set. He decided to give himself that day off from fixing up his shop, so he accepted the child's invitation to
join the family for flying.

"And you're welcome to stay for Christmas dinner too, if you haven't accepted any offers yet." Mounga added.

Spying the other single witches who were disentangling themselves from each other and casting dirty glances at each other that it was the other's fault and they should have caught it, the bachelor wizard accepted the offer with thanks for Mounga's hospitality.

The party wound down quickly, and Ginny and Draco made their exit amid another shower of sparks from people's wands as they left the open-air pavilion.

Severus and the rest of the guests followed the bride and groom up the main street, around the corner and a few more blocks up, walking up hill as the streets became slightly steeper as they approached the long gradual slope of the volcano that towered above the town. About halfway between the center of town and the edge, the newlyweds reached their little home.

Ginny remarked how perfect it looked, as she had not seen it. She had promised Draco not to look at it before the wedding so it would remain a surprise. They now walked hand-in-hand up the path to the front porch.

Draco opened the door. He swung Ginny up into his arms and carried her over the threshold. The groom closed the door with his foot, his bride still in his arms, and that was the last anyone would see of the newlyweds for the next week.

Severus let out a sigh, the day finally over. Draco's dream had come true.

As he walked back to the community center to help with the post-reception clean-up, he saw others walking past, going back to their own homes to get ready for Christmas.

Here it was, the night before Christmas, when most people are busily concerned with last-minute gift-wrapping, preparing Christmas feasts, putting up the last touches and stuffing children's stockings. Instead, amid the usual bustle of last-minute preparations, these people had taken time from their full schedules in order to cook a potluck wedding feast, spend time away from their own Christmas preparation, and join Ginny and Draco – who they hardly knew – for their wedding, and decorating the community center on top of that. To think of all this, it made Severus wonder what type of life he might have led had he grown up in a community full of supportive warmth and caring as these people had shown the three sanctuary-seekers.

Christmas was a time of hope and glad tidings, and Severus wasn't so cynical over such sentiments for once, having witnessed it first-hand with the townsfolk who had taken them into their bosom.

Hermione arrived at Lavender's house, wearing an understated set of plum-colored dress robes that could also double for a very elegant set of business attire appropriate for important meetings and more formal social functions. Lavender had offered to pay for an outfit if Hermione didn't feel she had anything nice enough, or that was too fancy for the occasion. That certainly described her wardrobe, and she took her boss up on her offer. The bride had suggested Madam Maurelle Mandel's House of Haute Couture, since she was getting her wedding dress there; Madam Mandel would know what to pick to flatter Hermione without upstaging the bride or looking under-dressed.

Marf said there was a Christmas present for her when she woke up, but since the wedding ceremony was that morning, Hermione promised the house-elf she would open her gift after she
She did allow Marf to help her with an elegant French twist for her hairdo, which was promptly pulled down and redone by Lavender's stylist, who also did a complete redo of Hermione's make-up. At least she didn't have to change her outfit.

Hermione found Lavender in her bedroom getting ready while Ron was in one of the guest suites. They had slept in separate beds for the night, observing the custom that it was bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding, and especially her dress. Hermione wanted to assure Lavender that that tradition would not make or break her marriage, but there were other more important factors to consider regarding the success of a marriage than following some silly superstition.

This was Lavender's wedding, and Hermione let the bride cling to her notions. This was her day. Little was discussed between the two witches, and Hermione could tell the bride was nervous, but happy.

Soon it was time for the ceremony to begin. Lavender's father came and knocked on the door.

Hermione emerged. She was followed by the bride, covered by her veil and blusher, a simple bouquet of lavender roses in her hand.

The former Mrs. Weasley had been to enough weddings, including her own, and knew what to do. She walked down the long hallway and entered the solarium, where an official from the Ministry and Ron awaited at the end of the aisle.

It was surreal to Hermione that she was walking down the aisle once again with Ron waiting at the end, but this time it was not for her. She took her place as Lavender's bridesmaid as the organ that had been brought in for the occasion struck up Wagner's "Bridal Chorus," which the wizarding community had adopted from the Muggles.

As Hermione turned to look back, she noticed Ron's face and the way he gazed with absolute adoration at the vision of Lavender as she entered through the doors of the solarium. He had never looked at Hermione with that same look of utter and consuming love as he wore upon his face that very instant. Even after looking at her own wedding photos, she had noted her own lack of enthusiasm on her own wedding day to Ron, and she knew neither were ever meant for each other the way Ron and Lavender were.

Lavender joined Ron's side, and the ceremony began.

It was a rather long-winded affair. Hermione listened to some of the officiant's words and noticed there was a slight chastising tone in his choice of words about fidelity, forsaking all others, making very subtle hints that Ron screwing around on his second wife was just plain old not going to happen. She wondered if Lavender had a choice in the words spoken or if this was something the official from the Ministry added, putting his own commentary into the ceremony, especially regarding the recent divorce scandal. For a wedding ceremony, it almost seemed a bit somber. The only ones who seemed to be smiling were the bride and the groom.

Eventually vows and rings were exchanged, and a kiss sealed their nuptials. As the bride and groom walked back down the aisle, Hermione had to be paired off with William Kidd, Chaser for the Chudley Cannons and Ron's friend.

She wondered – if Harry wasn't gone, would he have been Ron's best man a second time?
Christie Kidd gave Hermione a patronizing look as she walked down the aisle on William's arm.

The guest list was small. There were a few members from the team, their wives, Arthur Weasley, Bill and his wife Fleur, the twins without their wives, Albert Dobmeir, Neville, Seamus Finnegan and Dean Thomas.

They moved to the dining room where a wedding breakfast was served. Lavender had the good sense not to sit Hermione anywhere near Christie Kidd or Nicole Stewart, the harpies who had made her life hell with their snide remarks while Ron was a mere second-string Keeper.

Hermione was seated between Lavender's father and Bill Weasley, who was flanked on the other side by his wife. Lavender's mother was not there since she had died during the war, otherwise she would be sitting where Hermione currently sat. Traditionally, Hermione should have sat on the other side of Ron, but given the situation, that would have made the subdued reception that much more awkward.

There was a string quartet that played quietly in the corner. Hermione didn't think there was going to be any of the more lively traditions seen at most weddings, such as the first dance. And there would be no tossing of the bouquet, since Hermione was the only single witch at the entire wedding.

After breakfast, a very beautifully decorated small wedding cake was served, along with the finest champagne from a wizarding winery in the Champagne province. William gave a long-winded toast to the happy couple, making a few faux pas, accidentally calling the bride Hermione once. Hermione raised her glass and clinked glasses with the people near her. She could have said something much more eloquent with fewer words, but given that she was the ex-wife of the groom, she sat quietly instead, making polite conversation with Lavender's father, Ruthven, and Bill.

Bill and Arthur had a somewhat haunted look about them. Even the normally jovial twins seemed to be a bit more subdued for such a festive occasion.

Hermione had heard about the Howler Ginny sent and how it put Molly into fits, which required a stay in St. Mungo's. Arthur was hoping to bring his wife home after the wedding in time for Christmas dinner, if the healers said she was well enough. The Draughts of Peace they kept pouring down her throat were helping.

The bride and groom were happy, and the way they looked at each other spoke of their profound and boundless love and affection for one another. Hermione wondered if Harry was just as deeply in love with the Kyrgyz witch and she with him by now. She was lost in thought, recalling the heady sensation of falling in love with Severus and how she still seemed to float on air thinking about him. Upon self-reflection, Hermione wondered if it would have been even more wondrous had she not been restrained by her guilt of falling for a wizard other than her husband at the time.

As the cake and champagne were finished, there was little left to do.

Guests began making their farewells, sensing that the occasion had come to a close. Christie and Nicole gushed on about how wondrous Lavender looked, which she did. It was a lovely four-ply silk with a bias cut that seemed to give the whole dress a seamless drape as it was made from one piece; it fit the bride perfectly, as if it was spun and woven around her form. It was neither too tight, nor voluminous. It was as understated as the wedding was, yet simply elegant.

Neville bid his farewell to the bride and groom, grinning sweetly at the couple, happy for them both. When he came to bid Hermione farewell, he mentioned how he looked forward to seeing her in the New Year with the beginning of her Herbology portion of her apprenticeship.
Seamus and Dean also wished the happy couple their felicitations, but Hermione didn't care for the look in Seamus' eye when he said he was looking forward to seeing her around. Dean was much more gentlemanly when he gave her a brief hug and a peck on the cheek goodbye.

Arthur clapped his son on the shoulder before giving him a hug, restrained in his happiness for his son that he finally married the witch he truly loved. Lavender even got a brief hug from her new father-in-law as well. When it came time for the head of the Weasley family to say goodbye to Hermione, she noticed how he fidgeted about, his eyes downcast as if almost ashamed to meet her eyes.

"It was good to see you again, Arthur," Hermione told him, hoping he understood that she held no ill will against him.

He seemed to brighten at Hermione's roundabout forgiveness and gave her a small hug before going over to St. Mungo's.

The twins said they'd like to take Hermione out to lunch sometime to catch up and talk shop, which seemed to cheer her up a bit.

As they shook Ron's hand and gave Lavender a kiss upon the cheek, Hermione heard one of the twins lean in and say to Ron under their breath, "Just don't fuck this marriage up too, little brother." It wasn't said lightly, but with grave implications.

Albert made his farewells too, with a reminder that Hermione was expected to show up to his place soon, since Christmas roses could only be harvest on Christmas Day. He normally would have given his apprentice the day off for such a holiday, but potion ingredients must be harvested when they must.

She silently chastised herself that she'd forgotten, with the lie to her Master that she didn't forget.

Bill and Fleur were the last to leave. Bill took his littlest brother aside to impart some last-minute advice. Meanwhile, Fleur gave Lavender a few tips, should Molly start harping on about grandchildren and Ron and she weren't ready yet, wanting to enjoy some time alone before children came.

Hermione shook Bill's hand, and he asked if it was all right if he and Fleur still had contact with her. In reply, Hermione hugged Bill in the same fashion as when she was still part of the Weasley family; she assured him that the only one she had hard feelings towards was Molly. Bill looked away, embarrassed, before giving Hermione a faltering smile.

Fleur and Hermione exchanged brief kisses upon the cheek with an invitation for Hermione to join them New Year's Eve, if she was available. Hermione said she would have to check with Albert if she was available, as sometimes things during her apprenticeship would spontaneously require her attention and she might have to bow out.

Now that everyone had gone except for Ruthven Brown and herself, Hermione gave her sincerest wishes to the bridal couple that they would be happy together. She gave each of them a kiss upon the cheek before she Apparated back home.

Once back home, she told Marf she had to delay opening his present to her, feeling a bit taken back she hadn't gotten anything for him. She made her apologies before changing her clothes and heading over to Albert's house to begin harvesting the Christmas roses in bloom.

After Hermione was done with that one task, she would rush back to her flat and then maybe open
the present, if she wasn't rushed to go over to her parents’ house. The now single witch had promised she would be there for Christmas dinner by three o'clock.

Who knew how long it would take to harvest all those Christmas roses, given that it had snowed the night before.

Off in the Pamir Pass, Harry had just finished setting up his very own yurt. It was outfitted with everything he would need.

He had the foresight to bring a whole lot of Galleons along, should he need the money during the broom race for food, lodging, and other sundries. It was those Galleons that paid for the warm yurt he was sitting in now.

The other men around the fire were from the small group of nomadic wizard herders, with whom Harry had become quick friends. They talked with the English wizard about his plans.

Thanks to a translation spell Harry knew that Kingsley had taught him, he began asking for advice on how best to kidnap his bride, since that was the expected custom for this part of the world when it came to nuptials.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I have a lovely fanart commission by Deaa drew for me you can view on my Tumblr page here (with commissioned ukulele performance to go with chapter segment): http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/post/146318921950/anniversary-song-sung-by-david-cassel-the-ukulele

or on Deaa's DeviantArt page here: http://deealov3.deviantart.com/art/Commission-estump-565122246

I also commissioned a ukulele musician through Fiverr.com, Ukulelebandito, to perform “The Anniversary Song” Ginny and Draco dance to for their first dance. You can listen to it on my Tumblr page (link above). UkuleleBandito's Fiverr page is here: https://www.fiverr.com/ukulelebandito

Thank you to my wonderful betas, JuneW and Hope, especially JuneW for correcting my Hawaiian here and there as needed.

'Ekolu means three in Hawaiian.

Male 'ana means wedding. 'Ekolu male 'ana means three weddings.

"The Anniversary Song" is an adaptation by Saul Chaplin and Al Jolson of Iosif Ivanovici's "Donauwellen Walzer."

Bride kidnapping? Harry kidnap a bride? All will be explained in Chapter 78. Just wait.
As Severus cracked an eye open that clear Christmas morning, he fixed his gaze on his bedside table at the object Ginny had left for him, wrapped with Christmas paper and a little bow.

The note attached to it said she thought he might like this one the best of the ones she had, and she hoped he liked it.

He opened it warily, accustomed to disappointment and having no prior experience with receiving gifts from Mrs. Potter – no, from Mrs. Malfoy.

There, in a silver picture frame that Ginny must have bought since coming to Malu Palekaiko, was a photograph of Hermione.

The photograph captured a brief moment in time. She was reading a book, her knees drawn up, her face holding a thoughtful expression, until she suddenly realized she was being photographed. She looked up and spontaneously smiled, lightly laughing as if to say to not take her photo, her hand waving to point the camera away from her before she gave a look of bashful resignation that it was too late, before she went back to reading her book. It was perfect.

The photo was taken after the war, but before her marriage and career began to wear her down, just as eons of erosion can wear down even the strongest and tallest of mountains. She was not nearly thin as when she first came to him, and she did not have the look of a woman made weary by the world yet, as if there was hope in her future and her dreams had not been dashed. It was a slice of Hermione's life he had not witnessed and was glad to have at least seen her as such.

He watched the photograph repeat the same scene over and over. Severus suddenly longed for a proper cup of tea.
Since coming to Hawaii, he had tried a cup of tea once. It was awful. The person did not bring the water to a full boil. The tea they used tasted stale, as if it had sat in the back of the cupboard for years, and was that horrid Orange Pekoe dross. It was presented with honey and lemon, and no milk or sugar. When he asked for milk, the waitress gave him some cream instead.

What they graded to be Orange Pekoe in the States would certainly not have been graded the same in the British Isles. Severus couldn't find anything but the American brands of tea in the local general store. He definitely would be adding a few *Camellia sinensis* bushes to his garden and growing his own tea once he found and bought a property.

Rising, he showered and shaved before dressing. Justina let Severus have free run of her kitchen, especially since he rented a second room in order to use as a temporary library, as he was tired of Summoning books from Hermione's handbag, then to have to sort them back into the tiny bag. It was a temporary solution, as he would be moving his books to his new shop by the New Year. Some books were to be put in his personal library at his new home, but since he hadn't found one yet, his shop would have to do for now.

After a cup of coffee, toast, an egg, and a heaping pile of fresh fruit, he was ready to go flying. Severus grabbed his broom and flying gear and headed up the empty street towards Mounga and Rainbow's residence. They said any time after eight that morning would be fine, since the kids always woke up at the crack of dawn on Christmas, dying to open their presents.

Mounga's residence was a two-story house, built in the tropical plantation style with a covered balcony on the second story and front porch on the first. The windows were trimmed in white, contrasting against the cheery yellow exterior paint. There were swags of tropical vines that were meant to emulate the swags of evergreens that colder-climate houses had for Christmas decorations. There was a large ten-foot poinsettia bush, its bracts bright red and festive, and five palm trees in the front yard. At night, Severus could see the Christmas fairy lights in those palm fronds from his room on the second story of Justina's hotel.

Severus set his broom on the front porch before knocking on the door, using the knocker. A Christmas tune played when the knocker hit the door, charmed to be festive for the season.

Akela opened the door, but upon seeing Severus on the front porch, she screamed and slammed the door shut. Before Severus could knock on the door again, Mounga opened the door, looking at Severus in puzzlement and then back into his house.

"Akela! Why did you shut the door? I told you Severus was coming over." Mounga shrugged, shaking his head. "Teenagers."

Mounga was still in his striped pajama pants, without a top on. Rainbow popped her head out of the kitchen and said, "Mele Kalikimaka, Severus."

He had yet to master the Hawaiian holiday greeting, so he greeted her in return, sticking to English. "Happy Christmas, Rainbow."

"Mele Kalikimaka, Mr. Snape!" Iakona and Kaimi called out from the living room, from where they could still see their guest.

He greeted them back in English as well.

Akela came out looking far different from when she first opened the door. Instead of mussed hair and pajamas decorated with palm trees and snowmen wearing sunglasses, her hair was now neatly
brushed and braided, ready for flying, and she wore appropriate flying apparel.

"Mele Kalikimaka, Mr. Snape," she said, trying to hide her embarrassment. She turned to her mother and hissed under her breath, "Why didn't you tell me he was coming over this early, Mom?" giving Rainbow a petulant glare that only teenagers can give their parents.

"I assure you, you looked no worse than hundreds of other teenage witches in my House over the years who were up all night studying for their O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s," the former professor assured her.

Akela's jaw hit the floor. "You had hundreds girls in your house, and they were studying owls and newts?" she gasped with astonishment.

Mounga laughed and said, "I told you I couldn't say anything. You can explain that one, dude."

Rainbow had an interesting expression on her face, her eyes changing subtly from green to black, before Severus began to explain the House system at Hogwarts. He also gave a brief description of the Sorting Hat, his role as Head of House for Slytherin, and the examination protocols for the British wizarding educational system. The strange look on Rainbow's face disappeared as he described the context behind his choice of words, and her eyes changed to a more calm blue.

"Oh, my God. You were a Potions teacher? You must have been the nicest teacher in the whole school," Akela rhapsodized, looking at him a bit dreamily.

Had Ginny and Draco been there, he was sure they would have burst into gales of laughter, and taken a long time before they could stop dissolving into hysterics.

"You'll have to ask Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy when you see them next," the former Hogwarts professor deferred diplomatically.

"You taught them?" Kaimi chirped excitedly. "Really? That's awesome."

"I'm sure Ginny and her brothers would beg to differ," he replied quietly so that only Rainbow and Mounga caught his remark.

"Would you like some coffee?" Rainbow asked, trying not to laugh at Severus' sotto voce comment.

"Yes, that would be lovely, thank you."

Severus and Mounga moved to the living room where they could sit in peace while Rainbow finished cleaning up the kitchen from breakfast, and the rest of the kids could finish getting dressed for flying.

The Christmas tree was a traditional fir tree Portkeyed over from the Pacific Northwest. It was decorated with little snowmen who crept up and down the branches, reindeer that pranced about, and angels which played hide-and-seek behind glass ornaments, in addition to the assortment of decorative, non-magical ornaments. There were torn-up Christmas wrappings on the floor, and an assortment of gifts that had been unwrapped but were yet to be put away in their respective rooms.

Mounga asked Severus about the progress of getting his shop ready for opening in the New Year. Severus asked about how Mounga became the town judge, learning about the differences between the American and British wizarding judicial systems. Mounga had already been given a brief of how the British system worked, based on Severus' rather lengthy confession the night he arrived seeking sanctuary.
The front door flew open with a bang. A young raven-haired witch bolted through the door with a wrapped Christmas present in her hand, and ran down the hallway, using her wand over her shoulder to slam the door shut with yet another bang.

"And a Mele Kalikimaka to you too, Kiki," Mouna called out dryly, just as the door to Akela's bedroom door slammed shut.

"That would have been ten points from whatever House she would have been sorted into, had that been a student who entered my classroom like that," Severus thought aloud.

"Hmmm, maybe I should do that point system around my own house as an incentive for the kids to pick up their rooms and do their chores and school work," Mouna mused.

"Be forewarned, the rivalry between Houses at Hogwarts could get rather intense, with some sabotaging other Houses, setting them up for point deductions," the former Head of Slytherin warned, not clarifying that his own House was the one most notably known for that dirty trick.

"Yeah, there is that."

Off down the hallway, the screams from Akela and her friend Kiki could be heard, even through the door and walls. There were squeals and other common sounds that the teenage witches made. Severus was fully versed in the various noises and figured they were probably talking about boys.

Mouna wanted another cup of coffee before going to change his clothes, offering Severus use of the guest bedroom to change into his own gear that he’d brought with him.

As they were in the kitchen, Akela and Kiki rushed in and went up to Mouna.

"Look what Kiki got me for Christmas, Papa!" the young witch raved, a blissful look upon her face as she held it up for her father to inspect.

Before Severus could figure out what it was, she thrust it under his nose and sighed wistfully, "Isn't he just dreamy?"

There in front of Severus was Ron Weasley astride his broom, shirtless, with bulging pectorals, rippling abdominals and all exposed in the 2004 Mercury Broom calendar. The palm trees were swaying in the background, extolling the beauty of Tahiti.

Severus was overcome with a flood of memories, most clearly one when he’d walked in on Weasley banging his employer on her desk. A rage quickly engulfed Severus, remembering how Hermione came crying to him about her husband’s emotional cruelty – how he had made Hermione hate her body and question her own sexuality and self-worth. Every grievance against Ronald Weasley came rushing back, right down to the incident with the flying Ford Anglia.

His head tilted back and a sneer curled upon his lip as he snarled in a low and dangerous tone, "Get that thing out from underneath my nose this very instant, Miss Finau."

Akela looked at Severus in shock, her eyes brimming with tears that the wizard she was so smitten with had suddenly turned so hostile towards her. She bolted out of the kitchen and into her room, followed by Kiki, who slammed the door.

Feeling suffocated, Severus ran out the front door.

Mouna found Severus leaning against a stout post on the front porch and breathing heavily.
"Severus," his friend said, bewildered by Severus' sudden change in personality and hostile attitude towards his daughter. "What was that about?"

"Ronald Weasley," Severus said as he tried valiantly to regain control of his emotions.

"Yeah..." waiting for further clarification.

"Hermione's husband."

"Whoa... You mean..."

Severus' breathing finally slowed. "Yes, the very one who was having an affair with my employer all those years," he said quietly, should Rainbow or certain teenage girls be eavesdropping.

"Dude, I didn't connect the dots. You mentioned there were a lot of Weasleys, so I thought it was a common name, but I had no idea it was the very same. I never would have let Akela show it to you if I had put two and two together," Mounga apologized.

Severus looked over his shoulder at his friend. "I suppose I should go apologize and explain myself. I think I frightened the poor girl."

"Maybe she'll be over her crush on you now, so there could be a bright side to it," the larger wizard added, trying to find humor with the situation. "But yeah, you should tell her since I can't."

Severus went back into the house and knocked on Akela's door gently. Kiki opened the door and looked at Severus with wide and timid eyes.

"May I speak with Miss Finau for a moment, please?" he asked in calm and soothing tones.

Kiki looked back over her shoulder and Akela nodded, still clutching a large stuffed dog, her eyes full of tears. The friend excused herself saying she'd come back later after they were done flying.

Severus left the door open so Mounga could listen in from the hallways, knowing that's exactly what he would do if he were Akela's father.

Akela was still sniffing and wiping away tears. Severus conjured a handkerchief and handed it to the upset witch, who took it tentatively from him, now a bit more skittish around him.

"I feel I must apologize. How I reacted was uncalled for. I'm sorry I frightened you," he began as he took a seat in the chair at Akela's slightly cluttered desk, covered in bits of parchment with half-finished school work and doodles. Severus even caught the sight of one piece of parchment with the signature of "Mrs. Akela Snape," but pretended not to notice it.

On the bed next to Akela, he spotted the calendar opened to a different month. He caught the sight of Weasley dressed in full winter-weight Quidditch gear, with a majestic view of the snow-capped Canadian Rockies and a glacial lake with milky blue waters in the background.

"I know that wizard in your calendar," he confessed, his voice straining to remain calm and impassive.

"You know Ron Weasley?" Akela said with amazement.

"Unfortunately, yes."
Drinking in Severus’ response, Akela surmised, "And I guess you don't like him?"

"Dislike would be putting it mildly." Severus clenched his teeth and restrained himself from letting his anger seep into his voice again.

Akela should not bear the brunt of his hatred for the boy, he reminded himself. She was just an innocent girl with a silly crush on a wizard with more brawn than brains, and little knowledge of how the wider world worked, sheltered by a family and community that loved her. She would soon be exposed to boys as callous and vapid as Weasley soon enough, unfortunately.

Severus took a deep breath before soldiering on, since Akela didn't know what to say next, still recovering from the shock of her crush reacting in such a hostile fashion to her favorite Christmas present. "He was a former student, and not a very good one at that, who broke many rules and was disrespectful to me. But what angers me the most about him is that when he was older and an 'adult,' he was very cruel to a dear friend of mine."

Akela looked down at the calendar next to her, then looked back to Severus, with a confused look knit upon her delicate brow. "But he looks so nice."

"Looks can be deceiving."

He could give Akela a long history of wizards who looked "nice" but had a cruel streak a mile wide, starting from the once handsome and charming Tom Riddle, to James Potter and Sirius Black, down to this red-headed Quidditch star now plastered across her calendar.

"Draco is really handsome." Then she stopped and got a silly smile on her face. "Really handsome," the young witch added once more a little dreamily. "But he's really nice."

"Draco wasn't always the gentleman you now know him to be," Severus informed her. "He was unkind in his youth sometimes. The difference is, he grew up and became a better person. As an adult, he cast away what he finally realized was wrong."

Severus' last statement had many layers to it besides the topic at hand, but he would not delve into it.

"But Weasley, he never grew up, remaining the same as if he was a boy without taking into consideration the feelings of others. Never let another person take away your self-worth or make you question your mind, feelings, or looks, as he did to my friend. Especially don’t let another wizard do it to you." Severus added somberly, hoping to prepare her for some boy's hurtful comments that might be thrown at her someday.

Akela seemed to ponder his comments deeply, nodding, lost in contemplation.

"And if I might warn you, please do not show this calendar to Ginny. Not at least until I have prepared her," he asked.

"Why, does she know him too? Was he cruel to her too?" Akela asked, her face full of anxiety. She only knew Ginny's first married last name, not her maiden one.

"Well, it all depends on if you think Iakona is cruel to you."

Akela's eyes lit up with comprehension with the reference to her brother.

"You mean Ginny and Ron are brother and sister?" she asked, her face stunned by the revelation.
"Yes. And I hope that you will consider this conversation we had as a private matter. You can share with your father, but I ask no one else. There are a lot of things about Ginny, Draco and my own past we are trying to move beyond with our transition here. We are not running away from them or trying to forget them, but it will take some time for us to deal with some of the things we have recently gone through."

"Of course, Mr. Snape. Not even Kiki, my best friend, or my mom," she added, her face very serious. She made a cross over her heart with the tip of her wand to express the sincerity of her promise.

'Oh, certainly not your mother, unless you want it spread all over town' Severus thought to himself.

How is it that a man as discreet as Mounga married the town chatterbox and biggest spreader of news, Severus could not fathom.

"I appreciate your discretion on the matter, Akela." There was a pause before he asked, "So I hope you understand my reaction to suddenly seeing that?" His eyes darted to the calendar beside her.

"Yes, I can, Mr. Snape. I think I'll go and burn it now," she said, a little sadly. "Now that I know what a big, fat jerk he really is, I don't want it up on my wall now." It was once her favorite present and now she couldn't stand the sight of it.

Severus was secretly pleased that Ron Weasley would now have one less witch in his fan club, but it was also a bit regretful he had made her favorite gift something she wanted to destroy within minutes.

"Don't burn it, but save it for Ginny," he suggested. "Maybe she'll tell you some more unflattering stories about her brother. And maybe one day I'll tell you about the time he stole his father's flying car, broke the International Statute on Wizarding Secrecy Law by flying it in front of Muggles, and crashed it into the school grounds, which almost resulted in his expulsion. But that is a story for another time."

Akela's eyes gleamed with this little tidbit of information.

"And that story about him and the flying car you can share with all your friends," Severus added with a smile, looking forward to tarnishing Weasley's name from half-way around the world. Then he added for good measure, "And that he's a cruel 'jerk,' too."

Severus stood up from the chair. "So I hope you will accept my apology."

"Of course, Mr. Snape. I think I would have acted the same way if he was a low-life creep to my friends too. There's nothing to apologize for, I totally understand," she assured him.

"Good. I hear that the winds are favorable for a bit of flying this morning," Severus said as he excused himself from her bedroom.

Out in the hallway, as he suspected, Mounga was standing there, having heard their conversation, which Severus did not mind at all. He'd want to hear everything said between an older wizard and his young daughter in her bedroom, too.

"Thanks," the father said, patting Severus on the back. "I think you just saved me a lot of hassle trying to explain about some aspects of boys when she gets older. I think it meant more coming from you than hours of talking from me," which was a strange thing for Mounga to say since Severus couldn't imagine Mounga talking for hours on anything, since he was very economical with his words.
Severus made a promise to himself when the stationery store opened tomorrow, he would buy a lovely calendar for Akela to replace the one she was possibly burying in the bottom of a drawer this very instant.

Hermione Floo’ed back home, still stuffed to the gills from Christmas dinner and bone-tired. The Christmas roses in Albert's garden took longer than expected, and she barely made it over to her parents before they started carving the turkey.

They had given her a large plastic container full of leftover turkey, stuffing, roasted chestnuts, roasted potatoes, bread sauce, and some Brussels sprouts. There was a little container of extra gravy to go along with the food she brought home.

She was also holding a large paper bag, decorated with Christmas motifs, which contained presents from her parents. There was a nice jumper and a very expensive looking leather handbag. Hermione didn't want to tell her mother that witches didn't carry handbags, as they usually carried everything in their charmed pockets. Handbags were more for accenting a piece of clothing than serving a functional purpose, though the one she gave Severus was decorative with an older outfit she once had and was very functional with its Extension Charm. If anything, she could use the new handbag for going about London if she needed to blend in with the Muggles.

Hermione gave her parents an I.O.U. with the promise to purchase tickets for a particular musical which was going to open in the summer of 2004 that they were looking forward to seeing, since she couldn't find anything in the Muggle stores for them. She was going to try for opening night tickets, if possible, or at least within the first week of its premiere. Her parents were thrilled with her gift, even though it would take a while before they could enjoy it.

The exhausted Potions apprentice was glad she didn't have to go buy anything, since she had little time as it was to purchase anything, much less put up a Christmas tree, which she didn't. It was becoming more difficult to shop for her parents as they got older. They had everything they needed and wanted little else.

Marf relieved her of her various bits, putting the food away and storing her gifts in the appropriate drawers.

Once done, he came up to Hermione and said, "I must give this present to you, Mistress Hermione."

She looked down at the small creature and said, "I feel awful, Marf. I didn't get anything for you."

The house-elf blinked twice with its large luminous eyes and said, a little perplexed, "I did not get Mistress Hermione anything. Should I have? Am I a bad house-elf?" Marf’s lower lip began to wibble.

Hermione could tell that Marf was about to go on another self-induced masochistic punishment bender if she didn't nip it in the bud.

"No, no, Marf. That's perfectly fine, you didn't have to get me anything. But if you aren't giving me a present, then who is this from?" the witch asked, confused as to the origin of its giver.

"Master Snape said to give this to you at Christmas, should it be safe and the Aurors gone," Marf informed her.

Her hand tentatively reached out and plucked it from the house-elf's outstretched hands.
She reverently caressed the outside of it, noting the perfect folds at the end, the precision in which the seams of the plain red gift wrap met into a symmetrical shape at the end, the small white ribbon wrapped around it, and a hand-tied bow atop.

Unwrapping it, she found a wooden box with three vials in it, each capped with a different color, along with a note.

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My Dearest Hermione,

If you are reading this, than you must have chosen to stay behind. It is my hope that the memory contained in the red-capped vial will help with your endeavor to clear my and Draco's names.

The yellow-capped vial is for you personally.

The blue one is for you, should you choose to join me. It contains my last memory of Dumbledore as he told me where to go, should I need to seek sanctuary.

It has been an honor and a privilege to call you my friend and lover.

Eternally,

Severus Snape

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Hermione sat on the bed staring at the note. It became harder to reread it once again as her eyes were full of tears, blurring her ability to clearly see the spiky script.

The box was simple and brown on the outside, with slightly tarnished brass hinges and a small swiveling hook closure. The inside was lined with a deep midnight-blue velvet with little depressions for each vial.

She would have taken one out and examined the silvery threads that floated within, but considering how her fingers had recently lost grasp of the vial containing a few whiskers of Ron’s, she was not going to risk losing these memories Severus had left behind for her.

Heaving a great sigh, Hermione realized she didn't have a Pensieve. She couldn't even view the red-capped one tonight, even if she wanted to.

Pensieves were expensive and she would either have to borrow one or buy one. She didn't know anyone who had one, but she would have to ask Albert if he had one she could use.

Staring out at the night from her window, the despondent witch saw the overcast ceiling of clouds, lit from underneath with a sickly orange and gray from the city street lights and glare of brightly shining advertisement lights in nearby Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus. She wondered what Severus was doing at that very moment. Was it warm where he was, and could he see the stars at night wherever sanctuary was?

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
Skimming above the ocean at the same altitude as a flock of pelicans that flew in a loose formation a few hundred yards off to his right, Severus' heart was elevated with the feeling of freedom upon his broom.

He could finally fly again.

The Potions master's first love was Potions, but Quidditch and flying were a close second. He wasn't a Quidditch head, though he did love the game, but he loved flying most of all between the two lesser favorites.

Severus hung back from the flying Finau family, observing their styles of flying and if there was a regional difference in the way one might fly. Over the years he’d noticed slight variations in the way players from different countries rode their brooms; the Japanese grasped their broomstick handles with a looser and more relaxed grip, while the Canadians were more of the white-knuckle type, aiming for shorter games, but more dramatic dives and acrobatics. Even the way Russians rode their brooms, sitting slightly more forward than the British style of sitting farther back, did not escape his observation over the years.

Iakona, Mounga's son, rode in a middle position on his broom with a double Webster grip, one hand underneath, the other towards the side, permitting for quick hand-position change, while allowing for quick stopping. Akela was a more cautious rider, riding in the more common textbook posture and position.

Kaimi was the adventurous one, leaning far forward on her starter broom, trying to eek every last bit of speed out of the first-level broom as possible. It was a hand-me-down from her older siblings, and it was getting a bit worn out. Mounga said she would be getting a proper broom for her next birthday, since she had proven to be such a competent and responsible flier.

Mounga and his wife rode side-by-side, slightly ahead of the children, guiding their path around the island. The parents’ made sure their children stayed within the three-mile boundary of the island in order to remain behind the illusory magic which hid the island from Muggle eyes.

Having risen higher up, Severus glanced down and saw a pod of dolphins swimming underneath, chasing the shadows of the fliers above. The dolphins porpoised, leaping up out of the water as they jetted forth, expelling air quickly to exchange the air in their lungs with fresh oxygen before sliding back into the turquoise waters to join their fellow cetaceans once more.

As the pod turned to race away, chasing after a school of fish, Severus looked up once more only to see Kaimi falling from her broom towards the water below. Leaning forward, Severus put on a sudden burst of speed and raced to catch the small child before she hit the water.

Diving down, he barely caught Kaimi in his arms before she could hit the water, and whipped out his wand to catch her broom before it fell into the ocean swells below.

Placing her on his broom in front of him, he asked with great concern if she was all right.

The little witch was giggling and squirming with delight, seemingly having no concern she fell off her broom.

"Did you see that, Papa? Wow! I told you Mr. Snape was a really good flier. He caught me in mid-air. I've never seen that before!" she exclaimed with the zeal that only a young child could exhibit.

Had Severus been a Muggle, he surely would have had a heart attack.

Mounga came down beside Severus to hover alongside him. "Wow, that's was some pretty
impressive flying there, paniolo."

Rainbow, Akela, and Iakona swung back around to hover alongside them as well.

"Did you see that, Iakona? Better flier than you! I told you so!" Kaimi announced proudly, sticking her tongue out at her brother.

Perplexed, Severus said, "Does no one care that this child almost fell off her broom and into the ocean?"

"Dude," Mounga laughed. "She did that on purpose."

"And you let her?" Severus retorted, his voice filled with incredulousness.

"Dude, you live on an island surrounded by water, you better know how to get back up on your broom, should you fall in the ocean," the father clarified. "It's good practice, and that way, when she's older and flying on her own, I won't have to worry about her. She'll know how to kick off out of the water. Besides, makes good exercise for when they fly above ground, if they learn how to fall instead of fighting it. Iakona had a seventy-foot fall over the grass during one game and rolled onto the ground, getting nothing more than a few scrapes."

"Yeah, all of us learned to do that before Papa would let us get our first real brooms," Iakona added.

"Here, watch." Mounga nodded his head at his daughter. Kaimi slipped of Severus' broom and dove into the water, coming back up. "Let go of her broom. It's okay."

Severus reluctantly let go of Kaimi's starter broom and saw it fall into the ocean.

Kaimi swam over to it and straddled it. Then she kicked her legs underwater to burst forth up from the ocean swells and back into the air to rejoin her father's side.

"See, it's easy!" she claimed.

Severus sat there agog that this eight-year-old child kicked up out of the water.

"You should learn to do that too," Mounga advised. "Here, just dive down, and I'll bring your broom down."

"But saltwater is terrible for brooms," Severus whinged.

"Dude, you think there is a single broom sold on this island that isn't charmed and sealed with special waxes to repel saltwater and any moisture damage? You obviously weren't told of the finer points of the broom you bought," Mounga said with almost a laugh.

Reluctantly, Severus dove off his broom and into the water, wishing he was wearing his swim trunks instead of his flying gear. But if this was a critical flying skill living there, he would eventually have to learn it.

Mounga flew down besides Severus and gently tossed his broom atop the water. Just the sight of his new broom floating atop the saltwater made him flinch at the sight of it.

"Now, the key is to kick down hard enough that you create an air bubble beneath your feet, otherwise, you feel like you're treading in quicksand," Mounga advised. "Ready?"

"Why not just use my wand--" Severus began.
"Wands can get lost or slip from your hand," the larger wizard warned. "And then there are lightning strikes. It's better to learn the hard way so you don't drown, if seas are rough."

Severus knew that hurricanes occasionally passed through, so he guessed it was for the best.

Placing the broom under the water, he straddled it, fighting to stay atop of it as the natural buoyancy of the broom made it ride up between Severus' legs. With his feet, he tried to kick powerfully downwards to create an air pocket to catch and ride upwards. It was much harder than he had anticipated.

Severus was getting a little winded as he fought it, feeling as if he was caught in quicksand as Mounga described. He bobbed up and down, rising and falling as each swell passed him by. He was used to having solid earth beneath his feet for kicking off.

In the air, Iakona gave a demonstration of the leg movements and the synchronization of the legs in order to help create the pocket of air. After studying Iakona's movements, Severus finally shot up out of the water on the twelfth try.

Panting, he grasped his broom, trying to hold onto the handle as beads of saltwater raced off of it, watching the charm dry his broom out in the process.

"That was harder than I expected," Severus admitted, still catching his breath.

"Do that at least fifty more times, and it'll become second nature," Rainbow said before she took to a higher altitude to guide their children back home, the family's circle of the island nearly complete. But first, she led the group on a little detour to swing by a spot frequented by a couple surfers off the island's west shore.

Iakona had told Severus about a move he and the other fliers on the island had picked up from surfers who were shooting curls. They called it 'threading the needle,' where they rode their brooms inside the air pocket of a wave as it began cresting near the shore break.

Sure enough, Shark – the clothing store owner – and another surfer were out surfing the waves on Christmas day. There were a couple cabanas set up on the beach, marking where they were having their Christmas day barbecues with their families.

As Shark sat astride his board while waiting for his next wave, he watched Iakona give Severus an example of the maneuver. Severus thought it looked challenging not to get caught in the crashing wave, to be tossed about like a rag doll in the surf. After Iakona completed the trick, Shark gave him a high five.

It was time to head back so Rainbow could get the Christmas ham into the oven in time for Christmas dinner, at which Severus would join them as their guest.

Severus could only imagine the look of horror on Ginny and Draco's faces the next time he went flying with them and took a dive off his broom on purpose. He supposed he should warn them ahead of time so they wouldn't panic like he nearly did. He should teach them this new essential flying skill. Better yet, have twelve-year-old Iakona teach Draco and Ginny, and see how well they take flying instructions from a child half their age.

The young wizard did give him a very good demonstration that made it easier to understand than Mounga's verbal instructions.

He could almost hear Draco's bitching about the saltwater on his broom. Not that Severus whinged about it; he had merely protested.
A/N: Severus, Draco and Ginny have a little video Christmas card they put together for everyone, wishing everyone a “Mele Kalikimaka” to everyone. You can view it on the ADTLHEA Tumblr account here: http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/post/146528386305/draco-ginny-and-severus-wanted-to-send-you-a or on YouTube here: https://youtu.be/UYTc4Y7XBQ8

Thank you to my ever hard-working betas, JuneW and Cygnuz. Send them a bit of praise in your review sometime.

Of course I had to include a witch named Kiki. How could I not honor Miyazaki and his delightful film about a teenage witch from "Kiki's Delivery Service"?

Paniolo is Hawaiian for “cowboy.” So Mouna calls Severus "cowboy" after watching him wrangle Kaimi. (The first cowboys in Hawaii were Mexican vaqueros, who spoke Spanish – Español; the Hawaiian language has no “s” sound, so the word quickly evolved into paniolo.)
“Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot?”

Chapter Summary

It's New Year's Eve and Hermione and Severus are missing each other terribly.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Seventy-Seven
“Should Auld Acquaintance Be Forgot?”

Disclaimer: Happy New Year. Another disclaimer saying Rowling owns Harry Potter and I don't.

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Bill's owl said that she should come over around seven that night. Hermione was grateful their New Year's Eve party would start late enough for her to finish her work for the day and get a bit of studying time in, before she went to their home. She was almost done with the latest book assigned to her from Albert. It was about the delicate blending of opposite elements and the art of not blowing oneself up in the process.

There was also a book on ethics she was supposed to memorize as well, since there were certain codes of conduct for Potions masters and mistresses, but the book was a large tome, with small print and thin pages. It would take her a full year to commit most of it to memory, given her full-time work. Reading through it, it seemed like these rules and guides to ethical behavior and common laws that pervaded all countries where Potions were concerned were more like common sense than anything else, which made it that much easier to learn.

The Weasleys' invite said it was a casual affair; just a few family and friends. Hermione wore something she wouldn't mind if a drink got spilled all over her, as it almost invariably happened at these gatherings where alcohol was a large factor. She had a wand to clean herself up, but still.

Apparating over to Bill and Fleur's house, she noticed it was pretty quiet and the party hadn't really started yet.

Fleur greeted her at the door warmly and invited Hermione in. They were still setting up the food. Bill brought Michael and Philippe out to greet her, admitting he invited her to come over a little early so she could see the boys before they went to bed.

Hermione did miss seeing her nephews at Christmas a bit, since they were always eager to give their aunt a hug and a kiss.

"Can we still call you 'Auntie,' Aunt Hermione?" Michael asked, looking a little forlorn.
"Well, of course you still can." She gave Michael a hug to console him.

"But Uncle Ron has a new wife and she's Aunt Lav? She's nice, but I don't want to give you up too," he insisted. "How can you both be my aunties if you're not married to Uncle Ron anymore?"

Hermione made a face and noise to show that she was thinking. "Well," she said, her eyes glancing up at the ceiling. "Not being married to Ron doesn't mean I love you any less. Do you love me now as much as before, when I was married to Uncle Ron?"

"Of course I do, I love you just as much." Michael gave Hermione a hug back, squeezing her with all his might, feeling his little arms strain as he expressed his fondness for her.

"Then no one can take the love you have in your heart away from you. Even though I'm not married to Ron anymore, it won't stop me from caring about you," she assured him.

"I'm glad I get to keep you as my auntie," Michael sighed with relief.

Hermione patted Michael's back as he hugged her once again. She felt joy in the simple and uncomplicated love from a child.

Philippe was standing next to his brother, listening with great interest. He also gave Hermione a big squeeze and a kiss on her cheek before Bill wrangled them off to bed.

Once the children were tucked in, Bill came over and sat next to Hermione on the couch.

"Michael was a bit upset after my birthday party," Bill said, looking a bit somber. "He wondered why you left so early. Then when my mother went on about how you were 'dead to us' for divorcing 'her' son, I had to explain to Michael that you didn't really die. And then when you weren't there for Christmas, Michael was confused why you weren't there and was a bit upset. So I wanted to have you come over to assure him you weren't dead and that you were okay."

Hermione shook her head at the way this had all transpired. Molly seemed to take this whole divorce thing as some personal attack against her.

A part of Hermione wanted to know how her ex-mother-in-law was recovering, but another part of her was bitterly glad that she was suffering in some way. To ruin four lives for the sake of what she thought would be best for them, Hermione felt that it was only just that Molly suffer the repercussions of what her own decisions had wrought. If she couldn't handle it, Molly shouldn't have played with people's lives as if they were her own personal chess pieces.

"Any word from the newlyweds?" Bill asked, since Hermione did work for Lavender. Hermione's new boss had placed the company temporarily in her and Albert's hands to coast through the week she'd be gone.

"No. Though she said before I left after the reception that she'd be back on the second, which is just two days away. The company hasn't fallen to bits, so I guess Albert and I did all right to hold the castle down while she was away." Hermione shrugged indifferently.

There was a bit of strained silence until Hermione spoke up again. "Thanks for inviting me, Bill. It'll be nice to socialize a little, since I've been pretty busy with my work and apprenticeship."

"Well, Dad, the twins, and I aren't holding a grudge against you. It is sad how it came to this, but if you and Ron are both happier this way, then who am I to judge what is best for you?" Bill looked at Hermione, ducking his head down to gaze at her face a little more closely to gauge her reaction. "Are you happier?"
A bittersweet smile quirked at one corner of her lip. Hermione had her Potions apprenticeship. She didn't have to deal with Ron's moods or demands for mediocre sex. There was no more fighting, no more questioning herself, no more belittling remarks. Even the pay and work under Lavender was more rewarding than at her old job. Of course she'd be even happier if Severus was still around, but given everything else, her life was better.

"Yes, Bill. I am happy. The happiest I've been in a long while."

Hermione helped Fleur finish getting ready for the party. She arranged food on some trays while Fleur worked on an ice sculpture featuring dancing figures beneath exploding fireworks. Tiny shards of ice ejected in all directions with each burst, sublimating before reaching the ground.

The party started rolling around nine o'clock. A few other wizards and a witch from Gringotts were there, most of whom worked in curse-breaking like Bill. There were also a few Hogwarts classmates from the same year as Bill, as well as Fleur's little sister, Gabrielle, and her fiancé, a French wizard named Guy. Guy's brother, Baudouin, also came along to join the party.

Of course the twins, their arms full of fireworks and party favors to set off at midnight, came to the party with their wives. Dobby was playing baby-sitter for the twins since Harry was away. The elf still lent a hand to the Weasley family even though Harry was divorced from Ginny. Harry had told Dobby to help the Weasleys, if he chose to do so, which the elf did. Dobby liked being helpful to people who appreciated him.

Hermione made small talk with Bill's co-workers. She learned that their latest project involved a cursed Spanish Galleon off the coast of the Yucatan Peninsula in the Gulf of Mexico. It required Gillyweed to search, since Bubble-Head Charms were foiled by the curse attached to the sunken ship. It was estimated that there would be a vast treasure, based on records the Goblins had on the expected shipment of gold coming from the Americas in the early 1700's.

The wine and ale were flowing freely.

Fortunately, Bill and Fleur had the good sense to put a Silencing Charm up so that the children would not be awakened by the party revelers. Fleur had to run off and take care of their infant, Eric, with a nappy change and late-night nursing, but otherwise the children were sound asleep the rest of the night.

Noshing on some wonderful Brie en Croute that Fleur made, paired with some mellow Merlot, Hermione brainstormed with George about ideas for The Sirens' Secrets for the upcoming Valentine's Day shopping season. Just over George's shoulder, she saw Baudouin glancing over at her periodically, checking her out.

Hermione was not in the mood, nor was she on the market for a new wizard to warm her bed. She still pined for Severus and would be for who knew how long.

"So we need a witch's perspective on something romantic to add to the store for the season. I mean, there seems to be only so much one can do with cupids and hearts. At least with Christmas there are more objects associated with the holiday we can alter for our purposes or use as a theme," George went on, stuck for inspiration.

Hermione nodded, indicating she was listening, and she was. Mostly. As much as it was nice to get out and talk to other people, she was missing Severus so much that night. She would have loved to have spent the whole night alone in the flat with him making love, drinking champagne together and off of each other's bodies, or making more bets to be paid off, both parties happy with the result of the wager. Severus could have even made cioppino, an Italian fisherman's stew, using
seven different kinds of fish for good luck. He and Draco had been eating it every New Year's Eve for good luck in their quest to escape, and it seemed it only took four years for their luck to kick in.

"- but I need something that not only is sexy but erotic, subtle, sensual," George went on. "I mean, what can you do with roses besides give them to a witch?"

Hermione closed her eyes. She thought back to the time in Severus' bed and that Arabic spell in which he cast flowers that brushed up against her skin, as if being caressed by a thousand butterflies, with the scent of jasmine, roses, and violets enveloping her.

Inspired, she asked George, "How good is your Arabic?"

"Not very. What do you have in mind?"

The next hour was spent cutting out heart shapes from left-over red tissue paper that Fleur dug out from Christmas storage. Then there was a charm to add the scent of flowers, make the heart cut-outs fly like butterflies – Fred came over to help with that one – and then disappear once they had caressed the skin.

It took a few tries. On the first attempt the heart-like butterflies flew at Hermione and practically attacked her. It would take more work to finesse it to something they could sell, plus there was the matter of directing the butterfly hearts to the right spot on the body, as some wound up alighting on Hermione's hair before dissolving into nothingness.

It wasn't as elegant as the Arabic spell, but it was something to put in a box and sell for a few Galleons, which was what Fred and George were looking for. Besides, not everyone could pronounce the spell in Arabic and get it right, especially if they were too horny and wound up to do the proper pronunciation. That spell was one of the few she knew in Arabic that Severus taught her from his old and very rare tome, but she wasn't about to volunteer how or where she'd learned the spell.

The twins promised her a forty percent royalty on profits, should they be able to get the product ready in time for Valentine's Day.

Once the twins ran off to tell their wives about this great new product they would need their help developing, Baudouin made his move.

"That was quite clever of you," the French wizard with a thick accent praised Hermione. "And quite sensuous. I didn't know British witches were familiar with the more erotic Arabic spells of the fifteenth century."

He sidled up to Hermione and ran a finger up along her arm in a way that was supposed to be sensual, but just made Hermione's skin crawl.

"I read it in a book, if you are insinuating otherwise," she told him icily. "Or were you not versed by Fleur about my prolific reading habits."

"Well, there is a difference between knowledge and experience," he said, his dark brown eyes raking over her body in a manner similar to the way Bascom Nettleton had done to her before. "But as you are a divorced witch, I'm sure you have enough experience to teach even me a few things."

And this is what Hermione should have expected. Evidently, there was this misconception in the wizarding world that divorced witches were an easy lay, since their virginity was long gone. Also, having been used to being serviced by a husband, she wouldn't be too picky about any wizard "filling" her needs in her empty bed.
"I may be divorced, but I'm not a slag who is going to fall on my back for some wizard who happens to know about a few esoteric spells," she threw back at him, as she slowly pulled out her wand, ready to make her point clear she wasn't interested if he got any fresher with her.

"You British witches. Why must you be so uptight about this sex thing. You're available; I'm rich, handsome, and available. Why shouldn't you come home with me tonight?" Baudouin argued, as he tried to pin her up against a counter.

Feeling her back pressed up against the tiled edge, Hermione slid her wand down. "Either remove yourself from my presence, or my wand 'accidentally' goes off. And I know hexes that will take St. Mungo's three days to undo." To make her point, she pressed the tip of her wand against Baudouin's trousers in just the right spot where there was no mistaking the seriousness of her promise.

Playing the cool opponent who had let her win this round, Baudouin began backing away, his hands held up in surrender. "Your loss, Mrs. Weasley."

He turned and sauntered out of the kitchen just as the witch from Bill's work came stumbling in. "Ooh, he's cute. Is he available?" Bill's co-worker asked, a glass of champagne in her hand. Her eyes were a little glassy as they were firmly fixed on the posterior of the exiting French wizard.

"Yes," Hermione informed her before lowering her voice in a more secretive tone, "He's just waiting for a very nasty case of 'oak root fungus' to clear up before he said he might owl me. But he's all yours if you want. I won't stand in your way."

The witch made a rather disgusted face, her interest turning quickly to revulsion once Hermione used the euphemism for a particularly nasty wizarding venereal disease that was on par with Muggle herpes. Once you got "oak root fungus," you could never fully get rid of it, only manage the condition's symptoms. He could have had it for real, for all Hermione knew.

"Eww. No longer interested." The witch stumbled out of the kitchen in search of a fresh libation.

Bill came into the kitchen laughing. He leaned up against the counter opposite of Hermione, giving her a look that said she could still surprise him.

"It's a good thing you and Ron parted on good terms," Bill remarked. "I'd hate to see what would happen to Ron if you didn't."

Hermione was studying the bottom of her glass. "You missed the fights we had in marriage counseling. There was that time we hexed each other, then there was the one time I hauled off and decked him flat," she admitted ruefully.

The red-headed wizard whistled while he shook his head. "I didn't know."

Hermione was studying the bottom of her glass. "You missed the fights we had in marriage counseling. There was that time we hexed each other, then there was the one time I hauled off and decked him flat," she admitted ruefully.

The red-headed wizard whistled while he shook his head. "I didn't know."

"And that's the way Ron and I wanted to keep it, though Ginny and Harry knew."

There was another awkward silence between them before Bill spoke.

"Did you know about Ginny and Draco?" he asked, his voice quiet so to avoid being overheard by anyone beyond the edge of the kitchen.

Hermione closed her eyes and sighed. She could trust Bill, but he was also Ginny's brother.

"By the time I discovered that, Ginny had already made up her mind to leave Harry and be with
Draco," she confessed.

Hermione almost added that if she could have stopped it she would have, and she did try at first. However, given everything she knew now, would she still have tried to stop Ginny from being with Malfory? Or do all that she could to help her friend be with the love of her life – that she was denied due to Molly's interference from the start?

"Do you know where she is?" Bill asked, a quiver of hope trembling in his voice.

"No, but I might have an inkling. I have to do some research first."

Hermione could have asked Bill if he had a Pensieve, but then he might want to view the memory for himself as well. These were Severus' memories, and Bill had no idea about Severus or her involvement with him. And that's how it was going to remain.

Harry knew where Ginny was, but currently he was high up in the Himalayas busy wooing a nomadic witch. She would speak to Harry once he got back, and see if he could ease Bill's mind.

So far her own research into Spain and sanctuaries had yielded nothing. The only thing she'd found regarding sanctuaries was in reference to wizards who were monks working for monastic orders. Hermione never remembered Ginny cooking any Greek cuisine. Her own research into the sanctuary in Greece revealed some interesting recent accords for a bidding war regarding who got to stay or who got hauled off back to their country of origin.

Severus and Draco might have made money working for Lavender, but not even they had enough money to outbid the British Ministry of Magic and the money they would spend to drag them back to England.

Using Harry's hint about Ginny and her cookbooks, Hermione had also looked into Italy, Japan, India, France, Brazil, and Egypt, but even those places had no sanctuaries that she could find in her research.

At that moment, Hermione was glad she didn't have a Pensieve, otherwise she would have already viewed the last memory for Severus just to satisfy her curiosity where he was. At least she could truthfully answer Bill that she didn't know where Ginny was, though omitting that Harry did.

"If there is anything I can do to help you find her, let me know. I don't want to bring her back, I just want to make sure she's safe and happy," Bill assured her.

He was right to suspect Hermione might not tell him if his intent was to bring Ginny back. Hermione knew he was telling her the truth, though.

When he woke up New Year's Eve morning at the hotel, there was a note for Severus floating in front of his door as he headed down to the kitchen to make breakfast.

Ever since Hermione's photo was placed on his bedside table, Justina stopped offering to bring him coffee or join her for a nightcap. She must have figured out that his lack of interest in her charms was not just because there were a bevy of other witches he could have his pick of. Severus had his options, but he didn't choose any of them.

Justina would have normally knocked on his door to notify him he had a message, but she didn't. Either the note arrived very late or exceptionally early, or she had completely given up on ever having a chance with the most eligible bachelor in town.
Draco and Ginny were finally resurfacing from their week-long secluded honeymoon at their cottage. The note was an invitation for Severus to come over for dinner.

There was a request if he could make his delicious cioppino, since Ginny had heard of it but never tried it. Severus would have to run down by the docks that morning to see what the local catch was, but he could pull it together last-minute. They offered to serve him lunch, and he could arrive no earlier than noon.

With a basket full of fresh seafood, some dry white wine, a loaf of French bread, tomatoes from the local market, onions, garlic, dried red pepper, bay leaves, and a bunch of holly as a symbol of domestic happiness, Severus made his way up the street, around the corner and up the gentle slope to the white cottage where the Malfoys lived. A pineapple was placed on the front porch, a signal that they were finally welcoming guests. It was a long practiced custom to display a pineapple as a sign of hospitality.

The lawn looked like it was recently mown. He wondered if Draco did it, or had the free elf do it before the one-week rent-a-butler service the creature rented himself out for expired.

Severus knocked on the door and was met with a very relaxed and blissfully happy Draco. The smile plastered on the boy's face couldn't have been removed with even the worst of hexes. He looked that euphoric.

It was disgusting, and Severus was happy for him.

Ginny greeted Severus, looking equally relaxed with a fiery twinkle in her eye. She thanked him for the holly, before taking the bunch of foliage accented with red berries and the groceries from Severus.

"Thank you so much for the bottle of Fairy Brandy and gallon of fresh passion fruit juice for the wedding present," she thanked him with a kiss upon his cheek.

Severus returned the thanks, "And thank you for the gift you left for me."

Ginny flitted about the kitchen as if she was walking on air, putting Severus' supplies away for now.

Meanwhile, Draco and Severus went to the living room to relax before lunch was served.

As the two wizards gazed in silent contemplation at the peaceful Japanese garden, Severus asked, "Is it really just like the one you made?"

"Down to the placement and selection of the tamate stone lantern and the tetsu bachi basin," Draco confirmed. "Ginny said I couldn't have picked a better home if I had read her mind."

Draco dropped his head back on the couch and let out a small but satisfied groan. "You didn't happen to pack any extra vials of that Sequoia stuff, did you?"

"No, but I think that will be one of my first commissions once I set up shop, if those Chinese witches are still interested, which I think they will be."

Draco lifted his head and remembered, "That's right. Two days from now. Are you ready?"

"I have my equipment in place, the rooms are built out, Floo is connected, supplies are all in to get me started, awning is fixed, windows painted, shingle hung, business license obtained, and I even put a small ad in the local paper," Severus updated his friend.
Draco nodded approvingly. "Count me in for a case of Sequoia if Ginny keeps this up," he groaned. "Talk about making up for lost time."

"You're newlyweds. What did you expect?" Severus reminded him. "And besides, do you mind she's as equally amorous?"

Draco gave Severus a goofy smile and shook his head. "Not as all."

There was a level of tension in Draco that was stripped away. It could be the island affecting the younger wizard, it could be because all his biggest dreams had come true, or the week-long uninterrupted shagging – perhaps all three. Whatever it was, Severus wondered if he would become as relaxed and at peace with himself as Draco seemed to be at that moment.

"Did Lavender make you sign any noncompetitive agreements with your contract?" Draco asked, wondering about the legal implications of Severus making the same potions he once developed for their former employer.

"It was limited to countries where she currently had a presence in, so the Americas, Japan, China, and Southeast Asia down to Australia and New Zealand are fair game, should I sell anything abroad. India is not quite a settled matter. Though I have a feeling I'll be busy enough with commissions and tutoring locally to keep me busy and keep me comfortable."

Ginny called the wizards to the table for lunch. They ate fresh spring rolls stuffed with Thai basil, mint, finely julienned carrots, lettuce leaves, bean sprouts, and lightly pickled ginger, served with fresh wedges of lime and soy sauce. There was lightly battered deep fried shrimp wrapped around a piece of sugar cane, and steamed rice.

"So what have you been up to this past week, Severus?" Ginny asked, having not heard their earlier conversation.

Instead of rehashing the same thing, Severus thought he would add a bit more information.

"Oh, the usual. I got my shop ready for opening on January second. Learned to kick off flying from the middle of the ocean. And to top it off, Mounga's teenage daughter shoved a copy of the Mercury Broom calendar under my nose – featuring your brother, to my surprise."

Ginny stopped eating for a minute and looked at Severus to see if he was joking about the last two. There was nothing humorous in his expression.

Draco spoke first. "Did you at least wait for it to be removed from her hands before blasting it to ashes?"

"Oh, I restrained myself," Severus informed him. "I merely sneered and yelled at her before she ran off in fright, tears streaming from her face."

"Nothing you haven't done to most of the students at Hogwarts at some point in time," Ginny added dryly.

"I bought her a calendar featuring the most beautiful magical castles and palaces in the world to replace the one she no longer wanted, once I explained my reaction to it."

Draco and Ginny exchanged glances.

"And what exactly did you tell Akela?" Draco asked.
"That he was a... as she put it, 'a big, fat jerk,' to a dear friend of mine." Severus used his fingers to exaggerate Akela's quote. "A cruel and not very bright student of mine. I did ask her not to say anything, except I did give her free license to tell her friends he's a big, fat, cruel jerk – and that flying car incident – should she feel free to spread some truthful gossip."

Draco bust up and was in stitches. Even Ginny started giggling.

"Akela did say she was going to burn it, but I told her to hang on to it in case you wanted to see it, Ginny. From all the muscles he had, I can certainly understand the difficulty Hermione had with the muscle-gaining potions he was on. That must have been a very potent potion," Severus thought aloud, remembering his own reaction as he and Hermione tried to reverse-engineer one vial of it.

"Was there anything else you told her?" Draco asked, wanting to be prepared.

"Rainbow and the children got a brief about my work at Hogwarts, the House system, and that you were once students of mine. Akela is under the impression I must have been the nicest professor in the whole school," Severus said with a roll of his eyes.

Ginny had to turn her head to the side and spit out the mouthful of coconut water and pineapple juice she was in the middle of sipping, in order to avoid choking on it while laughing, or spraying it out her nose.

Even Draco had to stop and catch his breath, as he was laughing too hard to do much of anything else.

As they finally settled down, Draco said, "So you must be joking about the kicking off in the ocean, right?"

Severus wondered if maybe he shouldn't warn them and just do it while flying out with them some time. Catching a fleeting glimpse of shock on Draco's face as he would take a swan dive off his broom just might be worth it.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Around the time Severus was finishing lunch, Hermione was standing outside Bill and Fleur’s in the chilly night air, her cloak wrapped about her to keep her warm. It was in the mid-thirties Fahrenheit and a strong and constant breeze was blowing, whipping her cloak about her ankles.

She almost begged off to go home early, but she made a promise to herself to at least stay until midnight to wish Bill and Fleur a Happy New Year, since they did invite her.

People were getting drunker, and she found more comfort in the solitude than feeling alone in a room full of people.

This was going to be the first night in years she hadn't spent New Year's Eve with Harry and Ron, and she was all right with that. More than anything, she wanted to be with Severus, and she wondered if he thought of her with the same ache in his heart as she had when she thought of him.

In the parlor, she could hear the countdown begin. Grabbing her drink she had set upon the stone wall, she went back inside to join the last few second to the New Year. People hugged, couples kissed, and Baudouin and that witch from Bill's work were making out. Hermione's former in-laws gave her a hug and peck on the cheek. Even Grace and Florence, the twins’ wives, gave her the same affectionate gesture. The twins set off fireworks within the house, which due to the Silencing Charm, thankfully didn't wake up the sleeping children.
Everyone sang Auld Lang Syne, though Hermione didn't have the strength to sing it more than above a whisper. The song was about remembering friends of the past and not letting them be forgotten. She could never forget Severus, and the lyrics made her heartsick for him all the more.

When their song ended, Hermione made a quick exit, thanking Fleur and Bill for their hospitality before she could break into tears.

The cioppino was even better than before. The Opah fish was a delectable addition to the shrimp, squid, scallops, crab, clams, and Mahimahi that swam in the tomato, wine, and shellfish broth that Severus had to make from scratch.

It was just the three of them for New Year's Eve.

It was nice to see Ginny and Draco once again. He had actually missed them with their week away, even though they never left town. They were comfortable and familiar people in his life and he felt a little adrift without their presence, especially at the hotel. Still, he had made enough friends and acquaintances since coming to Malu Palekaiko that he wasn't lonely. Severus was by nature a bit of a solitary creature, but even he found solace in the genial companionship of those who knew him well.

They sat together relaxing in the living room, chatting about Ginny's work with Halulu to pull together a class schedule for introductory belly dancing for different age groups. She asked Severus for tips about laying out a lesson plan.

Severus gave the pair an update on town gossip, which Rainbow had been more than happy to supply to him. The newlyweds were more attuned to social goings on and wanted to know what they missed.

Now that Draco had got the girl and feathered their new nest, he needed a new project to keep him busy. He was used to working, so sitting around doing nothing – while Ginny was busy at the dance school teaching, when she wasn't learning hula – wasn't going to be good for his psyche or their marriage. Severus mentioned that tutoring seemed to be a popular thing, since all the kids were home-schooled, and many of the mothers worked part-time. There was talk of lessons in Charms and Transfiguration, which Draco excelled at, but he wanted a few days to think about it.

He had his life ahead of him now and the choices were endless. Severus reminded Draco that tutoring might be a short-term thing while he sorted out his life's passion for a career choice, not that Draco needed the money. Still, it was good to have a goal to strive for, and work tended to give one a sense of purpose.

As midnight approached, Ginny popped the champagne and poured it into flutes. Off in the distance they could hear their neighbors chanting out the countdown. They watched the clock and wished each other a Happy New Year with hugs and kisses upon the cheek, the newlyweds giving each other more than just a peck, of course.

Severus had a lovely voice, but he rarely sang in front of others, even Draco and Ginny. He mostly sang when learning a new language, since that helped greatly with pronunciation, and usually alone in the shower or bath.

Draco and Ginny sang Auld Lang Syne, which brought Severus’ mind back to Hermione.

It had already been the New Year for eleven hours back in London. He wondered if she'd sat alone.
in his old flat, or if she'd gone to a party. Severus wondered about a great many things regarding Hermione.

Severus was so used to hearing updates about her daily life that he had missed them terribly. The simple mundane task of lending an ear for her latest triumph or tragedy in the lab at work filled a corner of his mind that was now bare and empty of the latest happenings in Hermione's life. He wondered how the fall-out of her divorce was progressing, and if she was no longer the favorite topic of gossip magazines. He longed to hear about her apprenticeship, and tried to imagine how different Dobmeir might be training her than if he had been her Potions master instead.

In his head, Severus would have conversations with Hermione telling her about his day – such as how he had to explain to the local business licensing office that his was more than a service business, but that he would also be providing products for commission. His mind filled with the sound of his voice as he would go on about how inept some government officials could be, and he could imagine her soothing him with empathetic words, telling him her own experiences, and providing a suggestion of her own. He almost found himself talking to himself aloud in public as he would have these conversations in his head, and had to cover it with pretend humming as a witch passed him by.

It was these little conversations in his head with Hermione that kept him from fixating on how much he missed her in his life. To not have these imaginary conversations with her in his mind would only remind him how much more he missed her with the absolute silence of no one there to listen to him, as he had listened to her.

Now that the hour had struck, the year was new and the champagne drained, Severus excused himself to go back to the hotel. Ginny and Draco were getting more affectionate, and he knew it was time to bow out.

There was a promise of flying the next day, and Severus reminded them that should they get “distracted” again, please owl him ahead of time.

On the stroll back to his room at the hotel, he saw the odd firework here and there rise up above the town’s rooftops and explode in an array of outlines shapes featuring babies in sashes, clocks, phoenixes and other appropriate festive designs.

Back at the hotel, reminded of the incident when Draco answered the door Polyjuiced as Ginny, Severus’ eyes darted to the drawer where he kept the unused vials of Polyjuice Potion and snippets of Hermione's hair. He felt a twinge of shame, almost in the way he felt after spying Hermione masturbating at the spa without her knowing he was watching.

After locking the door, he closed the shutters, put up a Visual Obfuscation Charm – just in case anyone could peek in through the closed shutters from the second story, and a Silencing Charm.

As he pulled open the draw of his bedside table, the photo of Hermione – reading a book, then smiling and laughing – caught his eye. He placed it photo-side down on the nightstand so that she could not watch what he was about to do.

Pulling out one vial of the Polyjuice Potion, he set it aside while he removed a single small sample of Hermione's hair. He didn't know how many more times he would do this, so he used one small piece.

He undressed and stood in front of the non-enchanted mirror. As he tipped the vial back, he felt the potion slide down his throat and creep with its numbing heat throughout his body, infusing his veins with her essence.
With fascination, he watched his body in the mirror change to match Hermione's the day she gave him her hair.

Severus missed her so much that he nearly cried out at seeing her reflection in the mirror, even knowing that he was projecting a shell of her image. He wanted to place his head upon the very breasts he saw in his own reflection and let her stroke his hair so tenderly.

His fingers - Hermione's fingers - caressed the face he wore. The familiar calluses grazed his skin. They were hers and at the same time his own. His hands trailed down the body he knew so well from memory, now refreshed anew.

Severus closed his eyes momentarily as his fingertips grazed his neck, remembering when he asked her to teach him how she touched herself.

As his fingers reached his breasts, he noticed how the perception of touch was different, as if it was more intense as he played with his nipples than in his normal male form. The sensation of it, he noted, pulled tightly in his core, an aching in the lower abdomen that was unfamiliar, yet familiar. It was more internal, and he knew it was Hermione's uterus pulling and tightening in response to the stimulus.

Laying down along the edge of the bed so he could continue watching himself in the mirror, Severus mimicked the movements of Hermione's hand. He'd memorized her movements from many nights together, dragging pads of his fingers along his own rib cage, hip bones, and navel, noticing his body arch in response similarly to Hermione.

The sensation was the same, yet not. Her skin was softer, and also a little more sensitive.

A soft sigh escaped his lips, and he found himself even more turned on by the sound.

"Severus," he whispered to himself.

It seemed a bit indecorous, but he felt needed this. Hermione admitted to him how she had used a couple of the magically charmed dildos the twins gave her, confessing in her huskiest whisper that she had imagined it was him. She told him of how she masturbated while thinking of him, calling his name out when she could no longer wait to see him next.

How different she was near the end than from the sexually timid creature he first made love to. He was the one who brought out the sexual goddess within her.

And now he would masturbate to fantasies of Hermione begging him, just to hear his name called out once more.

"Please, Severus, I need you," he pleaded, not quite catching the right accent or cadence, but it was close enough, it was unmistakably her voice he heard in his ears and his own head.

His fingers slipped between his legs and he gasped as the sensation of fingers slid over the clitoris. It was just as sensitive as the tip of his penis, perhaps even more so, because the feelings of intensity as his fingers began to slide back and forth was deliriously good. The bundle of nerves was concentrated into a smaller area, which made it seem nearly overwhelming.

Dipping his fingers lower, he found that Hermione's body had reacted with the same familiar response. Wetness spread across his fingers, adding lubrication as he went back to stroking Hermione's clit. Had he known how good this felt, he would have done a whole lot more of this to her.
His other hand slipped lower and began to probe himself, sliding two fingers in. Severus now understood why Hermione begged him to fill her. The tightening in his lower abdomen was building. Remembering how he made her come before, he used those same motions and speed to bring himself to orgasm.

Looking back over at the mirror, he spied Hermione reclined along the bed, knees pulled up, back arched, hair splayed like a fan across the bed, chest heaving, cheeks flushed and eyes heavily dilated.

Severus came with a hoarse cry, the electric sensation spreading from his abdomen outwards, tendrils of white heat racing out towards his limbs. It was different from the sudden all-over body sensation that he experienced as a man. Different, but just as glorious.

Instead of feeling exhausted like he would, had he ejaculated, Severus found himself not only relaxed, but energized. Now he could understand why sometimes Hermione seemed to have more vigor after the first coupling than before. It was only after several powerful orgasms that Hermione would want to drop off to sleep as badly as Severus.

Bringing his fingers up to his mouth, he licked each one, reveling in the taste of her. It was technically himself, but this was Hermione's body. It tasted like her.

He spent the next few hours re-familiarizing himself with the body he missed. If he could not be with her, then this would have to satisfy his needs for now.

Severus dragged fingers through the mane atop his head. He leisurely played with Hermione's breasts, making note of things he found pleasurable versus Hermione's own techniques. Should he see her again, he would have to try them on her to see if she liked it as much as he did.

As the hour grew late exhaustion eventually over took Severus, having climaxed twice more.

Before he drifted off to sleep, the Polyjuice Potion having not yet worn off, he pulled the photo back up and put it back in its place next to his bed. He wanted her to be the first thing he saw in the morning when he woke up.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to my beta, JuneW, and please welcome a new beta, thegreyladies, who also edited this chapter.

This will be the last chapter I post until after June 13th, once Leviosa (The Harry Potter con July 7-10) is over.

Here’s a link to a very good recipe for cioppino, from Bon Appetit magazine: http://www.bonappetit.com/recipe/cioppino-2. I traditionally fix it on New Year's Eve (or go out to eat it at a good seafood restaurant) and use seven different kinds of seafood, so I would cut down on the amount of fish and shrimp and add some crab and lobster to the shrimp and fish, along with clams, mussels and scallops so you have the right number for good luck.
"Discretion Guaranteed"

Chapter Summary

Severus opens his little Potions shop, and Harry has a surprise.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Seventy-Eight
"Discretion Guaranteed"

Disclaimer:
Rowling own Potter
Lawyers might sue
If I don't make disclaimers
I'm gonna get screwed

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Sipping a cup of coffee at the hotel, Severus wondered how many customers he would have the first day his shop opened.

He had placed a small ad in the town paper, The Daily Times & Tides, advertising his services.

"Severus Snape: Potions Master
Over 20 years experience, certified E.T.F.C.
Available for tutoring, commissions and consultations
No potion too small or large, too easy or complex
Discretion guaranteed
Opening Friday January 2nd
Business hours: Monday - Friday 9 to 6
Evenings and weekends by appointment only
42 Humuhumunukunukuapua'a Lane"

Looking over his ad, he wondered if he needed to add one of those friendly hibiscus graphics, given that people sometimes needed something flashy to grab their attention. Draco was better suited to this advertising stuff. He wondered if he should have had Draco write something up for him and design the graphics before his wedding.

If business was slow, he could have Draco put together something for him for next week's paper.

Just then, the very same wizard Severus was thinking about showed up.
"Ready to open shop like a regular working slob?" Draco drawled, leaning against the doorjamb, his hands in the pockets of his shorts.

"I am not slovenly," Severus retorted.

"Except when you've drunken yourself blind over Hermione," the blond wizard reminded him.

Severus didn't need to be reminded of that, and ignored the comment.

"Come on," Draco urged him to get going as it was almost nine o'clock. He started singing the chorus from a wizard song about dragon parts for sale, rubbing his hands like a greedy goblin. "It's money, money, money by the pound..."

Draco walked with Severus across the street and down one of the major side streets towards the small back-alley lane where his new business was ready and waiting to open.

The younger wizard saw the people lined up around the street, standing along the sidewalk.

"What's going on?" Draco wondered aloud.

As the two wizards rounded the corner, they noted the line went along the street's sidewalk and turned right down the small alley where Severus' shop was waiting to open.

"There must be close to two hundred people in line!" Draco said, which seemed to have caught the attention of the people in line who turned around and beamed bright smiles at the town's newest Potions master.

Some witches had their children in line. Some had dragged as many as four children along, though some were too small to start studying Potions and were probably there because their mother was in line along with their siblings.

"Care to earn a little pin money playing secretary for me today?" Severus asked in a deadpan voice.

"I guess I'm here to help."

Getting to the front, the people moved away while he unlocked the door. As soon as the door swung open, people rushed at the door.

"Wait, just wait a minute!" he called out in his best professor voice when he sought to regain order amid chaos in the classroom. "Please remain in line."

Looking at the mix of people, he instructed them to part into two lines: one for tutoring, the other for consultation and commissions.

"What if we're here for both?" one witch called out who had two children with her, one around ten, the other who was about fifteen.

"Then once you are done with the line for tutoring, you can get in the consultation/commission line," the Potions master informed her, to which there seemed to be a least a few groans from the other people in line who’d had the same idea.

Draco said he would be right back and ran off.

Severus went inside and made extra copies with a quick duplication spell before handing out packets to each parent in line who had come to inquire about tutoring, one packet per child for his services.
As he handed them out, he informed the parents that their child should fill out the form, with their supervision. The form was a questionnaire about the child's current level of skill regarding Potions, including a list of potions with little columns of tickey boxes – one column to mark for which potions the child had attempted to brew, and one for the potions where they had succeeded, with an additional section at the bottom to list potions not already included in the lengthy list. There was also a section requesting a list of which books the child had studied regarding the subject. As he handed them out, he suggested that people go home, and come back to schedule an appointment once they’d filled out the form.

Draco came back and tapped his wand to a couple packs of playing cards. He then started handing them out to the people standing in the consultation and commissions line.

Severus' helper announced that as it would take a while, once their card was called, the card would flash and vibrate. It would also mark in the corner, in smaller print, how many people were still ahead of them, and the number would drop with each client served. Those farther back in the line could go about their business and come back when their card was called, depending on how long it took to get through the people in line before them.

Once that was done, Severus lit the candles and torches inside, donned his new black cotton robes and called his first customer from the commissions line.

Draco was shown where the appointment book was and began taking reservations for those who decided not to wait for their card to be called, even though they could be at home relaxing in the meantime. Some people had to get to work and made evening and weekend appointments. Severus instructed Draco to make sure to leave half the day available for tutoring, since there seemed to be a huge call for it, starting on the 12th of the month. It would take at least a week to get through all the consultations regarding the children's current level of education and aptitude.

By the time lunchtime rolled around, Severus had met with over twenty consulting and commission clients alone. Some merely needed guidance on a potion they were working on at home for personal use, some wanted to pay Severus to brew something to help them be more attractive to their spouses or get rid of an embarrassing rash in a delicate area. A few wanted some Veritaserum in order to get their wives or husbands to confess if they were cheating or not. There was one witch who requested Wolfsbane Potion for her daughter. The Chinese witches came and asked Severus for that male stamina potion he’d mentioned the night of the luau. A few broke down into tears, needing a bit of coaxing from the former gigolo – who was used to weeping witches – as to the nature of their visit to him. There were a few wizards who needed a potion for gout and other ailments, as they didn't like Arnold, the other Potions master in town who couldn't keep his mouth shut. Ranjit's gout cure formula tasted like spicy flavored vomit, which they didn't care for, and his arthritis formula was less appetizing.

It seemed there was a lot of dirty laundry that could have been aired in public, had many of these witches and wizards gone to Arnold, which is why Severus had so much business. The new business owner was sure the part in his ad that said "discretion guaranteed" was the cause for many of his consultation visits.

In addition to booking clients, Draco also played cashier, collecting monies from whatever Severus wrote down on a scrap of parchment, charmed to not be altered between Severus' desk and Draco's hand. Each one was marked in the ledger with name and potion order, as the standard was half the payment up front, half upon delivery, based on Severus' previous freelance work during summers.

Ginny popped by to present a sheaf of wheat, symbolically wishing Severus riches and prosperity for his new business, and saw that the line was still substantial. She offered to go pick up a couple
of sandwiches for the new Potions master and his “assistant” to eat while they worked.

Severus didn't like to eat and work, preferring to concentrate fully on one or the other, but he needed to make an exception this first day.

By early afternoon, some of the witches with children who needed tutoring were bringing back the filled-out questionnaires. Severus suggested to Draco to book them in fifteen-minute blocks per child. The consultation was free, as it was his time teaching that would cost money. No doubt Rainbow had told half the town about all his years of experience teaching.

Some of the witches and wizards took a good few minutes to come back when their cards were called, as they were no doubt back home doing other tasks while waiting for their turn. One wizard Apparated to the alley in front of the shop, still rinsing the shampoo from his hair with a towel wrapped about his waist, not wanting to miss his turn.

A reporter from the town paper swung by and took a few photos showing the long lines still down the block, and asked Severus for a quote.

"I'm thrilled I can provide a valuable service to this community that has welcomed me with open arms and made me feel at home," Severus said in his statement. It was so diplomatic, it sounded as if Malfoy had written it for some advertising fodder.

When it was time to close, there were still some people who had cards but hadn’t been served. Draco adjusted the charm to reflect their place in line, and they would be dealt with on Monday morning when Severus opened up for business again.

There was a stack of tutoring questionnaires that had been returned during the day that Malu Palekaiko's new Potions tutor would work on over the weekend, when he wasn't dealing with some of the weekend appointments.

Draco had booked him from nine to noon for Saturday and Sunday, which would still allow Severus time to go through the questionnaires and begin brewing some of the Potions he had been contracted to concoct.

As he closed up shop, after his first day in business, Draco patted Severus on the back and congratulated him on a successful launch.

"We'll see how successful the tutoring portion goes once they deal with me," Severus remarked grimly.

Just a cursory glance through a few of the questionnaires told him he had his work cut out for him. He wondered if there was no standard curriculum that these home-schooling witches and wizards went by when teaching their children, or just that some of them were coddling their children by not pushing them hard enough to achieve a level of academic competency that was expected by a certain age.

Severus already had a book regarding the American testing standards for American witches and wizards, the SAT: the Stupendously Augean Tribulation. It seemed that there was one standard test once a child had reached the same age as Hogwarts students were when they took their NEWT's, and there was no equivalent to OWL's. If parents wanted their children to pass the Potions portion of the SAT, he might have a very, very busy time indeed.

Hedwig delivered a note from Harry that seemed a bit cryptic, but Hermione had a feeling she
knew what to expect, based on Kingsley's update on Harry when she last saw the senior Auror.

Arriving in the afternoon at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, Hermione was greeted by Harry with a broad, warm smile.

Before Hermione could ask Harry about his accident, the broom race, or anything else, he said gushingly, "I'd like to introduce you to my wife, Zhubanysh."

Hermione thought he might be bringing the witch to England as his girlfriend or fiancée, but she had no idea Harry would marry so quickly after the traumatic and sudden divorce from Ginny.

Harry stood next to his blushing bride, who smiled shyly at Hermione. Zhubanysh was still wearing her native dress, which involved a lot of felt and decorative stitchwork on a long-sleeved blouse, a vest, several layers of skirts, a highly decorative apron, and woolen felt boots.

Hermione knew she shouldn’t look shocked, and she did her best to cover it up by smiling and trying to be happy for Harry, but a large part of her was wondering if this was nothing more than a rebound romance that got swept away with the moment.

"Wow, Harry. This is so... sudden!" she tried to say brightly, her smile faltering a little as she tried to hide her shock.

"Yes," Harry sighed, his voice plainly expressing the heady sensation of someone who had fallen in love and was still enraptured by the initial thrall of it all.

Sticking out her hand, Hermione said with as much grace as she could muster at that moment, "I'm very pleased to meet you, Zhubanysh."

The young bride, who barely looked like she was of age of consent, clasped Hermione in a hug. "Harry said you were like sister," she said with her thick accent and slightly stilted and awkward English. "That make... makes you my sister."

Hermione hugged her back, knowing that this witch was in some ways very innocent and there was no duplicity in her broad and open face. It was then that Hermione noticed she had green eyes, like Harry, but a different shade.

Zhubanysh's face had the almond-shaped eyes and skin coloring that was halfway between European pale skin tones and the warmer brown and yellow tones of the Chinese to the east. She really captured the look of someone who lived along the old Silk Road where cultures crossed and blended. Her face had the roundness that was exemplified with the Russian matryoshka dolls, the eyes of someone from eastern Asia, the eye color of the Europeans, along with a European smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose and cheeks, and the long, thick, dark, straight hair of the Indian subcontinent. She was uniquely and sweetly beautiful.

Harry turned to his bride and spoke to her in Kyrgyz, a Turkic language, a subgroup of the Kypchak languages.

"When did you learn to speak their language, Harry?" Hermione asked, perplexed at the fluency in which he was speaking a foreign tongue.

"Translation spell. It's easy, Kingsley taught me," he explained, teaching Hermione the spell so she could converse with Zhubanysh.

Dobby served up lunch, but he felt a little out of place since it was uncertain how much Zhubanysh wanted his help. She had never seen a house-elf and was uncertain how Dobby would fit in with
her domestic duties to her husband. Harry explained to his wife that even though Dobby was a free elf, the house-elf felt a debt of gratitude to Harry and remained in his service out of a sense of honor, though he could leave any time he chose.

After lunch, Zhubanysh poured tea for her husband and his guest, even offering a cup to Dobby, which endeared her to Dobby with her kindness, before pouring a cup for herself.

Hermione wanted to drag Harry aside and ask him if he had gone mad. Before she could do that, Hermione played the dutiful guest and listened to how they had fallen in love.

It was very sweet. Yuri Novgorodich, a fellow broom racer, found Harry in the snow and took him to the nearest yurt he could find, since who knows how many more miles he would have had to fly with Harry before finding other help. Zhubanysh explained how she fell in love with him at first sight without even knowing who he was. She had never even heard of Harry Potter, so she was unaware of his celebrity status or why he was famous.

It seemed that Zhubanysh playing nursemaid to Harry and tending to him so attentively endeared her to him and quickly won over his heart, especially with her sweet songs Harry claimed healed him.

Since she was a young witch, who was barely seventeen and ripe for marriage since witches tended to marry young in her culture, the father was always present. So with little chance to do physical wooing, their courtship consisted of trying to communicate until Kingsley came along and healed Harry's frostbitten parts. After learning a translation spell, they could converse more easily and spent lots of time talking, though they had already fallen for one another by that point.

By the time that they finished telling Hermione, she was much less circumspect about the sincerity of these two regarding their bond. Harry recounted the wedding customs he had observed, which appalled Hermione, since bride-kidnapping seemed akin to abduction and rape. He assured her that it was an old tradition based on some very, very, very old customs – and the kidnapping does not occur without the bride's consent and her family's. She was a witch after all, and to take her against her will would prove to be a short marriage. Zhubanysh was very proficient with a wand, to be sure.

Hermione eventually asked Zhubanysh if she could speak to Harry regarding some other matters of a personal nature.

Harry's bride smiled sweetly and replied, "Of course, sister," before rising to go to another room.

Ending the translation spell, Hermione said in urgent hushed tones, "Harry, are you mad? How long have you known her, and now you're married to her in what? Less than a week?"

Harry looked at Hermione flatly and said, "And how many hours did you spend with Snape before falling in love with him? And did you fall in love with him or while he was under some pseudonym?"

Hermione's face fell. She didn't tell Harry about that part, but she guessed while he was lying there in a yurt in the Himalayas, he'd probably figured out that Severus originally didn't introduce himself as Severus Snape. Or Ginny might have made mention of it, but he doubted it. Plus Kingsley did warn Hermione that Moody knew about the masks Severus and Draco used. So that probably trickled down to Harry's ears as well.

Hermione was guilty as charged. She had spent less than forty hours in Severus' company under the guise of Calleo before she had fallen for him, then realizing she was in love with Snape after
overhearing Moody and Kingsley talking at Harry's birthday party. Even then, once she knew who he really was, she was already hooked and had fallen for Severus.

Harry had spent nearly a whole week in the company of this witch doing nothing but talking before deciding he loved her enough that he wanted to marry her. There was no desperate dry humping in the kitchen, no dance lessons where they were in each other's arms, nor their hormones driving them towards each other – only the simple act of conversation. Granted, Hermione and Severus did talk a lot, but there was also a whole lot of physicality added to the fire between them that urged them on.

Recalling Bill's comments from New Year's Eve, Hermione asked herself, 'If Harry is happier this way, then who am I to judge what is best for him?'

"Are you happy?" she asked her friend.

"I thought I was happy with Ginny, but we both were kidding ourselves and I didn't want to see it. But with Zhubanysh, yes. Happier than I have been in a long while," he admitted, smiling brightly, his eyes crinkling towards the edges like when he was younger.

Looking at him, she saw more of the boy she once knew shine through than of the man who had looked tired and haunted in recent years and months.

Patting him on the leg, she said, "Then I'm happy for you, Harry. For you both. I hope you both have a long and wonderful marriage together."

Suddenly remembering Bill's wish, she said, "I went to Bill and Fleur's for New Year's Eve. He wants to know if Ginny is safe and happy. So if you could let him know that you talked with her and she is indeed, that would ease his mind."

Harry nodded, but also indicated he would not disclose her location. He knew that some members of the Weasley family might not respect Ginny's decision and could show up to make a scene, or worse, try to haul her back. Molly might be transported to the edge of the caldera, if she was foolish enough to try and take Ginny away from Malfoy.

"I hope you know that when the press finds out you married someone so quickly after your divorce with Ginny, they're going to have a field day. There was speculation wondering about Ginny's whereabouts, the notice of your divorce in Ministry records, neither of you available for comment..." Hermione began listing the many things that would invariably happen, having recently been through the wringer herself lately.

Harry assured her he had already warned his wife of what might happen. He said that a statement has already been sent to the press that would show up in Monday's Daily Prophet.

Hermione also asked if Harry had a Pensieve she could borrow. Unfortunately, Harry didn't have one, but indicated he was thinking of buying one.

Zhubanysh was urged to rejoin them. She brought out a tray of honey-soaked fried bread with more tea, eager to show off her culinary skills to her new sister.

Hermione, using the translation spell once again, told Harry and Zhubanysh about Ron's wedding to Lavender. There was a lot of back-story that the younger witch did not know, but she knew that Ron and Hermione were once married, but were not anymore. She also knew that Harry, Hermione, and Ron were childhood friends. Zhubanysh wasn't told of the finer details of Ron and Lavender's history and their affair behind Hermione's back.
"It was a very... solemn wedding," Hermione admitted, not wanting to say it was more like a funeral. She didn't want to confuse Zhubanysh as to why it wasn't the joyous occasion it should have been, but wasn't. She would eventually learn many of the details over the years, or probably sooner.

Hermione was invited to stay for dinner, at which Zhubanysh proudly served her national dish to her new "sister." To Hermione's relief, Zhubanysh couldn't get any horse meat so beef was used instead. It was a dish of meat stewed for about three hours and served with homemade noodles sprinkled with parsley and coriander. It was very filling and delicious.

She asked Zhubanysh if sometime she could teach Hermione how to make it. She was eager to learn a new dish, feeling inspired to expand her repertoire of dishes since learning new ones from Severus. Harry's bride was flattered and ebullient that her cooking was appreciated, not just by her husband, but Hermione as well.

Harry and his new wife ate with their hands, which Hermione copied, having done the same when she had eaten Moroccan food with Severus while blindfolded.

After dinner, Hermione excused herself. She had much more studying to do since Albert was going to test her that week on how much Greek she had learned and absorbed so far.

The newlyweds bid Hermione farewell with hugs and kisses, before she Floo'ed home to the Red Ginseng.

Sitting in her study, Hermione suddenly realized that of all these divorces, that she was the only who had not paired off already. She was guessing that Ginny and Draco tied the knot shortly after arriving at wherever their sanctuary was.

There was a moment when she wondered if she had left with Severus, would he eventually have proposed to her, or was the memory of Gabrielle, his first wife, too painful for him to consider marriage ever again. And though Severus had closed his note – the one that he included with the vials of his memory – with the word "eternally," a thread of doubt crept into Hermione's mind.

'What if he met someone else where he is now? How long would Severus wait for me? What if I show up and he no longer wants me or loves me the same way?'

There were things they never talked about, or more likely they avoided to deflect the unpleasantness of the topic.

In the absence of Severus' reassuring presence, the faith that he had helped restore in herself began to falter, no longer nourished by his words and encouragement. A part of Hermione was withering from the lack of Severus, and the care he gave her. She didn't doubt her love for Severus, but began to doubt herself that she was worthy of him to wait for her.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Work was good for Severus. It kept his mind off of how much he missed Hermione. But at the end of the day, when he got back from a long day at his shop after staying late into the night brewing, he would walk back to the hotel, up to his room, and find it empty. The photograph of Hermione was his only company late at night when he longed to feel her arm thrown possessively across his chest, as if claiming that he was hers. And he was. Still.

He had been working late so many nights that he had taken to eating take-out, since he didn't have much time to cook now. The food was good, but there was something more satisfying about a
home-cooked meal. There were invites from the Malfoys for dinner, but playing catch-up to the surge of work he had when his business first opened claimed much of his time, and he often had to bow out.

Severus did leave work at six o’clock on his birthday, which fell on a Friday that year, and went to the Malfoys for a birthday dinner. It turned out to be more like a mini surprise party. The whole Finau family was there, along with Halulu and her husband, Greg, Gary, Gary's wife, Iolana, Arnold and Ranjit. There was a barbecue in the backyard, and chicken and fish were grilled up, drinks were served and everyone enjoyed themselves. Iakona and Draco talked about how Draco could improve his kick-off from the ocean, since he was still having trouble learning that move. The Potions masters talked shop, with the two old-timers congratulating Severus on his business and thankful they didn't have to turn away so many customers any more. Neither Arnold or Ranjit were the least bit interested in tutoring.

Ginny baked a cake and Severus enjoyed himself, but still wished Hermione was there to share the day with him. He wondered if she remembered his birthday, or was she so busy with work and her apprenticeship that she forgot, and if her affections for him were just as strong, or were they waning with him far away. Severus wondered if she had received those memories Marf promised to deliver and if she had seen them yet. Then there was the inevitable question of would she join him if she did know where he was?

Draco was still coming into work with Severus every day, happy to continue working with the wizard who mentored him and worked alongside him at The Lovely Lavender Company. They had a good working rapport with one another and it was easy when they knew each other's habits and nuances. The backlog of potions was beginning to ease up, and the schedule was more moderate and not overwhelming. Still, now that Severus was tutoring students, each one between one and five days a week, he was rather busy.

Some of the witches began asking for recommendations of a Charms and Transfiguration tutor. Draco hadn't studied under a Master, but Severus recommended him highly, which was enough for the parents to trust their children's supplemental education curriculum under his care.

Draco used Severus' Potions questionnaire as a template for his own. He finally began to understand why Severus had pinched the bridge of his nose so often during class. There were major gaps in the education of some of these children. Some were learning things that would be considered sixth-year level without mastering some other spells that were considered essential for a first year. It was appalling.

Rainbow had done a fairly good job of teaching her own children, as Iakona was a very talented student. He was only twelve, and already doing potions that a fifth year would do. But there were still gaps in some of his basic Potions skill set that explained why he was having some difficulty advancing in his studies. It surprised Severus that Rainbow – who worked as a part-time Healer – didn't cover more of the basics that were missing.

Severus considered bringing up at the next town council meeting the creation of an education curriculum standard that would address these issues. To him, it seemed more like a hodgepodge where the better educated parents were doing a better job, while the lesser educated parents were barely able to teach their children the basics. This current approach to local education was hindering any chance of the poorly-taught students of bettering themselves by scoring high enough on their SAT's to go onto an apprenticeship. Given his years working in institutional academia, he hoped his advice would bear some weight with the locals.

In a rare moment, there was an hour in the afternoon when there were no consultation appointments
or tutoring for Severus. Draco was currently working with a student regarding his Charms work in a second tutoring room Severus had built out. There were no students doing their practical Potions work in the front lab where Severus supervised and guided them. Instead, in the rear Potions lab that was his work space, Severus made the most of his time by beginning to stew some iridescent jeweled scarab beetles that needed to simmer overnight when the front door opened.

There was the small chime of a bell to let Severus know a customer had come in. He made sure the flame was set at the right intensity before going to see his next customer.

Severus entered the waiting area to see Halulu standing there, her face a little more weighty than her usual smiling self.

"Do you have a moment to speak about a commission?" she asked, her voice less commanding than customary.

"Of course. I have the next forty-five minutes free until my next appointment," the Potions master said as he ushered her into his office he used for such business.

The office was charmed so that no one could overhear anything said within the confines of the space, in order to stop nosy parkers from sticking their wands where they didn't belong.

Shutting the door, he turned to his friend and asked, "What can I do for you?"

Halulu licked her lips, and he could tell she was having difficulty trying to say why she was there. She took a steadying breath before looking Severus in the eye and saying, "I need a fertility potion."

Witches were naturally fertile women, as their magic tended to lend a certain ability to conceive without the issues that many Muggle women could suffer from. This kept witches from experiencing problems such as an imbalance in hormones, infections of the ovaries that could damage them, unusual-shaped uteruses that could interfere with implantation, endometriosis, and a whole host of other problems of a congenital, genetic or secondary cause. For a witch to need a fertility potion was a great scandal that made some witches question if they were truly magical.

"Have you seen a Healer?" he asked, seeking to address a host of other causes before using a fertility potion.

"Yes, and Rainbow says that everything is working fine. I'm ovulating, Greg is fertile, my cycles are regular, I'm not anemic..." She trailed off as she began to cry.

Severus had a box of tissues on his desk, and he pushed it towards Halulu for her to use as needed.

"Thanks."

Her list crossed off many of Severus’ first line of questions. "How long have you been trying?" he asked, since he didn't know how long they had been married.

"Ten years, though, for the first five years we were married we decided to wait. Fifteen years together and no children. I'm beginning to lose hope," she said, the tears coming back once more.

"What were you using for birth control for those first five years?" Severus asked.

"Arnold supplied contraceptive potions to the local apothecary, and I used those. Other witches have used them, but after they got off the potions they later get pregnant, so that's not it," Halulu informed him.
That was another thing checked off on Severus’ list of questions.

"If I may ask, how long are your cycles?"

"Twenty-nine days."

"And if I may also ask, how often do you and your husband have sex between your seventh and seventeenth day of your cycle?" Severus asked. He kept this as professional as possible, since this was a very personal question.

"Every other day. We were told that trying every day when I'm most fertile might lower his fertility, so we try every other day."

He nodded, trying to think of other things. If he was going to brew a potion for her, the Potions master needed to know what had and hadn't been addressed in order to narrow down the possibilities.

There was something he remembered from a few books he had regarding fertility, arousal and sex potions. Just as stress and anxiety can interfere with arousal, so it could as well with fertility.

Severus knew Halulu was a busy woman. She ran the local hula school, was a town council member, worked part-time in the Portkey office, and worked part-time in the Department for Imports and Exports as well. Whenever Severus saw her, she was always on the go, and he did not know when she found time to socialize. She seemed so full of energy, but now sitting in front of her, she looked tired and exhausted.

An idea struck upon Severus. It was a bit unconventional, but he thought it would make for a good case to study, exploring the aspect of stress and fertility.

"When was the last time you and Greg went on a holiday?" he asked, trying to confirm a suspicion of his.

"Gee, I don't know," she strained to recollect. "Um, maybe thirteen or fourteen years ago? Before I opened the hula school? Yes, it was a few months before I opened the hula school. Thirteen years," she confirmed her earlier guess.

"And you've been trying for ten?"

"Yes."

Severus sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers in front of him, his elbows resting on the arms. "I could take your Galleons, Halulu, and brew you a fertility Potion. But I don't think my potion will be nearly as effective as you and Greg taking a two-week holiday abroad."

"But...?"

"Stress has been suspected to affect fertility. With your busy schedule, you and your husband have had little time to relax and let your mind and bodies rest," Severus went on.

"I can't just go away for two weeks!" Halulu insisted.

"Why not? Do you not have other women who have substituted for you at your hula school in the past? One day or two weeks, it will not be the end of your school. Besides, what is more important to you right now? Living up to the expectations of others and this grueling schedule you keep yourself to, or conceiving a child?" he flatly asked her.
Halulu gazed blankly in front of her. She had kept a busy schedule, trying to live up to some self-imposed image and high set of expectations she had set for herself. Severus knew the type, since it had once been his own lifestyle. He had run himself ragged before, especially during his days in the past trying to play Potions teacher, Head of Slytherin, reluctant slave to The Dark Lord, and faithful spy for Dumbledore. He had drawn himself so taut that he’d nearly snapped a few times, living on Invigoration Draughts to keep himself going.

"So do you take Invigoration Draughts to keep up with the schedule you set for yourself?" he asked, wondering if she did.

"I... Well..." She looked away, perplexed that this wizard had seen through a careful facade of the ever put-together, on-top-of-it-all Halulu who could do everything, and usually did.

"Japan is lovely in April with the cherry blossom festivals, I hear. Though they say that in spring, Paris is for lovers." Severus remembered Hermione's tale of her honeymoon with Weasley, then added, "And then there is the Island of Capri off the Italian coast. It has a little wizarding restaurant that serves the most wonderful aphrodisiac oysters. They are harvested from the same beds as the Sirens eat from. The restaurant also serves them with a lime blossom-infused limeade that supposedly can be quite... stimulating, regarding conjugal bliss. It can enhance the already romantic setting of Italy."

"But what about my work?"

"Everyone else seems to take a holiday now and again. I'd say you were overdue." He quirked a brow at her, slightly surprised that she should dare to refute him. "You work in the Portkey office. I think you could arrange something in the near future. April is three months away. Plenty of time for you to put your affairs in order for a two-week holiday that is long overdue. And no more Invigoration Draughts."

"But what if..." She didn't want to say what if she couldn't get pregnant.

"If within two full cycles after your trip you have not conceived, then I will take your Galleons and will use all my knowledge and my entire library to help you and Greg conceive," Severus promised. "But for now, I recommend a nice relaxing holiday far way. You can forget your troubles, relax, sleep in, and not worry about trying to get pregnant. Take a sabbatical from life and your worries."

Halulu seemed to give a sigh of resignation, as if finally admitting to herself that she could not do it all.

"I have been where you are now," he confided to her. "Sometimes you have to recognize your own limits, even though you think it can all be done."

Severus did not tell her he did do it all, but it had ravaged his body and strained the limits of his mind when he needed his mind the most to keep him alive.

Hermione was eating the last piece of cake. She had baked it on Severus' birthday, lit a candle, and softly sung "Happy Birthday" for him, though she was all alone.

Each night, while she studied her Greek that she wasn't grasping as fast as she had hoped, Marf served her a cup of tea and a slice of cake. It had taken her two weeks to finally eat all of it, not wanting to gorge herself on it. She didn't want to buy a new wardrobe if she couldn't fit in her
current one. Besides, she finally had some really nice dresses, and she wanted to be able to keep wearing them for a long while.

Working in Albert's garden certainly made up for the fact that she was no longer lifting and hauling boxes around the Department of Standards & Regulations. Using magic to lift boxes of magical ingredients was not exactly the smartest thing to do, as some ingredients might react to even the slightest bit of wand work. And given that she was now working most of the day every Saturday for Neville, fulfilling the Herbology portion of her Potions apprenticeship, she was getting an extra work-out. Even her biceps had become leaner, but more muscular.

Fortunately, working with Neville was helping her master Greek. Neville was fluent in Greek and Latin. He explained that though it wasn't part of his apprenticeship, he had decided to learn them since most plants were named using Greek and Latin. The Greek and Latin words often described the plant and its characteristics. For example, his beloved Mimulus Mimbletonia – the Latin “-ulus” diminutive indicates the Mimulus is smaller than the Mimbus.

Hermione knew all the binomial nomenclature for all the Potion ingredients she had tested over the years, which helped her learn some Greek. However, Hermione and Albert did not often converse in Greek at work. To help her, Neville would converse with her in the language, which made learning the language a bit easier.

The old classmates would be in a heated repotting shed conversing back and forth. With their arms elbow deep in freshly mixed potting soil, Neville would guide her with proper conjugation, tense, and grammar. At times, he would expand her vocabulary with a word that better fit the context of the conversation.

Hermione hoped when she learned Latin, the next language she was going to master, that it would go much easier. But Neville was happy to help her, as she had helped him back at Hogwarts, especially in Potions.

She wondered if she should work on two languages at once, but was cautioned by Albert it was better to work on one language at a time. He had tried the same thing, and wound up making slower progress than when he stuck with one language at a time.

As Hermione was repotting dormant daylilies that she was dividing, she thought to ask Neville, since nearly everyone else was unable to help her.

"Say, Neville, you wouldn't happen to have a Pensieve, would you?" She tried to make it nonchalant, but she was getting quite anxious to locate one since she had been in possession of Severus' memories for nearly a month.

"Nope, sorry to say that I don't. I did think that maybe I would need one to help organize my thoughts. Anything specific you need it for?" he asked, curious to her need for one.

"Just need to review some old memories regarding some research I'm doing." she sort of truthfully explained.

Hermione was stumped. Everyone she knew was either thinking of buying one and hadn't gotten around to it, or didn't have one. The only person left Hermione hadn't asked was Lavender, but she didn't think her boss had one. Lavender didn't seem like the type who would have one, like Dumbledore had. Usually the more academic types tended to have them for review of historical analysis, and to organize their thoughts and see patterns for research. But Hermione figured it couldn't hurt to ask since no one else seemed to have one.
A/N:
Humuhumunukunukuapua'a is the state fish of Hawaii, pronounced hoo-moo-hoo-moo-nu-koo-nu-koo-ah-pooh-ah-ah. It is an aggressive reef triggerfish with a pig-like snout.

There is a song called “Every Little Piece from the movie, Pete's Dragon. I borrowed a line from the lyrics: "It's money, money, money by the pound..."
There is a link where you can listen to the song without video here: http://disney.wikia.com/wiki/Every_Little_Piece?file=Pete%27s_Dragon_-_Every_Little_Piece

American testing for college entrance exams are called SAT's for Scholastic Aptitude Test. The wizarding population adopted a similar acronym so witches and wizards could complain about their SAT’s and Muggles would be none the wiser.

Zhubanysh is a Kyrgyz girl's name meaning "comforter."

Thank you, Wikipedia, for being an invaluable resource. Here is their page on the Kyrgyz language: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyrgyz_language
Chapter Summary

Hermione views two key memories, and gets invited to meet other Potions masters. Severus is still adjusting to his new life in a new country, and receives his own invitation for a bit of regular socializing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Seventy-Nine
"English Tea and Old Memories"

Disclaimer:
I can't write no good disclaimer
I can't write no good disclaimer
'Cause I try and I try and I try and I try
I can't write no, I can't write no
With Rowling owning Potter
And her tweets comes on the Internet
She's writing more and more
About some Cursed Child play
Adding to canon every day

I can't write no, oh no, no, no
A hey, hey, hey, that's what I disclaim

A/N: Disclaimer a parody of “Satisfaction,” by the Rolling Stones.

It figured the last person Hermione thought to ask if they had a Pensieve was Lavender. The magical object was expensive, and the common perception was only academic types had one in order to help organize their thoughts. She knew Lavender had the money to afford one, but Hermione did not perceive her as the type to require it for mental matters.

When Hermione asked if she could borrow it for some memories Severus left behind which might exonerate his and Draco's name, her boss was more than happy to lend it for as long as she needed it. First, though, Lavender needed to clear out a few memories she kept stored in it.
Hermione wondered if one of those memories was of Bascom Nettleton, since Hermione asked Lavender why the owner of the Mercury Broom Company wasn't at the wedding. Ron and Bascom had become rather chummy over the months and it surprised her he wasn't there. Lavender admitted to Hermione that Bascom and she had been on intimate terms when she first left Hogwarts, and it was not an amicable parting. When Ron had initially invited Bascom and Dagmar to the wedding, Lavender had to inform her husband-to-be of her prior involvement with Bascom. Needless to say, Ron had since been spending far less time with the Nettletons upon learning such news.

When Hermione showed up to work one morning, the stone bowl was waiting for her on a part of her desk which was not covered in books, scrolls, and sheaves of parchment. It was all she could do to concentrate on her current project for Albert and Lavender – researching a potion for longer and thicker eyelashes without turning the witch into looking like a camel. Four-inch eyelashes were a bit too long for anyone who was not of the Camelus genus.

After her work for the day finished up, she rushed back home to fetch the box Severus had left her for Christmas.

Once back in her office, she locked her door and cast a few security spells. Hermione did not want to be disturbed, even though Albert and Lavender had already gone for the day.

Holding up the red-capped vial, she watched the silvery threads of the memory float languidly, its sultry dance within its glass confines belying the turbulent thoughts contained within.

After pouring the contents of the vial into Lavender's Pensieve, she leaned forward and let herself be pulled into the memory.

Initially disoriented, having only been in a Pensieve memory once before, Hermione recognized she was in a corridor at Hogwarts near the Infirmary. Hearing the familiar clack of boot heels on the stone floor, Hermione turned and saw Severus and Draco walking down the corridor towards her.

Severus was clad in his old frock coat and billowing black robes. Draco followed slightly behind and to his right, dressed in all black as well, in a full woolen cloak. The blond wizard was at his full adult height, but had not filled out yet, looking more like a frightened willowy boy than a young man. The Head of Slytherin was looking gaunt and stern, looking older than when Hermione met him again years later than of this memory.
As the wizards took long strides down the dimly lit corridor, Hermione ran to keep up as they entered the infirmary.

Madam Pomfrey greeted the pair, looking stricken and nervous. "I've contacted St. Mungo's for a Healer. It seems that this is beyond even my capabilities," the school nurse fretted. "They said it may take a while since there was another attack and they are quite busy right now. He asked for you and Mr. Malfoy immediately, Professor."

They crossed the infirmary to an area partitioned off with cloth-sheathed dividers. Normally, Poppy would have shooed any visitors away, but even she seemed to sense that time was short for the Headmaster and there was something important he needed to say. She did not tell Severus to keep it brief and let him rest like she did with most visitors who came to see her charges.

Hermione followed in behind Severus and Draco as they entered the semi-private area. It was then she realized that she was witnessing the last known memory of Dumbledore’s. Severus had told her that he was the last person to speak to Dumbledore alive, which is why suspicion was cast so heavily upon him and Draco regarding Dumbledore's death and its unfortunate timing before the attack on Hogwarts.

Recalling the date, she remembered where she was at the time of this particular memory. It was June 26th, 1999. She, Harry, and Ron were looking for Wormtail, trying to get him to make good on his wizard's debt to Harry for sparing his life in the Shrieking Shack.

The school was officially closed for the summer, but for this one instance, Dumbledore let as many students stay who desired do so. He had been approached by many parents to have someplace safe for their children to stay, when so many Death Eater attacks were happening all over the country.

In the memory, Dumbledore was sitting up in bed looking far frailer and older than the last time she had seen him, which was three days prior to this memory. It looked like he was trying to hold on to life, but it was stealing from his grasp as grains of sand slip easily through one's fingers.

"Severus, Draco," the old Headmaster gasped, his voice brittle and dry. He reached out a papery thin hand that looked as white as the ghosts that haunted the halls of Hogwarts. Blue veins stood out prominently, raised up from the back of his hand, contouring over the bones.

"Headmaster, we came as soon as I heard you called for us," Severus said, looking grave, his forehead etched with concern.
Draco said nothing. His eyes were wide with worry. Hermione could tell what he was thinking, as she had thought the same thing that was plainly written on the younger wizard's face.

"If Dumbledore dies before the end of this war, will we lose?"

Sybill Trelawney’s prophecy may have been about the war being fought in the end between Harry and Voldemort, but without Dumbledore, could the Order still stand against the Death Eaters?

In time, it bore out that it did, and Harry won in the end. But at the time, the future was dark and nebulous.

"I have a mission for you and Draco," Dumbledore said, his voice barely above a raspy whisper. "I need you to go to the orphanage where Tom Riddle was born and lived. Just as he used the gravesite of his father for his regeneration, I believe that there is something significant about the gravesite of his mother."

Dumbledore coughed. Severus offered the Headmaster a glass of water, but he declined for the moment.

Continuing with his request, Dumbledore said, "I have sought for many clues and items that might help Harry defeat Voldemort over the years."

Severus winced and Draco flinched at the mentioning of the Dark Lord's name, but Dumbledore would not use a euphemism. The Headmaster believed in using the name in order to remove the fear from it.

"I believe that there is something buried at the gravesite of his mother. She kept her married name of Riddle, though Tom Riddle Sr. divorced her. Just as her death was the impetus for Tom Riddle Jr. to abandon his humanity, I hope there is something tied to his humanity that he left at her gravesite. I hope it will help Harry defeat him."

"Headmaster, are you certain there is something there? And if so, what do you think it might be?" Severus asked.

"I am not certain of anything, Severus, except that what ails me is nothing that can be cured by Poppy or even the Healers of St. Mungo’s. There is no cure for time, and even Time-Turners..."
should not be used to delay the inevitable. As for Merope's gravesite, I do not know if it will yield anything or not. You and Draco must go since I cannot. Some of the far-fetched hints have yielded promising clues as to how to defeat Voldemort, and some of the most encouraging have resulted in nothing. But you must go and soon."

"What if we can't find her grave?" Draco asked.

"Severus knows where the orphanage is where Tom Riddle grew up. I have seen her grave and know it is there. I have been unwilling to desecrate it, until now. Time is short. I know the final battle will come in four days’ time."

"How can you be so sure?" Severus' face became etched with even more worry.

"June 30th was the night of the prophecy. Tom will seek to bring about its completion on its anniversary." Dumbledore gave Severus a piercing stare. "You remember that night, Severus. Do you not?"

Even with the Headmasters' frailty, it made Severus nearly cower knowing he was the one who had told the Prophecy to the Dark Lord, before he became a spy for the Order. It was after Severus told the Dark Lord of the prophecy that he was forced to kill his wife, Gabrielle. It took the death of his wife for him to change allegiances. Hearing the news of Lily being targeted by the Dark Lord, it only strengthened his resolve to fight against those he’d once aligned himself with.

"Yes, I remember," Severus croaked, hanging his head in shame. Hermione had already heard about how Severus had relayed the prophecy to Voldemort a long time ago.

"Then you must go now, as Harry, Ron and Hermione will need you most during the final battle to come. Protect Ron and Hermione as much as you would protect Harry, as he needs them by his side to help him in the end. Should they fall, so might his resolve."

"I promise I will do my best," Severus vowed.

"And I, Headmaster," Draco added.

Hermione thought she might have seen Draco during the final battle casting a deflection spell which might have hit Ron, but she wasn't sure until now. Upon hearing his promise to Dumbledore
to protect them, she was certain of it. Draco may have actually saved Ron, but never made mention of it.

"Then you must go now," the aged wizard commanded. Draco made to leave, but Dumbledore's hand shot out and grasped Severus by the sleeve.

Just then the memory ended. It seemed like there was more memory to come, but Hermione found herself back in her office wondering what Dumbledore was going to say next. There was proof that Dumbledore told Severus to go and leave Hogwarts. However, there was also no proof that Severus did not poison the Headmaster, resulting in his death, as some of the accusations insinuated.

Severus was the last known person to speak with Albus Dumbledore, as Madam Pomfrey had found the Headmaster passed away in his sleep when next she checked on him a few hours later.

Pulling the memory from the liquid substance in the Pensive's bowl, Hermione put the memory away in the red-capped vial before pulling out the one with the blue cap. She had a feeling that the memory continued on from there with the second one, since the first one ended so abruptly.

Once the memory from the blue-capped vial was in the Pensieve, she let herself be pulled once more into the rune-rimmed bowl.

She was correct. The memory picked up from where the last one ended. Dumbledore had a tight grip on the edge of Severus' sleeve.

"A moment with Professor Snape alone, if you please, Mr. Malfoy," the Headmaster requested.

Draco bowed his head and left the enclosed area, parting with a respectful, "Of course, Headmaster."

Once the echo of Draco's boots signaled that he had left the infirmary, Albus let out a small grunt of discomfort.

"Headmaster!" Severus sensed his mentor was suffering.
Dumbledore waved his hand dismissively, having more important things to discuss than a few aches and pains.

"Severus, I must tell you something, and you must pay careful attention."

Severus and Hermione both leaned in closer.

"Should Voldemort win, and should you and Draco have been found to be spies for me, you must seek sanctuary. There you will be safe where no one can hurt you any longer." Albus winced once more and coughed.

Dumbledore's face got a very faraway look, as he began to recall, "When Grindelwald fell, some of his top followers fled for sanctuary. I followed them and tried to bring them back. Unfortunately, the magic imbued into this sanctuary is so powerful that each attempt I had to bring one particular wizard back resulted in me being transported to a location more and more dangerous; the last time I was transported to the edge of the volcano's caldera. It was then I realized nothing I did could allow me to bring these followers of Grindelwald to justice. They had been granted sanctuary. And if we fail, so must you and Draco find sanctuary."

"But where is this sanctuary, Headmaster?" Severus asked.

"Malu Palekaiko, a magical island hidden from Muggles. An island that is part of the chain of Hawaiian Islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean." Dumbledore gave a bittersweet smile before turning his gaze back to Severus.

"There is no place called Hawaii, and certainly no place like that in the middle of the Pacific, Headmaster," Severus corrected him.

"Or so you think, Severus." Even on death's doorstep, there was that damn twinkle in Dumbledore's eye. "After I was unable to bring back Grindelwald's followers, I began a very thorough and systematic erasing of any mention of Hawaii and Malu Palekaiko from all of British wizarding society. Books, maps, news articles, anything, everything. I even petitioned other governments to do the same. Though some of the European Ministries joined in my efforts, other countries did not, especially the United States, since Hawaii was one of their territories at the time. I didn't want any more of Grindelwald's followers finding out and following on to Malu Palekaiko and reforming their army there. And when Voldemort fell the first time, I felt vindicated in my erasure of this part of the world from our society's memory. I had erased the memory of this place of refuge from the minds of all witches and wizards through mass memory charms, omission, and eradication of knowledge," Dumbledore admitted, now looking more like he was filled with regret than triumph.
"Little did I suspect that Albania, a place with no sanctuary, would be the starting ground for the second rise of Voldemort." Dumbledore sighed wearily. "If you seek Muggle sources, you will be able to learn more about Hawaii, but be careful. There are those few who still know about Malu Palekaiko, like Moody who I told, should he need to stop Death Eaters from reaching Hawaii. And should he know that I told you, he might seek to erase that memory from you."

Now the prohibition of Death Eaters leaving England without special permission made all that much more sense to Hermione. The revocation of Severus and Draco's Apparition license, as one could Apparate to another country that hadn't erased the memory of Malu Palekaiko from the wizarding collective conscience, the restriction to travel. Everything.

"Should you and Draco be persecuted, flee, my boy. Go to Malu Palekaiko and make a new life for yourself there. I promise you will find peace and happiness there. A chance for a new beginning for you both," the old Headmaster vowed.

Hermione repeated the name of the island to herself in order to help commit it to memory. She could come back to view this memory as many times as she needed, but when it was done, she would look for Hawaii and the island that granted sanctuary.

Dumbledore stopped and broke into a fit of coughing. His hand stretched out to the glass of water Severus had offered him before. The Potions master handed the glass to the Headmaster who took a small sip, helping his cough subside.

"A bit of lemon, Severus" Dumbledore requested, gesturing over to the lemon cut in half resting on the bedside table.

Severus grabbed it and offered to squeeze a bit of juice into his water.

Dumbledore shook his head and said, "No, allow me," insisting on doing it himself, using his wand to extract the juice.

As the drops of juice fell into the glass, he said, "Now you must go. Time is of the essence, Severus."

"Yes, Headmaster," Severus said as he bowed and exited.
Hermione watched Severus leave in a swirl of black robes before finding herself once more in her office.

Running to a world atlas of magical plants she had, she opened the book up to the map of Oceania. There was the continent of Australia, the islands of New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, New Caledonia, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Micronesia, French Polynesia, the Marshall Islands, the Northern Marianas, Fiji, Vanuatu, and the Equatorial Islands – but no Hawaiian Islands. Moving to a map showing more of the North Pacific, she saw the Japanese Islands of Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu, in addition to the Alaskan Aleutian Islands chain stretching over a thousand miles across the northern Pacific. There were the Midway Islands, but that was the only thing on this map in the middle of the Pacific. Another map of the Southern Pacific towards the east showed the Pitcairn Islands, the Galapagos Islands, and Easter Island. Being Muggle-born, she had heard of the Hawaiian Islands before, but suddenly realized she hadn't thought of the place in many years.

Hermione had heard her parents lament once that on their year-long trip to the United States the only places they didn't visit that they wish they had gone were to Alaska and Hawaii. They said something about a six-hour flight from the West Coast, so that meant that it was far from the mainland.

Another book which included a world map showed no listing for Hawaii. Hermione wasn't sure where to look in the Pacific, since the memory of Dumbledore said it was in the middle of the Pacific, but he didn't exactly give any latitude or longitude coordinates.

There was one more memory Hermione could view, but she decided her curiosity was getting the better of her. She could not devote her full attention to the memory Severus left for her until she found a map with Hawaii on it.

After rushing home to secure her box of memories from Severus, Hermione threw on her best Muggle-like clothes, including the purse her mother had given her, and Floo’ed directly to the Leaky Cauldron. She could have ran there, but decided to save five minutes. She wanted to reach the Muggle bookstore before it closed. Fortunately, the bookshop she took Ginny to before was not far away. She just hoped they were still open.

Reaching the bookstore, she glanced at the store hours posted on the door and noted she had half an hour before closing time.

Hermione's eyes scanned the section titles in desperation, until she found the area she was looking for.
Arriving in the travel section, she found a map posted on the wall nearby. She began looking about, her finger grazing over the laminated paper, until she found it.

"There you are," she whispered triumphantly.

Her finger found the small island chain located just east of the International Date Line, and just barely south of the Tropic of Cancer. It was rather prominent, compared to many of the other islands in the Pacific that were listed in the first book she’d looked through back at her office.

It was quite amazing that Dumbledore had single-handedly made a land mass of this particular size disappear from the minds of British wizarddom, but then again, without books and maps, how could one know anyway about much of anything. There could have been stories, but she wondered if Dumbledore had erased the memories of those who knew about the place as well. Could one wizard cast an Oblivious Spell on all of wizarding Great Britain? If anyone could do it, it could only be Dumbledore who could have pulled it off.

Going over to the bookshelves packed with travel guides, she found a few books on Hawaii and pulled them out. Scanning through the pages, she saw beautiful tropical flowers, palm trees lining white-sand beaches, and smiling friendly faces of people presenting trays of tropical fruits in welcome. A time difference chart showed that Hawaii was eleven hours behind London time. A glance at the store's clock said it was nearly quarter to eight, which meant that where Severus was, it was quarter to nine in the morning.

A quick F.A.Q. guide showed local temperatures indicating it was much warmer, which made Hermione wonder if Severus was still clinging to long sleeves and using cooling charms, or did he adopt some of the local attire shown in the travel guide, notably, Hawaiian shirts and shorts. Hermione wondered how different wizarding fashion in Hawaii was from the Muggle population. She couldn't imagine Severus in a Hawaiian shirt and shorts. It was incongruent with the wizard she knew.

A chime rang out over the loudspeaker. She heard the announcement that the store was closing soon, and shoppers should bring all purchases up to the front. Hermione cursed herself for not having any Muggle money with her. She made a promise to convert some of her money to Muggle currency tomorrow during her lunch break, and to come back at the end of the day. She just hoped the house-elves weren't serving poached salmon for lunch, since she really did enjoy that particular lunch selection.

Rising at the crack of dawn, Severus donned his swim trunks, a shirt, a pair of flip-flops, and a towel over his shoulders. He headed down to the shoreline for a morning swim before eating
breakfast and opening his business. He found that if he worked off some of his pent-up sexual energy first thing in the morning with a rigorous swim, he was much less likely to snap at his customers, students, and Draco during the day.

For some reason, the ocean seemed to drain a lot of energy from him so that he didn't walk around taut as a wire and just as ready to snap. Since coming to Malu Palekaiko, he had become much more relaxed, but that feeling of calmness was beginning to wane the longer he was away from Hermione.

He didn't want to regain his reputation of an irritable and brusque person, since people on this small island had been very friendly and respectful of him. They had no preconceived notions of the Potions master or his reputation that was known among the British wizarding population. Severus liked the fact that people on the street smiled at him and didn't dart their eyes in suspicion or fear of him. Even among those who knew him well back in England and at Hogwarts, there was a standoffishness that people had towards him, especially given his dark and troubled history. Malu Palekaiko was a place where Severus could reinvent himself, become the person he could have become had life been different and a bit more kind to him.

But missing Hermione, and the copious amounts of sex they used to enjoy, was bringing back some of the old habits of his irascible temperament, which required daily exercise to keep his temper in check.

Walking back to the hotel after a long swim, Severus waved to the shopkeepers who opened early and greeted him with a friendly "Aloha."

In the shower, after rinsing off the sand and salt from his body, he usually had a good wank to take any further edge off. After he toweled off, he dressed in a long pair of cotton trousers, closed-toe shoes, and a short-sleeved shirt.

After a breakfast of fruit, toast, and coffee, he would go to his shop to open for the day. Draco would usually arrive shortly after him.

The schedule had become much more manageable as of late, with half the day filled with tutoring in fifteen- to thirty-minute increments, and small thirty- to ninety-minute-long Potions classes, of five to eight students, since there wasn't enough time in the day to hold individual Potion brewing sessions. The small class size, without the House rivalry involved, allowed Severus to cover more material in a shorter amount of time with more personal instruction. In addition, he grouped children based on skill level, not age, which seemed to make the environment more conducive to learning. The former professor found the experience much more rewarding and the children more attentive, since he didn't have to monitor a class of about twenty – when who knew what catastrophe would occur for the minute or two he had his back turned.
One policy he had to institute was a clothing policy for the children. For brewing, students were to wear either long trousers, a long skirt that went past their knees or a long sarong. Closed-toe shoes were also a requirement, with stockings to protect the calves if the child was wearing a skirt or sarong. Work robes were always to be worn. Severus found that most of the children didn't have proper robes or gloves, so he had some made and incorporated use of them into his tutoring fees. Another expense was that he used a local laundry, run by a free elf, to wash the black cotton robes and gloves the children spilled experiments on all day long, as well as his own. Potions – spilled on bare skin – could prove to be most... corrosive at times. Severus made the dress code requirements mandatory after one child, who didn't heed his warning to come in proper shoes, lost a toe that had to be re-attached at the local clinic. Some children started bringing their own gloves and robes as time wore on, especially since Severus tended to keep his shop a bit on the cool side with cooling charms.

The other half of his day was filled with consultations and requests for commissions. There were very few evening and weekend appointments. He had a few vampires who commissioned him for an additive to pigs' blood to keep it close to body temperature without spoiling and make it taste more like human blood.

These hours allowed Severus to have more free time to explore the island, collecting ingredients and scoping out potential places where he'd like to build a house.

Manny, his real estate agent, couldn't find anything regarding Severus' specific needs. The agent suggested he buy some land and build, since the only other thing to do was wait for someone to die or move away before anything else would come onto the market, and Severus had seen every available house out there on the island. Severus even considered buying two parcels of land, one close to town and another on the western side of the island which tended to be much drier and in the rain-shadow of the volcano. The extra parcel of land would be an ideal spot to grow Mediterranean plants that didn't like it where the town was located. Any extra ingredients, he could ship to the other apothecaries on the other Hawaiian Islands. The town was located more along the south side of the island and was quite wet, but not as drenched as the east side of the island, which received rain every day and was a tropical rain forest.

Arriving at work one morning, Draco wore a big smile.

"Guess what I've got?" Draco asked in a sing-song voice.

Severus wanted to say something snide, like "The wizarding clap?" but held his tongue. He was getting tired of living at the hotel and wanted a place of his own that afforded him a bit more privacy and room. Also, the fact he still wasn't quite satisfied with a long swim and a wank that morning meant that it was going to be a long day.
"Tea!" trilled Draco, producing a tin of loose leaf tea.

Severus snorted, disbelieving Draco would find this exciting news. He had drunk the crap they tried to pass off as tea here. He had decided he would stick with coffee, until he could grow his own tea.

"It's from England!" Draco added in the same sing-song voice.

Severus stopped and reached over, snatching the tin from Draco's hand like a greedy, grabby child to look at it. He tried to remove the annoying plastic tape seal, getting fed up with the Muggle packaging and using his wand to remove it. Then he cracked open the top and inhaled deeply, feeling the tension seep away just from the scent of it.

"Where did you get this?" Severus asked in awe, coming out like a sigh of relief.

"Muggle run to the other islands," Draco informed him. "It seems that because there are some of us who cannot leave here without risk, there is a small niche service where this witch runs to the other islands to bring back wizarding and Muggle items not available here. Naomi, who runs the service, does a run once a week. She found a Muggle grocer who specializes in foreign food imports. Sauerkraut and pickles from Germany, sardines from Morocco, pastas and tomato sauces from Italy, and teas, condiments, and biscuits from England. Among other things."

Severus inhaled once more, his eyes fluttering shut before he exhaled once more, letting the scent envelop his senses. "Thank you," he breathed. It was Muggle tea, but it was still good British tea.

God, how he missed a good cup in the morning. Kona coffee was exquisite, but he was missing his habitual morning beverage.

Draco continued prattling on while Severus was lost in the smell of glorious tea. "She asked me if I wanted any of the tinned Scottish haggis next time she went back, and I told her I'd have to ask you. She gave me a list of all the British food items they stocked. They're all Muggle, but at least it will be pretty close to what we had at home, though I don't think they'll have any pumpkin juice or butterbeer. I did see Seville orange marmalade on the list."

"Count me in for a jar of marmalade on the next trip. How much do I owe you?" Severus asked, feel eternally grateful to Draco just at that moment.
"Consider it a gift. Anything to help improve your mood as of late is a gift," Draco noted dryly.

Severus knew he was getting a bit snappish lately, but he didn't want to apologize for it either. There was a small bit of grumbling in the back of Severus' throat as he took the tin to the back Potions lab and pulled out his good teapot which had already started collecting a little dust on the shelf.

Setting the kettle on, Severus offered a cup to Draco who politely declined. "I got a tin for Ginny and me, and I had three cups this morning already." This explained why Draco seemed a little more lively than usual.

The older wizard was ready to down a whole pot by himself, just to satisfy his withdrawal.

He didn't want to admit it, but there were things Severus was missing about England. After all those years of dreaming to get away, there were some things he was longing for. One was a butcher who could provide good lamb, since lamb didn't seem to be a popular meat for the locals. Pork, beef, chicken, and seafood were the bill of fare in Malu Palekaiko, though the butcher did say he could get some good American lamb from the mainland – and also from New Zealand – by Portkey, if Severus had something in mind.

Severus was unfamiliar with the differences between the lamb from either place, as he was used to good English and Scottish lamb raised on the green and lush pastures. He would have to get lamb from both and do a taste comparison with Draco and Ginny. Perhaps a good leg of lamb from each region with some freshly made mango chutney, since mangoes practically grew in nearly everyone's backyard and couldn't get any fresher. He could also get fresh ginger here, though it was better to use candied ginger in his recipe. Then again, depending on the time of year, spring happened at opposite ends of the calendar for America and New Zealand, so "spring" lamb might be available year-round.

It was not just the lamb, or the jammy thumb biscuits – which were called cookies in his new home – that he had to get used to either being different or called by a different name. Biscuits were not cookies, but in American lingo referred to Southern-style baked rolls. Crisps were called potato chips here. Chips were "French" fries – though chips were originally a Belgian dish. A jumper was a sweater. And everyone dropped their u's when spelling words like "color," "favor" and "humor." It made grading a frustrating process, as he had to stop marking certain spelling corrections on submitted homework.

Despite the downsides of Severus' new home, he was willing to learn to tolerate them since he was free, and there was no price one could put on freedom. A few idiosyncrasies from the locals and
their customs were worth it. Then again, Hermione's voice in his head reminded him he was not entirely free if he could not go anywhere in the world that he pleased, free from persecution. As much as he missed Hermione and the comforts of home in England, he still preferred his freedom. He knew that if he'd stayed for her, in time he would resent her. Perhaps if she had secured his freedom, then there would have been no resentment for staying behind, but in the end, he knew that this new life was better for him. It was a fresh start.

As Severus finished his first cup of proper tea in nearly two months, Draco knocked on his office door.

"Your nine o'clock is here. And Ginny and I were wondering if you want to join us for drinks Friday night. We join Mouna and Rainbow at the bar on their Friday night date nights. Since you're not as busy with the shop in the evenings now, we wondered if you want to join?" Draco offered.

Severus' initial reaction was to say no, but then he thought that maybe relaxing with friends with a drink Friday night after a long work week might just be the thing he needed to help him remain more relaxed.

"All right. What time?"

"Six, at that bar where Rainbow blindsided you with that Wipe-Out drink."

"I never did figure out what that elusive ingredient was, since all those fruit flavors seemed to mask it," the Potions master admitted.

"Lovage macerated in vodka and essence of valerian," Draco volunteered.

Severus gave him a stunned look.

"I watched him make a couple of them over the weeks and paid him a few extra Galleons to find out what those 'secret ingredients' were."

That explained why Severus had been knocked for a loop. Lovage was used in Confusing and Befuddlement Draughts, and valerian root was used in the Draughts of Living Death. Add to that a generous tipple of multiple spirits acting as catalysts, it was no wonder Severus hadn't remembered
much of anything and was gone by the second sip.

Draco could see the grim look on Severus' face, knowing a drink like that had been served up to him unknowingly.

"I think Rainbow wanted to see just how much you could hold your own, since she says that Potions masters are notorious for holding their liquor. And given how much I've seen you drink, I'd say that's a fair assessment," the blond wizard admitted.

It was a good thing Rainbow had otherwise been a good and gracious friend to Severus in all other respects, since that was a stunt he could hold a grudge against for a long time. He was almost willing to forgive her for that one transgression, but not quite. In time he might forgive, but he would never forget.

Severus' mind was brought back to the present when his nine o'clock appointment entered and sat down. It was a wizard who came in seeking help to reverse a home brew of his own to eliminate back-hair. It didn't go as planned, resulting in a thick and luxurious fur pelt on his back instead. The Potions master pinched the bridge of his nose, knowing he'd have to figure out what the wizard did wrong before he could reverse the potion's effects. Reverse engineering bad brewing was an exceptionally trying task, but he had enough experience with children doing it over the years, so it wouldn't be that hard.

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Albert was showing Hermione the finer points of pruning trees for shape, growth, and fruit production. Apple trees had to be pruned in a particular way, since the trees did not fruit on vertical branches, but horizontal ones. In contrast, stone-fruit trees did better with a vase-shape pruning, allowing sunlight to enter the center of the tree to ripen the fruit.

Later that day, once she was done working on Albert's garden, Neville was going to show her grafting, which was essential for any Potions master to know. They would be grafting fruit trees onto rootstock.

Hermione was glad she didn't have to dig up any more spring perennials for dividing, since it took several hot baths and a few drops of soporhorous bean oil in almond oil to work out the kinks in her muscles and back after that chore. Her biceps would be screaming tonight, considering all the fruit trees she had to prune that morning.

She was sorely tempted to ask Lavender if she could get a discount for a massage at Madam Hope's Eternal Springs and Day Spa. Lavender was a silent partner there and closed the men's side down every month still for Blaise and Albert to test the latest products. Hermione couldn't get the
same privilege as the men, and had to test the products at home by herself, as Lavender didn't want anyone at the spa to see or possibly steal one to sell to her competitors before it came to market. There was too much business with the women's side on the spa on weekends for them to close it, while the men were more than willing to have their side closed down once a month for "maintenance" without being put out, unlike some witches.

Albert had a small orchard of various fruit trees for his personal kitchen use and Potions ingredients. Apricot kernels were an exceptionally valuable Potions ingredient. While he could have easily used the ones imported from Iran, he preferred to grow his own, ensuring freshness. And peach blossoms were quite delicate and didn't transport very well, most often becoming bruised by the time they reached the apothecary. The Asian pears were of no use for Potions, but he liked the Asian varieties compared to that of the European pears for eating.

As Hermione pruned away, making sure to cut last year's growth to an outward-facing bud, directing growth from away the center of the tree, she wondered how much of the same work she was doing had Severus done during his own apprenticeship. And would he be growing any apple or stone-fruit trees in Hawaii? Since many of the fruit trees she worked on had a requirement of chill hours – during which the tree had to grow in conditions when it was exposed to hundreds of hours while dormant between zero and seven degrees Celsius in winter – she wondered if he would only grow tropical fruits in his Potions master garden there.

"So, Albert," Hermione began, "do all Potions masters have an orchard and grow orchids in a greenhouse like you? How typical is your garden compared to other Potions masters? What sort of things would one find in any Potions garden, and what in yours is unique?"

"Well, having visited other Potions masters' homes, I'd say each one is as unique as the Potion master... or mistress," Albert mused, pausing from pruning a large cherry tree. "I'm rather fond of fresh fruit and canning my own surplus in the summer and autumn. I'm also quite enthralled with the ability to cross-breed species of orchids, and experiment in Potions with the results of those hybrids. Some masters and mistresses have lots of greenhouses and grow other tropics. Mediterranean plants are a specialty of some, and then some grow alpine plants, or cacti and succulents. In time you'll figure out what plants you will tend to use for the types of Potions you prefer brewing, and the ingredients you want to grow yourself will indicate what you'll grow in your own garden come day."

Hermione nodded to herself, wondering what type of garden Reginald Chuff had and what plants Severus tended for his master.

"Speaking of other Potions masters, some of us get together for drinks once a month. I'd like to introduce you to my colleagues," Albert added. "It's a good way to talk with other masters and learn from them, as many are willing to give guidance to an apprentice of a fellow colleague who is within our little circle of friends."
"Of course," Hermione responded immediately, thrilled to be invited. "When is your next gathering?"

"Next Saturday, Valentine's Day. Unless you already have plans for that day," Albert looked at her, a little uncertain.

"No, Albert. Trust me, I have nothing planned for that holiday," she assured him, indicating with her tone she was still very much single and had no romantic interests on the horizon.

"Yeah, a few of the other masters still have wives and are bowing out, but there are a lot of us bachelors and widowers to still call a quorum," he joked. There would be no vote, but it was his way of indicating there would be enough people there to make it an interesting evening.

"Did Dangerose come to many of these gatherings?" Hermione asked, curious to know if his wife came along.

"Yes, she did," he replied with a faraway smile. "And she and Fastrada Johnson, your friend who replaced you at the Department of S&R, were good friends. They'd chat up a storm while I talked shop with her husband, Ganfrey, and the boys. But they usually wound up talking Potions like the rest of us, joining in the conversation."

It pleased Hermione that though the wives were not fully-accredited Potions mistresses, they were allowed to participate in the conversation as equals – at least that's how it seemed they were treated, by Albert's tone.

Hermione chatted the rest of the morning in Greek, practicing with Albert. She was getting more confident and comfortable with the language, and Neville's weekly Greek tutoring sessions during their work together was certainly helping.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: As always, thank you to my glorious betas for this chapter, JuneW and Cygnuz.

I know I said I wasn't going to use any canon from HBP and DH, but we knew beforehand that Tom Riddle's mother died, but we just did not know her name. So I will use her name which was revealed in HBP since it allows me to refer to her than
just "his mother" for the story. Then there is the addition of the prophecy overheard by Severus, but I tried to backtrack that into the story somehow quietly.

There is speculation on the exact time of year the prophecy was overheard, so for the purposes of this story, I'm going to say it was June 30th, since that is when I wrote Victory Day to be.
“Missing Her, Missing Him, and a Narrow Miss”

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Eighty:
“Missing Her, Missing Him, and a Narrow Miss”

Disclaimer: I'm a little fanfic, long and rambling,
Here is my plot, broad and ambling.
When lawyers get all steamed up,
Hear me blast:
Rowling owns it all
Don't sue my ass

WARNING: Minor character death and description of a murder scene (one paragraph) towards end of this chapter. I can't send all of you comfort food, but I can at least offer a recipe for a comfort food favorite. Don't forget to scroll to the author's notes at the end for a new recipe.

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Severus mostly enjoyed himself that first Friday for drinks with the Finaus and the Malfoys. Most everyone drank their alcohol laced with various fruit juices, flavored liqueurs, and crushed ice, except him. Eventually he was convinced to try a Muggle drink called an “Old Fashioned” which used Bourbon whiskey, bitters, a pinch of sugar, a splash of water, a maraschino cherry, and a slice of orange over ice. Though he preferred his spirits straight, Severus did find this rather refreshing in the tropical climate. While gin and tonic would have been a British gentleman's drink in hot climates, even in the wizarding world, he still was not too keen on gin after the bender he went on the night of Hermione's anniversary dinner. For good reason, that spirit had not quite appealed the same to him since.

The following week found Severus joining his friends for a drink after he closed up shop on Friday. He made sure to go to the bar on a full stomach. As diverse as the dining scene in London was, this small island contained a number of new cuisines he hadn't been exposed to back in
wizarding England. A Korean restaurant that Severus had taken a liking to was open a few days a week. They had a very good tofu soup they served with black rice that was more purple than black. It had a nice nutty flavor to it he liked. And besides, the banchan – or side dishes – were worth the trip to the restaurant alone. They served kimchi so spicy that it could clear out even Severus’ prodigious sinuses, as well as fishcake, glass noodles, steamed broccoli, pickled daikon radish and lotus root, turnips in chili sauce, chilled steamed bean sprouts with sesame oil, and seaweed with sweet vinegar and salt. Severus was also able to practice his paltry Korean with the waitress in an effort to improve his vocabulary, which expanded with each trip to the restaurant, though it usually involved learning new food names.

Severus entered the bar to find Arnold leaning against the piano, already belting out an Elvis tune accompanied by a pianist who was banging away on the piano keys. Maurice, a Cajun wizard who had fled for sanctuary back in the sixties – after getting himself involved with some Muggle war protest groups and using his magic in some “anti-establishmentarianism ways” – played the accordion. A witch who was clearly old enough to be Severus’ grandmother was strumming away on a guitar.

After ordering an Old Fashioned from Bongo, Severus joined the Finaus and the Malfoys, who were already half-way through their first round of drinks.

“Severus!” Mounga called out, spotting his friend. The big man clapped Severus on the back.

“So is every Friday date night?” Severus asked.

“Yes, gotta keep the passion alive, can’t let the drudgery of day-to-day let me forget why I fell in love with Rainbow,” Mounga said, grabbing his wife around the waist and jostling her with a hug and a pat on the hip.

“So what, just drinks out?” Severus asked, wondering if this was all there was to their weekly “date night” night out.

“Of, no!” Rainbow refuted. Leaning in, she said in a conspiratory whisper, “Sometimes we go out for a movie or theater show amongst the Muggles, but we go to a little hot spring after drinks most times. Moonlight, a waterfall, secluded. We share it with a few other friends. We’ve decided to let Draco and Ginny have Monday nights, and they just started going to it.”

“I didn’t know there were any hot springs on this island, since I haven’t come across any in my explorations,” Severus admitted. This revelation made him realize why Draco had looked exceptionally relaxed on Tuesday mornings during the past few weeks.
Mounga leaned in and quietly said, “That's because they are mostly held under the Fidelius Charm, passed down through families. People don't necessarily want to have their little spots overrun with others crowding them and ruining secluded romantic spots. Plus if word got out to the tourists... Usually folk share with a small circle of friends and arrange to have certain nights. Since the hot spring was handed down to me from my father, and I'm the Secret Keeper, I get first pick. Wednesdays are available if you want some place to soak one night a week.”

Severus nodded his head that he was definitely interested.

“Fine, you can follow Rainbow and me after drinks. We'll show you where it is, and you can start visiting it Wednesday nights.”

The night was spent chatting about various things. Mounga had a legal conference he needed to go to at the end of the month in Nevada, in a wizarding town in the middle of nowhere. It was an area often associated with space aliens. Setting up a wizarding village where the Muggle military helps keep nosy people away was definitely one way to keep Muggles from discovering your magical town and community. Then there was the Finau family trip in the summer to Germany to visit the village where one of Rainbow's great-grandmothers came from, plus do a little genealogical research.

Severus gave Rainbow and Mounga an update on their son's progress with Potions tutoring, and put forth the idea to Mounga about a standardized curriculum to guide parents to follow so that their children would be better prepared for their SAT's. Draco chimed in with his own observations on the irregularity of knowledge from child to child, even of the same age. Severus could tell Mounga was seriously considering his idea, since he got that very thoughtful look on his face as he silently nodded.

The Potions master had gone to court once so far in his time on the island, having to testify that a particular witch had been in his office seeking a private consultation. She was being accused of a small crime, but Severus was her alibi at the time of the crime. Severus had his appointment book and ledger as evidence to her whereabouts, and the witch was not in possession of a Time-Turner. Mounga had listened to the case and had the same serious look on his face, and nodded his head in the same manner, as he weighed the evidence and considered the testimony. In the end, the witch was found innocent.

“That is something worth serious consideration,” Mounga replied, which gave Severus hope it might come up at the next town council meeting.

Arnold was back up by the piano again, crooning yet another Elvis song. Granted, Elvis Presley
was a Muggle savant, and known by many in the wizarding community, but even Severus was perplexed by Arnold's fascination with the singer.

“Does Arnold always sing Elvis songs?” Severus asked, gesturing to the older, balding Potions master with the slight paunch.

“Oh, Arnold never told you?” Rainbow asked, her eyes changing color from dark blue to bright golden with mischief.

“Told me what?” Severus asked cautiously. He wasn't sure he wanted to know if Arnold had not told him himself. He respected other people's private matters, a polar opposite compared to Rainbow, who was always eager to share everything she knew about everyone.

“He never told you why he sought sanctuary?” she prodded.

“No, and should he choose to divulge that to me, I will let him be the one to tell it,” Severus said shortly.

Rainbow's head jerked back in shock. Mounga hid a smile behind his hand, having rarely seen anyone shut his wife down when it came to opening her mouth.

“Well, I-I just...” she began to stammer.

Draco and Ginny could feel the tension mounting, and Mounga looked like he wasn't going to do a thing to step in. Draco knew Severus' temper and was familiar with his verbal lashings first-hand. He didn't think Rainbow had the fortitude to deal with a full-frontal verbal assault from Severus, should he feel provoked. And given the glint in Severus' eye, he could tell that his mentor was getting fed up with this witch's mouth that tended to run off a bit too much for discretion.

It would not be good for anyone should these two square off against one another. Draco knew he needed to diffuse the situation, and fast.

“Akela's Charms and Transfiguration work is coming along nicely. I think she will receive exceptionally good marks when she takes her SAT's eventually,” Draco remarked, noticing that the subject of Akela brought Rainbow's attention away from the near-confrontation as her gaze shifted to the young wizard and back to her family. “She hadn't told me what she is interested in studying.
Has she expressed what subject she would like to pursue for an apprenticeship?

Rainbow dramatically placed her elbow on the bar and plopped cheek into her hand. Her eyes opened wide with sarcastic flare and said, over-enunciating while giving Severus a meaningful look, “Potions.”

Severus could have sworn Rainbow's eyes changed to three different colors just during those two syllables.

Lifting his drink up to his lips, tempted to down it in one go, he muttered, “It's probably just a phase.”

“Let's hope so,” Rainbow bit back.

Arnold and Ranjit had never taken any apprentices over the decades. In addition, it was common knowledge about how many single Potions masters wound up bedding and usually marrying their female apprentices. This was something that Severus was somewhat guilty of himself with his work with Hermione, though they had already fallen into the sack before she began her work with him.

Severus had no interest in taking Akela as an apprentice, and even if he did, there was certainly nothing romantic that would ever happen between them. Ever. Besides, Severus didn't think he could stand the idea of a mother-in-law who was nearly ten years younger than him, who couldn't keep her mouth shut. If anything, if Akela was interested in a Potions apprenticeship, he'd see if there was a Potions Mistress back in England who was interested in a female apprentice.

“Why not let Severus tutor her?” Ginny suggested, which garnered looks of shock from Draco, Severus, and Rainbow. “Trust me, anyone who had studied under Severus, who can be a hard taskmaster when it comes to brewing, would certainly lose any interest when faced with his demeanor in the classroom.” Draco smirked at the thought and Rainbow's face began to brighten, seeing the wisdom of Ginny's idea. Severus could only glare daggers at Ginny.

Severus had been exceptionally patient with his new students who patronized his business, and took exception to Ginny's old characterizations of him, though they were rather accurate.

“It's true, Severus,” Ginny insisted, looking him square in the face; he noted she left out any mention of Hermione, since she seemed to be the exception to the rule. “One verbal dressing down
by you, and she will definitely not be interested in a Potions apprenticeship.”

Severus looked at Mounga, knowing the larger wizard could read the look on his face.

“Hey, if taking your kid gloves off with her will help Akela get over her infatuation, then fine,” Mounga offered, throwing his hands up in surrender.

Akela's parents didn't want to destroy her crush on Severus, but they felt it a tad inappropriate for a girl so young to be attracted to someone so much older, especially one who was not interested in her that way. Severus thought of her like a niece, especially since Kaimi, Akela's younger sister, had started calling him “Uncle Severus.” The Potions master had been unceremoniously adopted into the Finau family. And given that Mounga knew all of Severus' secrets, as a father, he certainly didn't want his daughter to remain too attached to him as well.

It was still quite the surreal experience for Akela's parents to openly discuss their daughter's infatuation with Severus.

A second round of drinks were ordered.

“So, Severus, are you going to the Singletons' Ball tomorrow night at the community center?” Rainbow asked, slowly nursing her drink, a dragon blood wine spritzer. Since coming to Malu Palekaiko, Severus had shunned all advances of the single witches on the island, and her curiosity was getting the better of her.

“No,” he replied firmly. Severus didn't even bother looking her in the eye, instead choosing to acknowledge the question with no more than a simple one-word response.

“Aw, c'mon, it's for charity,” she cajoled him. “A single wizard like you, half the single witches in this town chasing after you, you'd fetch a handsome price.”

Severus glanced at Mounga, who gave him that fleeting look he had on his face when the larger wizard would otherwise say, “I can't say anything, dude.”

Draco, Ginny and Severus had heard about the charity event in which the unattached witches and wizards, who were at least age of consent, got together on Valentine's Day for a ball. Some – from both sexes – offered themselves up for bidding of a date that night or a future night, in order to help
raise money for various causes. At the auction, items were also offered up for bidding, and many items were donations from the community at large.

One of the places the money raised would go for was the cost of maintenance of the community center. Another place was for a fund for sanctuary-seekers who came to the island without any money. Draco, Ginny, and Severus were fortunate to have money, while many who came did not. The monies for the fund were used to house, feed, and clothe sanctuary-seekers and help them get back on their feet. There was also a fund for helping children whose parents could not afford to send them to the mainland for their SAT's, which usually involved staying the night in a nearby wizarding hotel, food, and other travel costs. There was also a widows and orphans charity, and a few others.

Draco had offered some blocks of time for Charms and Transfiguration tutoring, which – considering most of the single witches and wizards attending had no children – would most probably fetch a small price, or someone might bid on it for their niece or nephew.

The Potions master had not offered his time, but elixirs. All of them tended to be more advanced potions that required a great deal of time and expensive ingredients, including a few vials of the ones that were being sold at The Sirens' Secrets. It was Valentine's Day, and those types of potions might fetch a good price at the auction that night, especially by a wizard who thought he was definitely going to get lucky. Severus thought many of the charities were worthy causes, which is why he bothered to donate the potions in the first place. Had it not been for Draco having Galleons in other Gringotts banks around the world, Severus himself would have been in need of the Sanctuary-Seekers' Charity Fund.

Severus glanced at Draco, gauging just how uncomfortable he was with the subject of people offering themselves up for money, and noticed the younger wizard's jaw clench a little. The two Slytherins had closed that chapter of their lives permanently. Ginny was also looking mildly irritated at the subject, but was trying to not let her face give anything away.

“Madam,” Severus drawled coolly, “I find the idea of someone having their flesh peddled repugnant.”

Surprisingly, Mounga kept his face impassive in response to Severus' comment.

Rainbow scoffed, tossing her hand forward dismissively as if batting away his objections. “Pfft! It's not like we're running a prostitution ring. I didn't take you for a prude, Severus.”

Before Severus could reply and address Rainbow's dismissive attitude, Draco spoke up.
With restrained anger, Draco replied, “After the war, a former classmate of mine was ‘disenfranchised,’ and forced into prostitution. She was later found to be murdered in a most gruesome fashion, a murder that would not have happened had she not been driven into such a profession. This is not a subject Severus or I take lightly, Rainbow.”

Rainbow's eyes went wide with shock. “I had no idea,” she gasped.

“And your discretion on this matter is strongly suggested,” Severus added, glaring at Rainbow in full Death Eater-mode.

Severus could have sworn he saw Rainbow quail a little bit, getting a glimpse at how dangerous and formidable he could be if push came to shove.

The subject was dropped, and Rainbow's curiosity to ask why Severus wasn't dating any witches was tempered for the moment. Given how they had clashed twice in one night, the group silently decided to stick to less inflammatory subjects.

The tension finally began to ebb away between Rainbow, Draco, and Severus as they finished up their second round of drinks. It did not escape Severus' attentions that Mounga did not defend his wife when Severus called her out on her penchant for gossiping earlier in the evening. The larger wizard even looked bemused.

Draco and Ginny eventually excused themselves and wandered off into the night for a stroll before heading home. The Finaus and Severus walked to the edge of town before Mounga Side-along Apparated with Severus to the hidden hot springs while Rainbow Apparated by herself.

Looking about, it was pitch black. The stars were their only illumination since the last quarter-moon had not yet risen. They used wand-light to make their way up the embankment with lava stones set as a stairway into the hillside.

Mounga cast about some glowing orbs to float above the water to illuminate the area, and Severus saw the light reflected in the gentle ripples of the water. The softly-glowing light revealed the jungle that sheltered this area, enrobing it in a verdant tangled wall of wild vines and vegetation. Only from the middle of the hot spring, which was more of a hot pool, could you see the sky above.

The ripples were caused by a waterfall that spilled into the pool, cooling the magma-heated water
to a wonderful 100 degrees F – up to a simmering 105 degrees F, depending on what part of the pool you soaked in. Severus was amazed that someplace so ideally perfect existed, looking as if this place was designed on purpose for lovers. It was truly romantic.

“This is amazing.” Severus said. “Wednesday, can I come here during the day to see what it looks like in the light?”

“Sure, all day Wednesday, starting from sunrise, until Thursday, just before dawn. There are a few of us who like a morning soak, just in case you arrive a little early or leave a bit late,” Mounga warned him.

Looking back across the slope of the volcano that gradually descended down to the seashore some distance away, Severus looked at the stars and gauged that he was somewhere along the north-eastern side of the island. Off in the distance, straight ahead was the Big Island, a few faint lights in the far distance indicating where the Muggles lived, unaware of this place.

Severus bent down and stuck his hand in the water, feeling the warmth. It was a perfect temperature. He made a mental note to tell Draco not to book any after-hours clients on Wednesday.

He thanked Mounga and Rainbow for their offer to enjoy this private spot before Apparating back to the hotel, so the Finaus could begin enjoying the rest of their date night alone.

Back in his hotel room awaited the photograph of Hermione.

“You should have seen it,” he said, imagining the conversation he would have had with her, had she been there. “Waterfall, lush foliage ensuring privacy, a Fidelius Charm to keep others from bothering us, perfect temperature, it was just as beautiful as those photos in those Muggle tourism books.”

Undressed and lying on his bed, the proper charms in place to avoid being overheard, Severus began stroking himself, thinking of Hermione's nude body standing in the pool near the edge. He could envision her skin glistening with beads of water catching and refracting the moonlight, a single white plumeria flower in her hair, placed on the left side signaling that she was a taken witch: his witch.

He sighed her name as he came, fantasizing about making love to her in the jungle at night. He
wished she could be there with him to celebrate Valentine's Day tomorrow. As it was, his memory of her would be the only thing to fill his aching heart.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Hermione awoke to find herself surrounded by a pile of books on Hawaii. She had gone to the bookstore on Friday night and bought the large stack of books, then promptly fell asleep while reading them. Some of them were travel guides, others were on the culture of Hawaiian and Polynesian islands, and a few were “coffee table” books featuring beautiful photographs of some of the most breathtakingly gorgeous places in the Hawaiian Islands.

Lava tubes, lush tropical jungles, beaches with swaying palm trees, moonscape fields of recently-erupted lava cooled to a shiny and wrinkled black, papaya and coffee farms with rows of trees, jaw-droppingly beautiful waterfalls that poured into a series of pools with Muggles diving head-first into the cool looking waters, dry grassy lands surrounding a lava stone church built in the 1800's, and dark and seemingly impenetrable forests of bamboo. All these scenes and more filled the pages of the books she'd bought.

Gazing at one particularly tranquil photograph of a cascading waterfall and pool, edged with bright tropical flowers, Hermione imagined herself and Severus skinny-dipping there.

Reaching her hand down between her legs, she began to think of Severus, pressing her up against the side of the pool near the waterfall, the rush of water drowning out her cries as he filled her. Blindly reaching to her bedside table, Hermione grabbed a bottle of lube and a dildo the twins had given her months ago. After lubing it up, she inserted it into herself and set the charm to slide in and out of her. Her eyes shut tight, she could almost see the vivid colors surrounding her, the call of wild birds in the nearby forest, the scent of strange and exotic flowers in the air.

She sighed longingly, “I need you, Severus. God, how I've missed you.”

Stroking her clit, she tried to remember the sensation of his body between her thighs, the feeling of his skin moving against hers, his weight bearing down atop her as he moved into her.

Hermione came, but it was not quite as satisfying as she had hoped.

“Happy Valentine's Day, Severus,” she whispered to the pillow next to her.

Feeling more depressed than relaxed from her orgasm, Hermione dressed for the day. She would be working in Albert's garden that morning, followed by an afternoon with Neville at his nursery.
The one bright thing to her depressing day ahead was that instead of sitting alone at home on Valentine's Day, she would be joining Albert for a monthly gathering with other Potions masters. A bit of intellectual stimulation with fellow academics was just what she needed to keep her mind off of Severus for the night.

Marf served Hermione up a hearty breakfast, since Saturdays were particularly laborious for his Mistress.

As she nibbled on her toast absentmindedly, she continued reading “Antigone” by Sophocles, mumbling the words aloud, her pronunciation hindered by her breakfast. Hermione got in a couple good hours of studying before heading off to Albert's. It seemed that for most Potions apprentices, working on a Potions master's garden was a daily chore, but with Hermione's arrangement of working for Lavender as well, Albert kept her duties down to one day a week. The weekly half-day apprenticeship with Neville would more than make up for her lack of practical Herbology experience in his own garden, as it would expose her to a greater variety of plants than what he grew solely in his garden.

Besides, Albert liked puttering around in his garden after work as a way to unwind and feel connected to his late wife, since it was a chore they had shared together during their many years of marriage.

Her gardening chores for the week involved adding more mulch for the spring, but not before raking and aerating the winter mulch that had compacted over the season from snow and being trod upon. Hermione could tell that her back was going to really enjoy a hot soak in the tub tonight, since many of these chores could not be done with a wand. Wizards used wheelbarrows, as using one's wand to move mulch was a somewhat messy process, usually resulting in lots of particles being airborne and making one cough. Shovels and rakes were the way one moved and hauled mulch, even in the wizarding world. Hermione understood how Neville suddenly got his broad shoulders.

'So much for magic making things easier,' Hermione groused silently to herself, wishing there was a charm with which to do some gardening chores.

Once the mulching for Albert was done, it was time for her to go over to Neville's nursery.

Apparating near the gates of Longbottom Horticulture & Herbology Ltd., she found Neville digging up fruit trees, bare-rooting them before heeling them in a soft berm of soil. He was digging
up the trees in expectation of those who would be planting fruit trees soon, since it was the beginning of the season for that garden task.

He handed her a shovel and showed her how far away from the trunk to use the spade to cut the roots. He used a garden fork to gently lift and rock them from the soil, before taking them over to the berm of soil to heel them in for easy selection. There were a few customers throughout the day's work who snatched up trees she had bare-rooted not moments before. In each section for each variety of tree was a photograph showing the tree blooming and fruiting, like Muggle time-lapse photography. Hermione barely had time to attach little tags to each tree showing the genus, species, and variety before some customers took them over to the cashier for purchase.

“So how's your Greek coming along?” Neville asked as he brought the blade of his spade down sharply to cut a root.

“Not bad, though I feel I should be progressing faster than I am,” Hermione admitted. She periodically grunted as she gently lifted an apple tree from the ground, rocking the garden fork up and down.

“What are you doing tonight?”

“Albert's taking me with him to some monthly social with other Potions masters tonight,” Hermione replied.

“Oh.” Neville sounded a little crestfallen, and Hermione suddenly wondered if he was asking her out on a date.

“But I guess I'm free next Saturday,” she added, feeling a bit awkward.

“Oh, great,” he replied more cheerfully. “Because I thought what better way to improve your Greek than hanging out with some. There is a Greek restaurant and bar I used to go to when I was trying to improve my Greek. I thought I might take you there to help with yours.”

Hermione suddenly felt a little silly, thinking he was going to ask her out on a date. She was recently divorced, and Neville was probably still pining for Luna. It was nothing more than an offer to help her with her language skills.
Finally done with her Saturday gardening and Herbology chores, Hermione dragged her tired arse back to her flat. Now she had to take a shower and make herself presentable for the social function. Fortunately, Marf had a nice, hot meal waiting for her.

Albert had told Hermione to dress lady-like, but on the conservative side. Many of Albert's colleagues were older like him, and they had certain notions regarding witches wearing trousers. And given that some of these Potions masters were still bachelors, she needed to dress as non-provocatively as possible, especially since she was recently divorced and Albert was recently widowed. Anything else would set tongues wagging in their circle, even if Albert was old enough to be Hermione's great-grandfather, and that he was still mourning his wife.

Arriving at Albert's home, he complimented her on her choice of outfit, indicating it made her look quite respectable. She wore a simple black skirt that went to just above her ankles, a pair of sensible boots that were freshly polished by Marf, a high-necked emerald green blouse, and a long black cloak.

They Floo'ed over to the home of Niles Goggin, a fellow Potions master who was about a decade Albert's junior. Niles greeted Hermione warmly and offered to get her a drink, to which Albert said he would fetch one for her.

Albert had warned his apprentice that because she was a single – well, actually a divorced witch – that she shouldn't accept any drinks from anyone unless she poured them herself or Albert had. Potions masters evidently liked to add a little something extra to the drinks of single witches who came to these affairs, but usually it was to play tricks on one another. Hermione didn't want to suddenly have an extra pair of hands sprout out of her ears nor an aphrodisiac slipped in on the sly, and she took Albert's warning seriously.

Hermione kept a couple bezoars in her skirt pocket just in case.

Most everyone else was there, including Reginald Chuff. Introductions were made and Hermione made sure not to grimace when introduced to the old Potions master that Severus had apprenticed under, especially after hearing some of the things Chuff had made Severus do and suffer.

Sipping her gin and tonic, Hermione mostly listened to the old masters ramble on, picking up little tricks and tips they casually mentioned about brewing some new potions, or recalling one they had concocted many years ago.

“So Hermione, how would you judge Albert as a master so far?” Royston Bentwick, a Potions master about ten years older than her, asked. He was the baby of the bunch, since most of the other
Potions masters were sixty years or older.

“So far, I'd say that Albert has been an excellent master to apprentice under. He's been very helpful and supportive,” Hermione replied truthfully.

For some reason, the other Potions masters found this funny and started laughing, as if she had said something uproariously hilarious.

“Albert,” Royston gasped, “didn't you tell her what happened to your first apprentice?”

Albert swirled his drink and raised his eyebrows, indicting he wasn't about to volunteer such matters and would remain tight-lipped.

Royston had only heard about the tale, but Niles decided he would fill Hermione in on the details. Albert should have known that they would drag this little story up, though every Potions master there had his own tale to tell regarding some rather embarrassing moment.

“So, Albert here,” whimpered Niles, in between subsiding laughs, “was teaching his apprentice... Brendon–”

“Brandon,” Albert corrected him, as he gave Niles a look telling him his own little story was next on the block for recollection.

“Brandon, who was a very handsome young wizard and engaged to a lovely witch, Agatha, I think was her name...” Albert nodded that Niles recalled correctly. “Anyway, Albert was teaching Brandon about love potions. Some birds, I think it was pigeons...”

“Crows,” Albert amended.

“Right, crows, land on the skylight above his workbench area and start pecking at something on the roof. Well, some debris was jostled loose from ceiling and fell into the cauldron of the love potion, which exploded in spectacular fashion all over the lab. Most notably, all over Albert and Brandon. Now, you must know that Albert had only been a Potions master for about five years. Brandon was his first apprentice and was only about eight years his junior at the time. So the love potion goes everywhere. Dangerose and Agatha go to visit them in the lab to call them for lunch, and find Albert and Brandon in a deep lip-lock.”
Hermione's face fell, finding this story rather embarrassing and feeling pity for Albert at having the mortifying experience dragged up in front of others, especially to her. There was nothing funny about the accident, which could have happened to anyone. Hermione's finding no humor about the story did not stop the rest of the wizards there from busting up laughing. A few spilled their drinks in the process, even though they had heard the story numerous times over the years.

“Agatha almost called off the wedding, and Albert had to convince Dangerose that he didn't secretly play both sides of the pitch.” Niles brayed like a donkey in between his howls.

Hermione remembered how she thought Ron was bisexual for a time. The anger and feeling of betrayal were still quite fresh in her mind, and she was sorely tempted to throw her drink in Niles' face, but refrained, refusing to join in on the laughter. Albert wasn't laughing either.

“Awww, c'mon, you gotta admit that's funny!” Royston ribbed her.

“Thinking your husband is playing around on the side with someone behind your back? No, I don't see the humor of that,” Hermione said flatly. She felt empathy for Dangerose for the anguish she went through until the matter was cleared up.

Suddenly everyone remembered that Hermione's husband had recently left her for a witch he'd been seeing behind her back for years. The laughter quickly died from their lips upon realizing their faux pas.

Given how embarrassing that was, even though it was many years ago, and how Albert's last apprentice was slothful, Hermione could see why he had been reluctant to take on a new apprentice.

“Well, Hermione, at least I hope you aren't a sour pain in the ass as one of my apprentices was,” Reginald Chuff threw in, trying to break the tension.

Even without giving a name, Hermione had a strong suspicion as to who this “sour pain in the ass” was before he continued rambling on.

“You'd think someone who was in an arranged marriage with a guaranteed piece of arse to bed every night would have been happy, but no. And then his wife up and died on him, and he was even worse to deal with. I was just glad that he was a quick learner and had already finished
learning his five languages so I could accredit him and cut him loose shortly after the funeral,” Chuff grumbled.

Reginald was trying to lighten the mood, but failing miserably. Hermione could now see first-hand why Severus referred to him as a bastard.

Royston decided to offer up his own embarrassing Potions failure to change the mood, making Hermione eventually laugh when he went into great detail about how he accidentally got a cementing-type potion on his hands and wound up getting stuck to everything he came in contact with, including a large cast iron cauldron. He eventually fell over and got covered in various Potions ingredients that made rashes and boils pop up all over his body.

“Hermione,” Niles called out to grab her attention. “Tell me how you managed to wrangle an apprenticeship with Albert here, given his aversion to taking one on.”

Shaking her head, she tried to deflect from the question, which seemed to make the other wizards there even more curious. “Well,” she deferred, glancing at her master, “Albert can tell it far better than I can.”

Albert gave a rather brief description about the circumstances regarding Dangerose's will and Trevor Spawn. Sebastian Delgado was mentioned, to which several wizards snorted amusedly. There was the “encouragement” by Delgado to take her on as an apprenticeship, though Albert didn't say it was a mandatory condition of the clause for Lavender Brown to take him on as her new Potions master, it was subtly picked up.

“And just what did you do for Delgado that made him blackmail Albert into taking you on as his apprentice?” Jack Braxton, a short, fat wizard who had a bulbous nose, asked rather bluntly.

“Saved his arse on a Potions problem when conventional methods of thinking would not make it financially feasible to manufacture large batches of the Sequoia Potion,” Hermione threw out, challenging any other insinuations to the contrary.

“Oh, you came up with the brewer's kettles idea? That was brilliant!” Niles gushed with admiration.

Severus did owl a few other Potions masters, but no one had a solution to fit Severus' needs for Miss Brown.
“Thanks to the Muggle Alliance Network, it was an easy solution,” she admitted, trying to be humble, but feeling a great deal of pride in her idea.

Royston quirked an amused brow. “So, Hermione...” He paused momentarily, his mouth twitching with a smile at one corner, before asking, “Did you help Delgado with that Sequoia Potion personally?” His eyebrows were climbing higher and higher up his forehead the longer it took for Hermione to answer his question.

She didn't like the tone of his question, though that's exactly what she did with Severus. All eight various brew times, plus the use of the Sequoia Potion with each variation of the Arousal Potion, Irresistible. There was a whole lot of testing going on in Severus' bed and around his flat for some months.

“Hermione only corresponded with Delgado and didn't have a chance to meet him in person until the Ministry's Halloween Ball,” Albert informed the fellow wizards, saving Hermione from having to answer that herself.

Royston was definitely interested in Hermione, especially since she was the only witch there and close to his age. He was currently in between girlfriends and found the idea of a female Potions apprentice a rather alluring prospect.

“Wait!” Niles noted with surprise. “Were you that witch Delgado was apologizing to at the ball? Did you dye your hair black? The one in the little royal blue number?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Hermione bit out.

Royston let out a wolf whistle. “No wonder Delgado made a fool of himself over you. Just what did he do to get on your bad side?” the youngest Potions master of the group asked.

“It was a cultural misunderstanding,” Hermione said, trying not to sound too irritated. She was getting tired about people bringing up that incident at the ball.

“Probably thinking his lips could better translate that thick accent if they were on yours!” Braxton shouted out.
Hermione folded her arms and crossed her legs.

The group of six wizards, minus Albert, all made “ooh” noises, knowing Braxton had hit the mark.

“He's lucky I only slapped him and didn't use that curse involving turning a wizard's bollocks into cannonball-sized lead weights,” she tossed out as a warning.

There was a collective gasp and groans of sympathetic pain as several wizards crossed their own legs. Albert sat there smugly, glad Hermione could hold her own against this crowd.

The challenge portion of the evening came around. Each Potions master presented a task, and the one who performed the worst had to down a shot of whatever libation they were pouring that night. Anyone who could not complete the task had to drink every shot from those who didn't perform the worst.

Hermione began to understand how Severus had such a huge alcohol tolerance, given that one time she had found him drunk after he'd downed most of the bottle and had polished off the last of it so quickly. These guys were absolute lushes with a hollow leg for liquor.

The first task was to identify a Potions ingredient based on smell alone, hidden in a box. Everyone wrote down their answer on a scrap of paper, and everyone who got it wrong had to take a drink. Hermione won that round as she was the only one who not only identified the ingredient correctly, but also identified the country of origin and subspecies of the Potions ingredient. Everyone bowed to her in awe of her talent and downed their drinks, since they had only listed the genus and species.

The next task was prompted by Reginald Chuff, involving peeling a particular ingredient. Niles offered the choice between apples from his pantry and knoggelwalden egg-fruits he had just harvested from his greenhouse. Knoggelwalden egg-fruits were bright pink, shaped like a large egg, had a thin shell-like rind, and – should you pierce the inner membrane – would make your hands smell like a dead skunk. This was a timed event, so it was the last to finish who had to drink everyone else's drinks.

Hermione had tested knoggelwalden egg-fruits before, but never had to peel them. When she tested them, she boiled them whole, which neutralized the stench the fresh fruit carried, before she sliced them open for inspection. For some Potions, knoggelwalden egg-fruits were peeled, leaving the
inner membrane intact and then gently poaching them, since the shell-like rind could counter or change the properties of some potions.

Chuff chose the egg-fruits over the apples. Hermione wondered if Chuff picked this particular test knowing Hermione would fail. Which she did. Niles had to fetch something to de-scent her hands, now that she smelled like a deceased member of the Mephitidae family. Once her hands no longer reeked, she had to down most of the drinks, except for Royston's because while he didn't pierce the membrane, he didn't finish within the allotted time.

There was a chopping competition, which Hermione didn't win. She didn't lose either, but came somewhere squarely in the middle.

As the evening wore on, Hermione began to lose more challenges and finally bowed out when she thought one more shot would make her regurgitate the entire evening's imbibings. At least whatever she was drinking was not going to make her jump up on the furniture, partially disrobe and sing, “I've got a lovely bunch of coconuts,” though she thought that some of the wizards there wouldn't mind a bit if she did, especially Royston.

Sitting on the couch, holding on to the arm of it to keep from spinning off of it and hitting the wall, Hermione almost didn't notice Royston plop his drunk arse down next to her. In the other room, Niles was singing some maudlin ballad in Russian that was very familiar, but she couldn't quite name it given her drunken state.

“So how about you and me go out for a drink sometime,” Royston asked. He held one hand over one eye so he would only see one Hermione.

“We're already drunking,” Hermione slurred, using the wrong tense in the wrong way.

“Nawwwwww,” Royston said, drawing out his response. “I mean, like a date. Maybe dinner.”

Hermione shook her head. “Nope. No way. Not a chance. Not interested. Nuh-uh.” God, she had to stop shaking her head or she really would lose the entire contents of her stomach soon.

“Aww, you gotta get you-shelf back on the market sometime,” he insisted, slurring a bit himself. “What'cha doin' next Saturday?”
“Going to a geek restaurant – a Greek restaurant with Neville to work on my Greek,” she admitted, but then slowly realized in her drunken state she shouldn't have said as much.

“That boy? Longbottom? He is green as gas – grass. You need a man!” Royston said, puffing out his chest, which was one of those lovely examples of why some witches from other countries made fun of English wizard's physiques. He had one of those shallow, hairless, caved-in chests.

“That boy is a friend an' the same age as me. No, wait, older. I mean, younger,” she warned him, glaring at him with a challenging eye, should he continue to berate her friend.

“What, he got to your bed before, before me?” Royston chuckled dismissively.

Hermione was glad she had drunk as much as she did at that moment, as she nary felt the impact of her fist making contact with Royston's jaw. Had she been sober, it would have hurt like hell.

Royston fell to the floor, laughing, having been knocked off the couch. He was too drunk to fully feel the effects of Hermione's right hook.

The latest game that was being held, involving naming Potions ingredients in reverse alphabetical order, suddenly stopped. Even Niles stopped his crooning.

Albert came over and looked down at Hermione who was looking a bit green.

“What happened?” he asked with wonder.

Pointing an incriminating finger at Royston, who was still on the floor laughing, she defiantly stated, “He accused me of shagging Neville when I turned him down for a date. Turned down Royston for a date. Honor was at stake.”

Albert conjured a bucket and put it to hover right in front of Hermione just in time before the evening's libations all came up. Hermione suddenly remembered how awful it was to vomit alcohol not just out one's mouth, but out through one's nose as well.

The round of challenges was halted while Royston was checked out and found to be all right,
though Albert insisted on letting the younger Potions master keep the injury to his jaw as a reminder to mind his manners where Albert's apprentice was concerned. Royston would feel it tomorrow and have a lovely bruise to hopefully jog his memory of what he did.

Niles clapped Hermione on the back, telling her she had done all right for her first time at their monthly booze-up. He said she was welcome to come back to future gatherings, while he handed her an elixir to help with the post drinking-vomit wooziness she was experiencing. Hermione blew her nose, but it still felt like there was some chunks of vomit still clinging to the lining of her sinuses, to her discomfort and disgust.

Royston was not necessarily chastised by the group for his behavior, but it was not condoned either. Hermione and the young Potions master had “worked out their differences” and the group would let it be. They wondered if Royston was drunk enough to not remember the evening and would try propositioning Hermione again at the next meeting.

Niles also tended to Hermione's hand, which was beginning to swell. After checking it, Niles determined that there were no broken bones.

Albert decided it was time for Hermione to go home. Once they had bid the rest of the Potions masters good night, with Hermione giving a begrudging grunt at Royston, Albert Side-along Apparated with his apprentice to the street in front of the Red Ginseng, since he didn't want her to get splinched or slur her address and wind up coming out of the wrong fireplace via Floo.

Arriving at the Red Ginseng, they found the place crawling with Aurors.

“What the...” Hermione began, but was at a loss for words.

“Hermione!” Harry called out and ran over to her. He embraced her and gave out a great sigh of relief. “Where were you?”

“Hermione was with me and several of my colleagues at a social function this evening,” the elder Potions master informed her friend.

Harry suddenly got a whiff of how much “socializing” Hermione had done for the evening. “How much did you drink?”
“Too much,” she admitted guiltily.

Harry then caught the faint scent of vomit on her breath.

Hermione squinted at all the activity going on. “Just what is going on?” she asked. She moved past Harry and made to go to the entrance of her block of flats. She slipped past an Auror who was supposed to stop anyone from entering.

“Hermione!” Harry called out. He tried to stop her, but suddenly found his cloak snagged on an old iron joint in the brickwork in the wall across from the entrance to the building. It hindered him from stopping her in time.

Gazing up at the block of flat's open atrium, Hermione saw the reason why the place was swarming with Aurors. Blaise Zabini was suspended in mid-air. A spell did not hold him in place, but rather his skin had been peeled away from the front of his body and hooks that came out of the wall, placed there magically, grappled the ends of the thin pieces of flesh suspending his body as if floating. His abdominal wall had not been pierced, but it looked like all his major organs had been somehow magically transported outside of his body and laid there in a puddle in the middle of the atrium floor beneath his body, most probably done with an Entrail Expelling Curse.

Hermione turned right around. She stumbled out of the building and onto the grimy damp cobblestones. She thought there was nothing left in her stomach after throwing up at the party, but she was proven wrong. Now on her hands and knees she wretched up the last bit of what was in her stomach, even dry-heaving at the end for good measure. Her body wanted to make sure there was nothing left.

Moody came over and stared down at Hermione. “So, did you know Mr. Zabini?” he asked very matter of factly, seemingly unaware or unconcerned over the physical distress Hermione was in currently.

Albert had crouched next to Hermione to help hold her hair out of the way while she finished retching. “Really? Now? Can't you wait until she's at least not on her knees from the shock of it?” the Potions master chastised the Auror.

Gathering her wits, Hermione made sure to remember that Zabini officially only worked only as a gigolo. Even Albert was told of the unsanctioned marketing and advertising work that Lavender had Zabini do for her. Albert was not sympathetic to Death Eaters, but he was not exactly in agreement with some aspects of the Death Eater decree. The decree treated those who were reluctant Death Eaters, forced into joining, the same as the most zealous of Voldemort's adherents.
Albert was willing to play along with his employer's ruse that Zabini was only a gigolo, and why she bothered to employ him if he was a Death Eater.

There were some things Albert understood that he was not entitled to know about. His employer had made mention of Zabini saving her from a fate worse than death, and that was enough for Albert to not pursue the topic.

“He lived in the flat above me,” Hermione truthfully answered.

“And you were all right with the knowledge of a known Death Eater living one floor above you?” asked Moody incredulously.

“We didn't bother each other,” she bit back, challenging his implied accusations. “Besides, the rent is free. You try living on what I'm making as an apprentice and paying for a flat.”

The pay wasn't exactly bad, and it was better than what the Ministry had until recently been paying her, but Moody didn't need to know what her new salary was. Just the statement that she was a paid apprentice made her sound as if she was living in poverty and thereby the statement of free rent sounded justifiable to the Head Auror, despite who her neighbors where.

“Apprentice?” Moody questioned, having temporarily forgotten seeing Hermione there with Albert when he came in to question Miss Brown after Draco and Severus' disappearance.

“Yes,” Albert replied, standing up and going nose-to-nose with the Auror. “Albert Dobmeir, Potions Master, E.T.F.C., and she is my apprentice.”

“Well,” Moody said a bit gruffly. “Where was Mrs. Weasley this evening, if you'll allow me to ask her,” he said a bit sarcastically.

“She was with me and six other Potions masters for a social function. So if you are accusing her of anything, she has a solid alibi.”

Moody blinked and said, “I wasn't accusing her of doing it.”
“Well, that’s what it sounded like,” Albert barked at him.

Harry came over to join the conversation. “Hermione, your flat is no place to stay tonight. The Aurors will be here all night. Why don’t you come back to my house, and Zhubanysh will make up the spare room,” he offered, placing a protective arm around her. “You can come in and answer questions tomorrow morning when you feel better and sober.”

“My clothes?” Hermione said, thinking of what she’d need.

“Dobby will wash your clothes tonight. We have a few spare unopened toothbrushes, so you can take one. Just don’t stay here tonight, Hermione,” her friend insisted.

She nodded.

“Why don’t you take tomorrow off,” Albert said, allowing her to take care of matters with the Ministry and the aftermath of the night’s events.

Moody gave leave for Harry to take Hermione to his home before he came back to finish helping his fellow Aurors with the crime scene.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

“Heads up!” Draco called out.

With one hand, Severus caught the package tossed over to him across his office.

'Ooh, Ginny's banana chocolate chip bread.'

“Happy Valentine's Day,” Draco said sincerely, not meaning to prod a delicate spot, but did so inadvertently.

Severus grumbled and opened a drawer to chuck the baked good in it before slamming the drawer shut with his wand, his mood suddenly soured.

The pair of wizards had come to the shop for a few Saturday morning clients. Even with an extra
lengthy swim and long wank in the shower, it did not relieve the emotions simmering below the surface of Severus' impassive visage. The day was meant for celebrating love, and here he was with the object of his affection half a world away.

Draco threw himself into the chair on the other side of Severus’ desk, setting one foot on the edge of Severus' desk. He scrutinized his mentor’s demeanor.

“Why don’t you just send her an albatross?” Draco suggested, as it was the most fucking obvious thing in the world.

“Who knows if the Aurors are still watching my... her flat,” Severus reasoned.

“Then send an albatross to her at work,” Draco huffed with slight exasperation. “Lavender has been known to get an albatross now and again. It would not be unusual.”

There was no need to name who Draco was referring to. Even he had noticed that the happiness that Hermione brought Severus in the last few months in England had nearly ebbed away. The blond wizard could certainly empathize. When he was parted from Ginny for nearly a year and a half, he came close to losing his mind. Given how Severus was a man who didn't openly express his emotions, Draco could tell that he felt them quite deeply and viscerally, which meant that despite the Potions master’s cool exterior, the man was withering away on the inside.

Severus thought about it. He had owled Hermione a missive once, but it was under the guise of another personality in order to ensure she would return to him. The second time was just a terse note as himself after Hermione's anniversary dinner. But of the sweetly-toned letter, how close was that personality of Calleo to his own? His genteel and courteous persona had to have come from somewhere, or was it just another mask of his? He was finding it harder to remember who he really was, with Hermione not around him any longer.

“I'll think about it,” Severus replied, just before his first morning appointment arrived for some one-on-one tutoring.

Draco nodded, acknowledging Severus' response. He recognized the sense of hesitation and fear of rejection from when he had thought about seeking out Ginny shortly after the Death Eater's Decree came out, even after Molly threatened him.

As Draco's first student came in for some Charms tutoring, he grumbled a little to himself.
Tutoring was something he was good at, but he didn't quite enjoy it as much as the work he once did for Lavender. Draco still hadn't decided upon a career, but as the weeks pressed on, he knew he didn't want to spend the rest of his life tutoring. He actually missed doing advertising and marketing for Lavender. At least he found that work to be fun and challenging, not mind-numbingly repetitious and frustrating like his current occupation. Draco was patient, but even he was finding it hard not to call a few of his students dunderheads to their faces when they didn't bother to do the homework he'd assigned. Then they complained they didn't understand the work, even with him practically holding their hand, step-by-step. If some of his students at least attempted to try and do the work, they might understand it.

Suddenly inspired, Draco's attitude improved. He would talk it over with Ginny over their Valentine's Day dinner at Mario's that night. It was so simple that he wouldn't be surprised if Ginny had already considered it herself.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to my most highly valued and talented betas, Junew and thegreyladies.

Placing events into the timeline of my fic, Severus gave the prophecy to the Dark Lord in early summer of 1980, but then killed Gabrielle shortly after that. So within a few months of getting his apprenticeship, Severus began teaching at Hogwarts in September 1980.

Mephitidae is the Family to which skunks belong to.

Here is the recipe for Ginny's banana chocolate chip bread I was able to get from her:

**Ginny's Banana Chocolate Chip Bread**

2 cups regular all-purpose flour ("plain flour")
1 tsp. baking soda
1/2 tsp. baking powder
1/2 tsp. salt
13 oz. weight very ripe peeled banana (approx three large bananas, see tip in #4)
1/4 cup oil (safflower or grape seed oil recommended)
1/4 cup buttermilk
1 cup sugar
2 eggs
3 TBL. milk
1 TBL. vanilla
1-1/2 cups semi-sweet chocolate chips

1) Preheat oven to 350 F
2) Prepare 4 mini-loaf pans (2-cup capacity). Spray each pan with non-stick baking spray, or coat with butter and flour.

3) Into a medium bowl, measure flour, baking soda, baking powder, and salt. Sift or mix until ingredients evenly distributed. Set aside until Step #6 below.

4) In a large bowl place peeled bananas and gently mash with a potato masher or fork. Mash until just softened. Do not over-mash. Tip: For best results, use bananas that are at least 75% brown or black. Using 100% brown or black bananas that have just begun to liquefy in the peel is perfectly fine too. The more overripe, the better.

5) Add oil, buttermilk, sugar, eggs, milk, and vanilla to the mashed bananas. Gently whisk until just barely mixed. Avoid using a power mixer to avoid lengthening starch molecules in bananas. The less you work it, the more crumb-tender it will be.

6) Add in flour mix and whisk until you still have a few small clumps of flour still not mixed in. Remember, less working of the batter means less chewy banana bread.

7) Fold in chocolate chips. Tip: Use 1 cup regular chocolate chips and 1/2 cup mini chips for better suspension of chocolate chips throughout batter. Fold with spatula until no more flour clumps remain and chips are evenly mixed.

8) Pour batter evenly into the four mini-loaf pans.

9) Bake for 20 minutes, then rotate the pans and bake for 20 more minutes.

10) Check if the loaves are baked thoroughly – pierce a loaf with a wooden toothpick or bamboo skewer. If the toothpick or skewer comes out clean, the loaf is done. If not, add up to five minutes more bake time, especially if doing a double batch.

11) Cool on a cooling rack. The bread stores beautifully in the freezer, wrapped in a freezer storage bag.

12) Note: If you want to make this quick bread recipe even more crumb-tender, for the flour: use 1 cup regular flour, and 1 cup cake flour.
Chapter Summary

Severus' heart is rendered mute upon the page, so he goes to clear his mind to find the words. Meanwhile, now that Lavender is out her Advertising and Marketing Director, Hermione suggests who might replace him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Eighty-One
“Disclosure and Bombshells”

Disclaimer: Harry Potter, a fanfic frontier. These are the literary ramblings of the OTP ship Snermione. Its 10+-year posting: to explore strange new lemony smut, to seek out new plot twists and new tropes, to boldly disclaim by stating Rowling owns it all.

A/N: Disclaimer a parody of the Star Trek: The Original Series prologue.

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Hermione could finally understand how Harry could fall in love with Zhubanysh so quickly. Once Hermione was back at the Potters' home, Zhubanysh helped bathe the shell-shocked witch and tucked her into a guest bed.

Hermione was convinced she wouldn't be able to sleep at all that night, with her mind filled with the fresh memories of gore and a torturous scene of Zabini's death. Then Zhubanysh started singing a soft, sweet song to Hermione, while stroking her hair and face.

Hermione found herself drifting off to a restful sleep, free of nightmares that would have normally kept her up after such an incident. Waking in the morning, she found herself feeling rested and relaxed, almost at peace. She wondered if there was something magical in the song Zhubanysh had sang, or in her touch.

The memory of Zabini's murder was still fresh in her mind and still caused her great distress, but
somehow Hermione felt a little stronger the next morning. She felt as if she would be able to face going to the Ministry that morning and discussing the events without breaking down in the process. Hermione wondered if Zhubanysh's particular talent had helped Harry heal and quickly move past his sudden divorce with Ginny.

More than anything, Hermione wished she could have woken in Severus' protective arms. He was the only other thing, other than Zhubanysh's special talent for soothing her, who could have made her feel as if she could face the day ahead. When she needed sanctuary the most, he was gone. Hermione would have to find the strength within herself to deal with her problems, until she saw Severus once again.

But when would Hermione see him again?

Hermione had scanned the *Daily Prophet* the other day, noting the cost of Portkey prices to places like Auckland, San Francisco and Tokyo. Averaging out the price, she figured how much a one-way Portkey to Hawaii would cost, based on the triangulation of those three major Portkey destinations. There was a fleeting moment where she entertained the idea of spending a whole lot of Galleons and just showing upon his doorstep, but she squashed the idea. She had promised to clear his name. How would it look – since she had stayed behind – to drop that promise and arrive without completing the task yet? Hermione had tried to leave with him at the last moment, but given how Fate had decided she was not to go, she figured there must be a reason why she was stuck in England and was not in Hawaii with Severus.

With freshly-washed clothes, Hermione dressed and went down to breakfast. Dobby had made breakfast since – the elf proudly told her – Zhubanysh had been up most of the night tending to Hermione, ensuring she slept peacefully. Harry came down as Hermione was finishing her breakfast; he was looking up as if he too had been up most of the night.

Once at the Ministry, Hermione answered some questions, with Harry there beside her for support. Moody and Kingsley asked her some questions, and she truthfully answered them. Fortunately, she didn't have to answer any questions about unsanctioned work, as she would have to lie about that. Given how Moody could smell a lie from a mile away, she was glad that she didn't have to manufacture any until that point.

As the interview wrapped up, Moody got a strange look on his face. Holding up one of Hermione's recent purchases, he asked in a curious tone, “And while investigating Zabini’s murder last night, we had to enter your flat, Mrs. Weasley. I saw a stack of some interesting books.”

In Moody's hand was a copy of *Fodor's Guide to Hawaii*. 
“You went into my flat?”

“We had to make sure the killer wasn’t hiding out there while we cleared the building. An interesting selection, Mrs. Weasley.” Moody thumbed through the book absentmindedly.

“And why would you say that?” Hermione asked, feeling her cheeks get hot and trying to not let the wild thumping in her heart give anything away.

“No reason,” Moody said. “Just wondering why you have so many books on Hawaii in your flat. Thinking of going on holiday there?” the Head Auror asked.

“Considering the fact my parents talked about going there, since they didn't get a chance to go when they were in America during their year-long ‘holiday’ to the States during the war, and they wondered if I was interested in going with them, considering I haven't been on a holiday in years and I'm recently divorced, yes. I am thinking of going there for a holiday. What of it?” the witch threw back at him hotly, trying to play innocent as to why she was being grilled about her choice of books.

“Muggle books,” Moody mused.

“Considering I'd be going Muggle-style with my parents, since they are Muggles, I thought it prudent to do research with Muggle books. Why this fascination with my choice of books, Moody? You want to come on holiday with me to the Aloha state?” she added sarcastically.

If anything, she wanted to deflect from his line of questioning to avoid Moody being suspicious of her knowledge of Hawaii, which he and only a few others knew about. Harry and Kingsley knew about Hawaii, but Moody didn't know that.

“Why are you acting as if a few Muggle books are so suspicious, Alastor?” Kingsley questioned his boss. “She's a Muggle-born, so Muggle books are not foreign to her?” Kingsley was directing that the suspicion Hermione was supposedly perceiving from Moody was for the fact they were Muggle books, not the choice of location.


To follow along Kingsley's lead, Hermione added bitterly, “Well, it's a good thing you didn't find
my stash of my Muggle parents' old medical books I've been reading. Heaven forbid you come across a copy of *Gray's Anatomy*!"

“Now listen here,” Moody started in, but was calmed down by Shacklebolt who put his hand on his shoulder.

Hermione burst into tears, more for effect than the need to cry. It didn't take much for her to need to cry, despite how much Zhubanysh's gentle ministrations eased her mind the night before.

“Hermione hardly slept last night, and she's quite tired, Alastor,” Harry defended her, understanding the ruse Hermione and Kinglsey were pulling. “We're all tired this morning. Now if there is nothing else, I suggest I take Hermione back to my home where she can rest until the Aurors are finished.”

“I want a Floo connection directly to my flat so I don't have to walk in the atrium of that building ever again,” Hermione suddenly spoke up.

Moody began to stutter, but Kingsley quickly replied, “I think we can get that taken care of today, Mrs. Weasley. I can certainly understand your reluctance to have to walk through the area daily,” he assured her. “I'll take of it personally and make sure it's done before the end of the day.”

Hermione and Harry left, but not before Hermione took back her book that Moody had swiped from her flat. The two top Aurors bickered, given that Death Eaters used to be the sole occupants of that particular block of flats. As the door was closing, she overheard Kingsley remind his boss that there were no more Death Eaters living in that building at all.

“Listen, Hermione, I'm worried about you,” Harry admitted as they walked across the atrium of the Ministry. “This is the second murder that has happened in or around your block of flats. And I think it might be the same person, since Moody won't entertain the idea. There are some aspects that are the same, like a calling card.”

It chilled Hermione's soul to think that this is the second murder done in such a fashion.

“I want you to wear this,” Harry handed Hermione a necklace with a small locket. “Should you need me, just grab hold of the locket and call out to me in your mind. I will know you need me, as I'll be wearing its twin. It also acts as a locator so I can find you.” Harry pulled an identical necklace out from under his shirt and showed Hermione.
“That's brilliant, Harry. Did you come up with that?” she asked with great admiration.

“No, these have been in use with the Aurors' office since the last days of the war. Aurors tend to work in pairs, so if they get split up and one is in trouble, it's a way for us to find each other, even if one had been Apparated away. They've been working on a new version of these where you don't have to hold them to mentally call for help, but this older version will probably be enough to keep you safe. Few know about these in our arsenal, and we want to keep it that way. So your discretion is required.” Harry tucked his pendant back under his shirt.

“Harry, do you really think–”

“I don't know what to think,” the young Auror admitted, running his hand through his shaggy black mop that was in need of a trim. “But right now, I'm concerned about you living at the Red Ginseng. If you had come home during the time the murder was being committed, you might have been hurt as well, and we're not sure if the killer had an accomplice or acted alone this time. Just give me some peace of mind and wear it. Hopefully, you will never need to call me. But should you need it, I'll be there.”

Heaving a weary sigh, Hermione placed the necklace over her head and tucked the pendant under her blouse. “Fine, Harry. If you are that worried, I'll wear it.”

Hermione traveled via Floo back to the Potters' home while Harry went back to work in trying to figure out who killed Zabini.

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The wastepaper basket in Severus' hotel room was overflowing. After starting his umpteenth letter to Hermione, he became frustrated yet again. The words had flowed so easily from his lips when they were together, which wasn't much given how he wasn't an effusive wizard who spouted off about his feelings. Now apart, it was even harder and the words stumbled around blindly in his mind, as if trapped in a dark, door less room. Now he regretted all the things he could have said but hadn't.

He was well read and normally eloquent, but now – while trying to put his heart to quill and parchment – he found himself dumb and lacking the resources which seemed just beyond his ability. Severus could write scrolls and scrolls about Potions, magical theory, literary analysis based on historical events at the time of a book's publication, Herbology, business matters and a slew of other areas of interests, but finding the right words to express his heart when his heart had lain quiet for so long was humbling to his ego. Intellect and brilliance were no match against the torrent of his emotions.
Severus could have consulted with Ginny, since she was a witch and knew Hermione well. She could help him, but his pride refused to let him seek assistance. His feelings for Hermione were a private matter. Even if Ginny could tell how much Severus was missing her, she never brought the subject up. There were fleeting moments where the two would exchange a glance and know the other was wishing Hermione was there as well.

'My darling Hermione...' There was another crumple of paper to fill the silence of his hotel room.

“Damn!”

'Dearest Hermione...'

Examining the parchment, he thought that that wasn't too bad. It had taken ten pounds of parchment for him to finally come up with a suitable two-word greeting to his letter. Now if he could only get a first draft written by the end of the day, he might have a suitable final draft to commit to parchment by the end of the week. But at this rate, it was going to be summer before he would have anything to send off.

Needing to take a break from this vexing task, Severus decided to go for a hike to clear his mind. Maybe the fresh air and sunlight would blow away the cluttered and unorganized thoughts, and help him find inspiration for his first opening sentence to Hermione.

The day was a bit warmer than usual, so he wore a pair of shorts and a short-sleeved button-front shirt, along with his hiking boots and a broad-brimmed hat to avoid sunburn. He packed some fruit for a snack and set off shortly before lunch time, as he had spent all Sunday morning on his letter to Hermione.

He reached the edge of town and began wandering off into the jungle, observing the plants and wildlife teeming about.

Using his wand, he cast a machete-like charm to cut through the thick growth. Once he passed through, he used his wand to repair the flora to preserve the habitat.

Muttering to himself, thinking that perhaps speaking the words instead of coming up with them in his mind alone might help him, Severus nearly tripped on the rotted fence that had fallen down. Swearing at the offending pieces of disintegrating wood that the jungle was reclaiming once more,
he came across a sign.

Flipping it over, it said: “For Sale.”

Looking about, there seemed to be no house. Severus followed the rotting fence line around the property, cutting his way through the vines, bamboo, and other plants that had woven themselves in and around the old property perimeter. Once he had made a full pass around, he determined it was a good acre in size, plenty large enough for his needs. Exploring inside the property boundary, he found a clearing. There was a stone-and-cement pad indicating where a house once stood. The remains of a fireplace, mostly demolished, was at one end of the house's footprint. It was made of large chunks of black lava rock. The white grout, in between the stones on the partially dismantled chimney flue, was dotted with moss and ferns.

Severus gazed out at the view from what must have once have been the front porch. There was a lovely view of the Malu Palekaiko, with the edge of the main part of town about a quarter to a third of a mile away. You couldn't see the streets, but you could see the second and third stories of the taller structures just above the palm trees that lay on the slope below him. He could even see the top of the roofline of his hotel.

He found and followed the old stone pathway that went from the outline of the old house down to a walkway that had become overgrown. Cutting through with his wand, he followed the path until it ended. Close to where the path ended, Severus could hear voices. Scything and cutting away at the thick growth, Severus found himself along a road that led back to town. He had walked this road before, as it had led up to a few other houses of people he had come to know and visited, as well as being the major trail that led up to the volcano from town. A few hundred yards up the road was a couple walking back up to their house. He had passed by countless times, and never knew the place even existed.

Heading back up the now cleared path, Severus looked about the property, noticing there was a fresh water stream that trickled through it, mostly covered by the undergrowth. There were areas that were flat and some that look like they had once been terraced, much like some of the small taro and rice farms he had seen next to some homes in the more rural parts of town and around the island.

There were spots he would need to clear to make his two gardens, but for the most part, this was perfect, except for the part that there was no house. Severus would expand the footprint of the house, making a second story terraced above and behind the first story, just as he had always imagined.

Picking up the sign once more, he almost could make out the name on the sign for whom to contact. With a wave of his wand, the name at the bottom was restored.
“Bugger,” Severus muttered.

Tina, Draco's real estate agent and infamous wizard-chaser, was the one he had to deal with. Severus was willing to pay full price, and even extra, if that meant he didn't have to go out on a date with her in order to secure this property.

Severus already had to decline her request for a commission of a love potion. There was little doubt who the intended target of his commission would be.

Sitting on the edge of the concrete-and-stone foundation, the Potions master transfigured a rock into a glass, spelled some chilled water into the glass, and drank the water while eating his fruit. Surveying the lay of the land and the orientation of the foundation, he thought the house would face almost squarely south, slightly angling off towards the west.

As he munched on some fresh pineapple, Severus mind began to fill in the gaps. He could clearly envision a row of cucumbers, tomatoes, and sweet peppers for his gazpacho. Over there would be his Potions lab, and next to it, his Potions garden, filled with plants that Pomona grew in her greenhouses, but he would grow them out in the open air in the rich volcanic soil. There would have to be a shade structure, as some of the plants he wanted to grow required partial to full shade, and not full sun.

Severus was no closer to having any idea what he wanted to write to Hermione, but he had, in his wandering, stumbled across the future site of his home, a home that maybe even Hermione could live in as well. Just the idea of having his own home once again made him feel as if his life was finally coming together bit by bit. He even smiled a little as he got up and dusted the dirt from his shorts to begin the trek back down the overgrown pathway and into town.

If Tina wasn't working at the apothecary, where she worked part-time, he would brave going to her residence in person. Severus had a new project to look forward to and to keep his mind off of how miserable he was without Hermione. It wouldn't make the longing for her any less, but it would keep his mind otherwise preoccupied.

Walking briskly with a purpose, Severus didn't notice the Albatross which had taken flight as it was circling the town. It was climbing higher and higher in order to catch a favorable wind current that would carry it off towards its distant destination, with a letter clasped in its webbed feet.

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once again at Hermione's work, grilling Lavender about Blaise Zabini's work for her as a gigolo. Not only had two of her Death Eater gigolos gone missing, but now a third was dead. Miss Brown assured Moody she had no more interest in keeping the side business in operation, given the only three she would trust enough to carry out the work were now gone, and Macnair was in Azkaban. Upon further questioning as to why Macnair was ever in her employment, he dropped that line of questioning after Lavender gave him the short and grisly version of why she’d had him in her employ, a story which seemed to please Alastor. There was no mention about Parvati. Moody knew all too well the history behind that.

Not only were Hermione, Albert, and their employer, Lavender, dealing with Zabini's death, though Hermione had no great affection for him, but now the president of the company was out a key employee who was doing a good job. Blaise had been picking up the slack where Draco had left off. Zabini didn't have quite the finesse of Draco, but he had been getting the hang of it.

Once the Aurors were gone, Lavender had used her business connections to see if there was anyone with marketing and advertising experience to take over the vacated position. There were a few who might have fit the job, but lacked a certain je ne sais quoi Draco had in spades and Blaise possessed in clubs, but was honing his skills with time.

By the time Friday rolled around, Lavender was fit to be tied. There were deadlines in upcoming publications, and new products which were to be launched soon. While Blaise had kept his boss thoroughly in the loop, Lavender had other things to do to run her business than deal with this aspect, though she would if it was absolutely necessary.

During the weekly staff meeting, Lavender went over Albert and Hermione's progress regarding the development and testing of some new products. But then the company president and owner picked up her tea cup and threw it against the fireplace in frustration.

“Damn it all to hell!” she bellowed at no one in particular.

Hermione wondered if Lavender let her temper get the better of her at home with Ron around, and how well he handled it.

Knowing it was futile, but wishing to offer some comfort upon seeing the pressure her boss was under, Hermione asked timidly, “Is there anything I can do?”

Spinning around on her heel, Lavender looked at Hermione and rolled her eyes, while snidely saying, “Oh, if you just happened to know someone well versed in advertising and marketing who can take Blaise's place and help run that department – because my company will fail if I don't find
someone competent eventually. Otherwise, no, there is nothing you can do. Thanks for asking.”

Suddenly, Hermione remembered she did know someone. She would have to speak to her parents first, but for the moment, she thought she would give Lavender a glimmer of hope since the blonde witch looked like she was near the end of her rope and close to panicking.

“Actually, I do.”

“What?” Lavender and Albert said in unison, the witch responding more vocally of the two.

“My Aunt Christine. She's a vice president at some big, multinational advertising and marketing corporation.”

“Why didn't you tell me this before?” her boss nearly shrieked.

“Because she's a Muggle and doesn't know I'm a witch! That's why. And until you mentioned it, I didn't even consider her,” Hermione admitted a bit hotly in response to Lavender's tone.

Lavender started stuttering, stopping and starting a string of unfinished sentences. Her frustration was partially out of exasperation that the source of her solution was working across the hall from her all this week, and partially out of excitement that she found someone who would have a fucking clue what to do.

“Well?!? Let's go tell her you're a witch and get her into the Muggle Alliance Network!” Lavender blurted out excitedly.

“First, I need to talk with my parents.”

“Can I come along? Anything to help,” Lavender offered.

“Considering you're the one who Ron left me for, that might not be the best thing right now,” the former Mrs. Ron Weasley gently reminded the new Mrs. Ron Weasley. “Aunt Christine might be a bit more understanding and you should come along when I go meet with her and break the news about me being a witch, but we'll break that other bit – you being the one Ron married – to her and
my parents later.”

“Oh. Right.” Looking at Hermione she said, “Well...? Go! Go Apparate over to your parents and tell them you need to tell your aunt that you're a witch.”

Hermione looked at Albert for his approval, since she had been planning on doing work with him today, but he shrugged and said, “Our boss says to go. Our work will wait, the publication deadlines will not.”

It was nearly lunch time, and Hermione knew she would probably be able to catch her parents before they left to catch a bite together.

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Tina and Manny glared daggers at one another across the table. Tina had sold the abandoned property finally, but she was still no closer to a date with Severus than before.

That talk, dark, yummy British wizard showed up on her doorstep the day after Valentine's Day. She thought her winning charms and looks had finally brought him to her, inspired by the holiday. Her hopes soared for a brief moment, only to be dashed when he handed her the "For Sale" sign indicating his interest in buying the property.

It wasn't even worth that much, considering there was no structure to inhabit. Severus was able to steal the place for a little under 20,000 Galleons, but it would probably cost another 20,000 to 30,000 to get a house built on site, depending on how large and complicated the design was.

Manny was pissed he had to share his commission with the witch. He felt that he was entitled to the entire commission, since he had been doing all the leg work, dragging Severus around the island. But it was by sheer luck Severus had stumbled across the abandoned property. It had been on the market for so long, nearly everyone forgot about the place. The house had been razed in a hurricane which had blown through there several decades ago. The property's current owners, the grandchildren of the original owner, kept paying Tina a small "maintenance fee" to mind the property and to sell it, though there was nothing to maintain, given that the house was destroyed.

Severus sat there gauging the tension between the two real estate agents. Even though Manny and Tina couldn't see it, Severus could plainly see the sexual tension between them. Manny was single, and Tina was single. Though Manny was not the most handsome of wizards, he wasn't that bad looking, if only he would ditch the bad comb-over. And though he was a bit older than Severus, Manny wasn't so old as to not be within the acceptable dating parameters for Tina, given that she was no longer a spring chicken herself.
Perhaps Severus could brew a double love potion batch, gratis, without informing Tina, should these two need a little help recognizing the attraction between them. Better yet, there was still one more meeting until the deed was handed over to Severus. Surely that would be time enough to brew a version of Irresistible, the Arousal Potion, but he would use regular mother of pearl in the mixture instead of the Caprese mother of pearl, since Lavender and the twins had an exclusive distribution deal on that ingredient.

Yes, a nice box of homemade chocolates with passion fruit, pomegranate, and Fairy Brandy liquid centers left in the room for the two to partake would certainly move things forward so Tina could stop harassing him and set her sights on some other wizard.

Life was moving along quite swimmingly this week for Severus, even though he had yet to finish his first draft of a letter to Hermione.

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Though Wendy and Wallace Granger were a bit circumspect about Hermione's intent to tell her Aunt Christine that she was a witch, they were much more open to the idea after their daughter's explanation about her boss' need for someone with advertising and marketing skills. It seemed that those were specific skills which few in the wizarding world possessed or encouraged as a career, nor was it even a job description widely recognized in the wizarding world.

Hermione's Aunt Christine had recently left her high-powered and very well-paying job at a large international marketing and advertising firm. It seemed that – despite the company's Human Resources Department assuring her that they were supportive of Christine in the time after her miscarriage – her superiors were not exactly patient or understanding. They were mostly men who told her to get a stiff upper lip and crack on with her life, haranguing her as to when she was going to get back to work as soon as possible.

After telling them where they could shove their well-intentioned and completely insensitive remarks, Christine Taylor – with the support of her husband, Tim – decided it was time to start her own small firm where she was her own boss. She could set her own hours instead of being a slave to the pressures and demands of her old job. It would hopefully cut down dramatically on her stress, which her obstetrician said had been a possible factor in her trouble conceiving the first time and her recent miscarriage.

Hermione and her boss Apparated to a nearby alleyway that was a four-block walk away from Christine and Tim's house. It was the closest place they could Apparate to without being seen or splinching, as Hermione had been to her aunt's house before and was familiar with the area. She was also familiar with how nice her aunt's front yard used to look when she had a high-paying job and could afford to pay for a full-time gardener. The yard looked rather scraggly now. This only made Hermione more determined to see her aunt take the job offer.
After Hermione and her boss knocked upon the door of the two-story house, Uncle Tim opened the door.

“Hermione! Your mum told us you were coming over. And this must be your friend... Lavender, right?” Tim said cheerfully, welcoming them into their home.

Hermione and Tim exchanged a brief hug before Lavender and Tim shook hands. Tim popped his head out the front door and asked strangely, “Where's your car?”

“Oh, we took the train,” Hermione lied plausibly, as the train station was a six-block walk away.

“Well, Christine is in the spare bedroom we converted into an office for her,” he explained as he showed the two witches the way down the hall.

Hermione walked past the room that was going to be the nursery and noted the door was shut.

Knocking on the door to his wife’s newly-converted office, Tim called out, “Dear, Hermione and her colleague are here.”

Christine bid them to enter, as she was busy on her computer typing something up. Rising from her seat, she walked around her desk and gave Hermione a brief hug, showing more genuine affection for her niece than Hermione could ever remember.

Hermione asked her uncle to stick around for the meeting, since he would need to hear this as well.

“It’s good to see you,” Christine said.

Hermione could tell her aunt was still recovering from the emotional strain of losing her child, but seemed to be making the best of it. Her bosses at her old work were certainly of no help to her in that regard.

“Aunt Christine, this is my boss, Lavender. Lavender, this is Christine Taylor, my aunt.” Hermione
purposefully omitted Lavender's last name for the time being.

The two women shook hands. Christine offered them a seat, as she had two chairs ready and waiting for them. Tim stood up against the wall behind them, leaning sideways against a couple of short filing cabinets.

“Wendy told me over the phone you need someone to do marketing and advertising for your business, Lavender. Is that correct?” Christine began.

Hermione and Lavender exchanged curious glance at one another.

“Yes, that is correct, Christine,” Lavender replied. “The... person I employed who did all my advertising and marketing recently met with... an untimely death. And I'm rather in a bind.”

“Well, I'm very sorry to hear about your loss. I'm sure it was a great shock to you both,” Christine said with great empathy. “But I'm afraid I'm in the dark about how I can help, as Wendy didn't say exactly what your company does or makes.”

“It's a beauty and cosmetics company,” Hermione jumped in, trying to avoid any unusual jargon that Christine might find too strange, until more information was revealed.

“Have I heard of this company, or are you a new start-up? You look like you're barely out of university, so is this a small operation?” Christine asked.

“Actually, I have my products sold and distributed in all European countries, plus northern Africa, the Middle East, Russia. I'm planning on expanding into India later this year,” Lavender informed her.

Christine's eyes got very wide, a mixture of surprise and disbelief. “And just what is the name of your company? And did you inherit it?”

“It's The Lovely Lavender Company. And no, I started it from scratch and built it from the ground up myself, with my own blood, sweat, and tears.”
Now Christine was really suspicious. She crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair. “You say it's not a start-up and you sell in several countries, yet I've never heard of such a company. Considering I had clients in the beauty industry recently, I would have heard of you before if your distribution is that broad, since I still read all the trade rags.” She practically snorted at her potential new client.

“The reason why you haven't heard of her company is because it's not in any circles you're familiar with, Aunt Christine,” Hermione gently informed her.

“Uh-huh. And why is that?” she casually threw back, squinting her eyes, thinking this was either a cruel joke or waste of her time.

“Because I'm a witch,” Hermione announced.

Tim jumped into the conversation. “You're not a witch, you're a lovely person. Who would call you such a thing?”

Hermione turned around in her seat to look up at her uncle, her face perfectly serious. “No, I mean I'm an actual witch.” To prove her point, she pulled out her wand and said, “Wingardium Leviosa.”

The pen-holder on Christine's desk began to float, guided by the movements of Hermione's wand.

Christine leaned forward to touch the floating pen-holder. “Is this a trick?” she asked with disbelief.

“No, it's not,” Hermione corrected her aunt. “I didn't go to that posh boarding school that Mum and Dad told you about. Well, I did go to a boarding school, but I went to a special boarding school for training witches and wizards for seven years, starting when I was eleven.”

Christine and Tim looked at each other and began laughing hysterically. “Either you're fucking bonkers and you've lost your mind after Ron left you, or this is the best joke I've ever had played on me,” the circumspect Muggle insisted as she leaned back in her chair.

Hermione stood up and decided to cast a powerful Transfiguration spell on all the furniture around her. She changed Christine's desk into a giant aardvark, all her desk clutter into blooming flowers and twittering birds that hopped about, the ceiling fixture into a small replica of the tower clock of
London mounted upside down that began to chime, the curtains into a waterfall that stopped short of the floor and left the carpet dry, the carpet into a grassy meadow, and the filing cabinets into a couple stone gargoyles. When her aunt stood to inspect everything, Hermione transfigured her chair into an ostrich.

“Whoa, did someone secretly slip me some acid or ‘shrooms,” Tim asked in awe, his eyes agog at the visions before him.

With a wave of her wand, Hermione ended the spells she had cast.

There would be no Ministry officials showing up, since Hermione had given them notice she would be informing a close blood relation, who was not a parent or sibling, of her magical abilities in order to encourage them to join the Muggle Alliance Network. Had she not informed then, Ministry officials would have started showing up and adjusting the Muggles' memories.

“No, Uncle Tim, you are not on drugs. I'm a witch and so is my employer,” Hermione informed her Muggle relations. “There are approximately 15,000 witches and wizards in Great Britain alone, with a total of over 300,000 in the countries where Lavender currently sells her products. With her emergence in India, that will double to over 600,000 potential customers. That is almost one-third of the world's population of witches and wizards, to whom she needs to market and advertise her products.”

“One... third of the world's population?” Christine asked for clarification.

“Of the world's wizarding population,” Lavender amended. She wanted Hermione's aunt to understand that though the scope was not as grand as marketing to millions or billions, it was still a large segment of the wizarding world.

Hermione could tell this was a lot to process for her aunt.

“If you're so magical, why didn't you save my baby.” Christine glared at her niece, her face showing how distraught she was. The tears began to fall.

Lavender had been briefed on Christine's recent miscarriage, so she was not surprised by this response.
“Because there are laws preventing me from using magic on people who are not magical, even close family members who know that I am a witch. If Mum or Dad were dying, I am prevented by the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy of 1692 of using my magic to save even them – because then every Muggle they knew would wonder how they ‘miraculously’ survived.” Hermione looked gravely at her aunt, feeling just as torn that she could do nothing if she had been there. “As much as I wanted to do something, I still couldn't have done anything for you and the baby. I'm so sorry.”

Christine steeled herself, trying to make the tears stop. “Well,” she bit out, “isn't that convenient. Your magical society can use the resources of us non-magic people while we can't use anything of yours.”

“It's a slow process, Aunt Christine,” Hermione tried to assuage her aunt's bitterness. “All the concern about secrecy started because Muggles were persecuting witches and wizards – burning them at the stake and such, as you remember from history lessons. It was only because of the war I was able to get a movement started to allow the Muggle Alliance Network to include people who were not just immediate blood relations, but more distant blood relations as well. It is a way to begin an outreach between our two societies while still observing secrecy laws.”

“Muggle?” Tim prompted, perplexed.

Lavender turned around and simply said, “Muggle means non-magical people like you and your wife.”

“How long have your parents known?” Christine asked.

“Since I turned eleven and the Headmaster of my school arrived to inform them that I was a witch, and he invited me to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.” It was one of the most memorable days of her young life, and Hermione would never forget a moment of it as long as she lived.

“And you're only telling me this now because you need my skills?” Christine asked, taking a slight accusatory tone.

“Expanding knowledge of our world to more distant blood relations is only permitted when there is a viable reason to include them into the Muggle Alliance Network, which only came about because of the war. Otherwise, it is discouraged in order to hold within the ISWS,” Hermione explained.
"The war? What, the Afghanistan and Iraq war going on now?" Tim asked for clarification.

"No, the wizarding war that ended in 1999," Hermione said, her voice somewhat hollow.

"A war of wizards? That sounds cool, like it could be the name of an old Doctor Who episode," Tim responded with inappropriate zeal.

"Seeing all the friends I had die in the war, many right in front of me, there is nothing 'cool' about that, Uncle Tim," Hermione said with a quiver in her voice, her response morphing into a sob.

Lavender began to silently weep.

"I'm so sorry. I had no idea," Tim apologized with great remorse.

Lavender conjured handkerchiefs for herself and Hermione, which startled the two Muggles who were still unaccustomed to magic performed in front of them.

"Thanks, Lav."

"If you don't mind me asking, did you lose friends in the war, Lavender," Tim asked trying to be delicate.

Lavender spun around in her seat and looked at Tim harshly with red-rimmed eyes. "If you call having my best friend's mind scrambled by a curse while she was being raped in the next dungeon cell, besides losing friends in the war too, then I guess you could say so. Oh, and the wizard who did all my advertising and marketing – the one who died recently – he saved me from her fate."

There was a long pause of silence while Hermione and Lavender collected themselves.

"Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe we shouldn't have come," Lavender said somberly.

"No! Please, I want to help," Christine pleaded. "I have been calling leads, but all the contacts I have are large corporations. Given the fact I am now a company of one, none of my old contacts
wants to hire me. And it's hard trying to break new ground with small- and mid-sized business. I
need the work. Please.

“You'll have to join the Muggle Alliance Network for a small fee, but that will give you access to
work for Lavender and any other businesses run in the wizarding community,” Hermione said.
“Unfortunately, you can't tell any of your Muggle clients about the work you do for us or any other
wizarding businesses. It's in this contract, should you agree to join.”

Hermione waved her wand and a thick contract suddenly appeared on the desk in front of
Christine. She jumped back a little, being suddenly startled by yet something else suddenly
appearing or changing before her eyes.

“I guess if I'm going to have any work, I'm going to have to agree to this.” Hermione's aunt flipped
quickly through the pages, which made a soft thwapping noise.

Tim came along to stand next to Christine's desk and asked meekly, “Does Ron know you're a
witch?”

Hermione and Lavender turned to each other and began laughing simultaneously. “Ron and I met
at the school we both went to,” Hermione said, gesturing to herself and Lavender. “He comes from
a pure-blood family.”

“Pure-blood?” Tim asked.

“It means he comes from a long line of witches and wizards on both sides,” Lavender volunteered.

“Probably thought he was too good for the likes of you then, which is probably why he divorced
you,” Christine snarled.

Just then, Christine's computer began to blink and brighten spontaneously.

“Lavender, calm down,” Hermione warned, sensing the computer's surge in power was due to
anger suddenly building in Lavender. The blonde witch might fry her aunt and uncle's electronics
in the room.
Christine looked at her future client and said, “Don't tell me you side with Ron for dumping Hermione?”

“Aunt Christine,” Hermione began, trying to diffuse the situation, “Ron and I both agreed to a divorce. He was pressured into marrying me, I felt obligated to accept. We never were really in love from the start.” Hermione had only volunteered a minimum amount of information to her parents as to why they divorced. “The divorce was amicable and mutual.”

“If she's your friend, then why does she look that way when I bring up your ex?” Christine challenged, pointing a finger at Lavender.

“It's complicated,” Hermione replied, placing a hand over her eyes, hoping she wasn't about to get a headache.

“Well, since we're having quite a bit of disclosure, I think I can handle a bit more, if it will clear some things up.” Christine folded her arms and sat back in her chair.

“You want my business and the full disclosure?” Lavender asked, feeling a bit hostile at the moment.

“Yes, considering some of the shit I've seen pulled in the corporate world and this recent revelation about this magical world I was unaware until a few moments ago, I think you can lay it on me. Hit me with your best shot,” Christine dared, throwing down the gauntlet.

As much as Lavender was crossing swords with Christine, who needed her as much as she needed her, Lavender admired this Muggle, who seemed like she had a backbone and a set of brass ones. She needed someone a little fearless to help take her company into the future.

“Fine.” Lavender huffed and stood up as she began to pace back and forth across the converted bedroom.

Hermione had seen that look on her boss' face and had heard stories from Severus. She knew there was nothing to do but let the storm blow over, ducking for cover at the appropriate moments, especially if crockery was involved.

“Ron and I had been having an affair for most of Hermione and Ron's marriage,” Lavender yelled,
beginning her tirade. “Ron was miserable, Hermione was miserable. I had been hoping for an opportunity to pry the two apart, since Ron was reluctant to divorce Hermione, feeling some obligation to stay married to her for financial reasons and his family pressure. I set Hermione up with a former employee of mine, and he set up an apprenticeship for her to finally leave her miserable job for better pay. Then Ron could finally leave her. Ron and Hermione are now divorced, both happier for it. Hermione is in a long-deserved apprenticeship – by me, as it happens – and with better pay. Shortly after the divorce, Ron and I married. He’s now my husband. Any questions?”

Tim went over to the cabinet and poured himself a drink, holding the bottle up to offer something to steady anyone else's nerves that were as suddenly as frazzled as his.

“Don't tell Mum and Dad,” Hermione insisted. “I'll tell them all that in time, just not now.”

Sarcastically, Christine raised her eyebrows and looked around. “Gee, I wonder why?”

“So who was this bloke you were involved with, Hermione? Where is he now?” Tim asked after drinking half of his Scotch in one go.

“It's complicated,” Hermione groaned into her hands.

“Oh, please.” Christine snorted again. “It can't be more complicated than you working for the... witch who stole your husband and now work for.”

Hermione glared at her aunt. “You have no fucking clue, and I'm divulging nothing more. You already know far too much. Be glad I will not cast a Memory Charm on you to wipe away this whole meeting,” Hermione snapped, looking every bit as serious as her promise.

“I could use a cup of tea,” Lavender stated plainly, her tone civil once more. “Do you think we could adjourn to the kitchen?”

Christine's head felt it was close to imploding from all these new revelations.

“Memory Charm?” Tim asked with a squeak, wondering if he wanted to know.
“A commonly used magical spell, often used to erase or adjust the memories of those who you want to forget certain information. The Ministry often uses them on Muggles who have inadvertently witnessed the use of magic and shouldn't have,” Lavender said, a little too cheerfully for the tone of the conversation.

Tim and Christine exchanged worried glances.

“Oh, don't worry. We won't cast one on you,” the blonde witch assured her future marketing and advertising consultant. "It's in the contract."

The four of them moved to the kitchen. Hermione made tea, using her wand to fetch the cups and saucers that were on the top shelf, as she couldn't reach them without a stool.

Christine's hands shook a bit as she drank her cup of tea.

“So, let's say I do take you on as a client. And let's say you do hire me to consult for you,” Christine began, her voice faltering a little. “What sort of retainer did you have in mind?”

Pausing for a moment, Lavender thought. “Well, considering your experience, as this would be nearly a full-time job, I was going to suggest 20,000 Galleons a year, plus bonuses tied to meeting certain sales goals.”

“Galleons?” Christine asked.

“She's offering you approximately 100,000 pounds a year,” Hermione said, doing the conversion in her head.

“And your retainer will go up to 35,000 when we launch in India.” Lavender looked at the Muggle sitting across from her. “Is that acceptable?”

Considering that Christine was bringing in zero pounds and was spending money in order to try and get new clients – with the purchase of a new computer, business cards, stationery, web domain address, website design, business license – 100,000 pounds a year to start was pretty damn good for her first client.
“We have a deal,” Christine agreed and stuck out her hand.

The two women shook on it.

"The Muggle Alliance Network will advise you on the taxes and banking, Aunt Christine."

“We’ll need to get you an owl,” Lavender offered.

“Owl?” Christine asked, her face looking a little stunned at yet another revelation.

“Yes, it's our mail delivery system,” Lavender rambled on. “Hermione's parents have one in their backyard. They can help you learn about the care and feeding of your owl, since I'll need to purchase it for you. I can take you to Diagon Alley so you can select one that agrees with you.”

“Diagonally?” Tim queried.

The rest of the afternoon was spent bringing Christine and Tim up to speed on many aspects of the wizarding world they would have to adapt too. Christine eventually fetched a pen and notepad and took copious notes.

“So...” Christine said, glancing over her notes. “I can use the... Floo to contact you, by sticking my head in the fireplace, but I can't use it to transport through? Is that correct?”

“Yes, it's something to do with the charms, the connections, and the magic imbued in the Floo powder. It gives Muggles just enough magic to make a Floo call, should you be approved for a connection, but not enough to travel. We can get you a connection within a week or two,” Lavender assured her.

“And you have no computers, and no electricity. You use candles and quills. You have printing presses run by magic. You have photographs that move but make no sound,” she asked for further clarification.

Hermione produced a copy of the latest *Daily Prophet* to give her aunt a sense of the style and layouts common in the wizarding world, especially the magazines, which included moving
Lavender produced a few magazines herself, showing Draco's work for the Valiant Wizard line and the cologne for men called Haunt. There was also some ad work by Draco for The Sirens' Secrets, and various other layouts over the past couple years.

“This guy is good, who designed these. A natural. Is he the one who died,” Christine asked delicately.

“No, he left,” Lavender replied. “His replacement was the one who died. His replacement was on the job for almost three months. So you can understand why I am in a bind. Publication dates are coming up, and I don't want to miss the launch of some things for the spring.”

“I'll need editorial calendars, rates, and so on,” Christine informed her new client. “Also a list of publications you currently advertise in and the ones you don't, and their demographics.”

Talking advertising and marketing was putting Hermione to sleep, even with two cups of tea in her. This was devolving into marketing gobbledygook that just went over her head.

Instead, Tim and Hermione went to the living room and let the two women talk business.

Letting out a huge sigh, Tim said a bit wistfully while staring blankly at the wall, “You know, if you talked to me yesterday, I'd sooner believe that aliens from another galaxy lived among us than to believe there was a magical world existing right alongside ours, with us completely unaware of it. Quite the little reality shatterer.”

“You'll get used to it. I supposed since I was approached at age eleven, it wasn't quite the shock to me. Given that strange things had happened for most of my life up to that point, it was just one more thing that explained how my magic was popping up inexplicably at the weirdest moments.”

“Oh, like the time when you were a child and you claimed to have jumped off the roof with an umbrella and floated down?”

“Yeah, that and more.”
“And we can't tell anyone. Except your parents, who already know,” Tim asked.

“Yes, that's it in a nutshell.”

“Fuck me sideways with a pineapple,” her uncle sighed with awe.

There was a long pause before Tim spoke again. “So that ginger and lemon iced tea thing. Was that magical?”

“No, it's just regular ingredients that help any pregnant woman with morning sickness.”

“Because that really did the trick until...” There was more awkward silence.

“I really wish I could have helped,” Hermione confessed. “And by the time I found out, it was too late. I was away for the weekend at the time.” She sighed, remembering how it ruined an otherwise perfect weekend with Severus.

Her uncle noticed an odd look on Hermione's face. "That guy. The one you got involved with. Do you want to tell me? I promise not to tell your aunt,” Tim said seriously.

“Uncle Tim, it took me months to come to terms with some of the aspects of that particular situation and half the things involved with that story would make what we just discussed pale in comparison,” the witch warned him. “Perhaps sometime in the future, but it's something still very raw for me. It is beyond complicated.”

“Well, I'll be ready and waiting with a sympathetic and confidential ear, should you need one,” he offered.

Hermione had been missing someone she could confess all the troubles on her mind, as if the pressure behind the dam was building, given that her lover and former confessor was gone. But given Tim's lack of context and history of many aspects of her world, it would be hard to drag up many of those memories with which to fill him in. Hermione would suffer them in silence instead.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: As always, thank you to my lovely and helpful betas for this chapter, JuneW and Cygnuz.

To calculate the rough approximation of the wizarding population, I used the Harry Potter wiki site (http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Wizarding_world) which estimates the wizarding population at 12,000 to 15,000. I decided to play it generous and stick with 15,000. England's population is roughly 60 million, so that winds up being one out of 4,000 who is a witch or wizard.

Adding together the populations of other countries – roughly, Europe as a whole (740 million), Russia (125 million), the Middle East (300 million), North Africa (50 million guesstimate) – that is a population of about 1,225,000,000. Divided by 4,000 leaves a little over 300,000 witches and wizards. India's Muggle population alone is approximately 1,225,000,000, so adding them to Lavender's distribution would double her potential customer base of over 600,000 if every witch and wizard used her products.
“Remus & Hagrid”

Chapter Summary

Severus figures out how to be more productive with his time, while Hermione is given a new opportunity to look forward to.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Eighty-Two
“Remus & Hagrid”

Disclaimer:
Hickory-dickory dock
Rowling owns Potter and lot
Betz disclaimed
that she had no claim
Hickory-dickory dock

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Returning from the toilet, Severus opened the door to the conference room and found Tina and Manny half-undressed with their tongues down each other's throats.

“Oh, pardon me,” Severus said with the most sincere voice he could dredge up.

The potion-laced chocolates he'd left in the middle of the table were half-eaten, and the two real estate agents barely noticed they had been found in a compromising situation.

Severus closed the door quietly and looked at the clock on the wall. He figured if he came back in a couple hours, the potion would have run its course. Given that Severus had waited this many weeks to find a home, a couple more hours wouldn't hurt before the deed was handed over to him.

Walking back to the waiting room, he whistled a chipper tune. He watched while Manny's secretary minced in the opposite direction towards the conference room, her arm full of files and
more paperwork for Severus' transaction.

'Three... two... one...'

Right on cue, Manny's secretary let out a piercing shriek, which seemed to cause the two lust-crazed lovers to make some hasty and awkward noises of their own, before a few shouts were exchanged and a door slammed.

Manny's secretary marched back to her desk as fast at her fat, short legs would let her, muttering under her breath, “The decency of some people. They should get a hotel room if they are doing to do that. Honestly!”

Looking over at Severus, who barely hid his amusement, she said as diplomatically as possible with a saccharine smile, “They'll just be a few more minutes.”

“I guess they still have some details to hammer out then,” Severus replied with a quirk of his brow.

Manny's secretary looked a bit flustered and went back to making busy work, nervously shuffling papers and making agitated huffing noises.

'Two down, six to go,' Severus mused to himself, as Justina was no longer chasing him either. And when Akela began her tutoring under Severus next week, or possibly two weeks, there would be one less witch chasing after him.

Akela wasn't exactly pursuing Severus, but she was lumped in with the other witches who were seeking to snag him for a date or more.

“You know, I left something brewing back at the shop. Why don't you just have Manny come find me when he's ready,” Severus suggested, with a jerk of his thumb as he was heading out the door.

Manny's secretary gave some grunt of acknowledgment, not finding the humor of the situation like Severus did.

Sauntering along the sidewalk, his hands in his pockets, Severus smiled. He had felt he had done a
good deed, not just for himself, but two people who would be a bit happier. But most of the joy came from the knowledge that Tina would no longer be employing her obnoxious methods in her pursuit of Severus. Manny could have Tina's attentions all to himself.

Given how he had heard from various sources why Tina had sought sanctuary in Malu Palekaiko, Severus hoped Tina would never catch Manny in bed with another witch. The townsfolk of Malu Palekaiko would not take kindly to a double-homicide in their little town, given that Tina said it was a crime of passion that led to her request for sanctuary – or so the gossip around town had hinted.

Severus unlocked his shop and checked on some potions that were simmering over the weekend, pleased that everything was coming along nicely. In his office, he finished correcting the latest batch of homework, glad to see that the students who needed his help the most were improving the greatest amount.

There were a few concerns he had regarding some of his students whose parents had meager incomes. Some of the parents requested to cut back the number of brewing lessons and hours tutored, which saddened Severus a bit. He couldn't necessarily start offering a discount rate for the poorer students, as then there was the question of sliding scale and resentment that others should get his services at a reduced cost. Then there was the fact he had overhead every month to deal with – namely rent, laundry services for rented robes and gloves for students and for himself, Potions ingredients for brewing classes, equipment replacement as cauldron bottoms were melted out or ruined, and so on.

It was a business and he was not in it to run as a charity. He had a house and business he needed to eventually repay Draco for. Miss Brown still had not set up her banking interests abroad yet, as she was needing more time, he guessed.

Setting the homework aside, Severus pulled out some fresh parchment and began calculating how much his time was worth, then began calculating how much time he spent scrubbing cauldrons himself, collecting local Potions ingredients that he normally harvested himself, the amount of time required for finding different ingredients from various sources around the island, and preparing harvested ingredients for pickling, drying and preserving. Then there was time spent sweeping, changing candles, chipping and cleaning up melted wax from the chandeliers and torches above, and so on. Even with spells to do most of these chores, all those still took time away from more profitable tasks.

Severus calculated that his time was most valuable doing tutoring, brewing, commissions, and consultations. For some of the scut work around his shop, he considered hiring a couple of the older and more responsible students in exchange for tutoring services. A couple hours of work in his shop could easily translate into fifteen to thirty minutes of tutoring time or a brewing session, depending on the chores. And there was always at least an hour or two of work required to clean
his shop up at the end of the day. At Hogwarts, detentions served to cut down on his time spent to maintain his classroom. The use of children to do more of the mindless work to keep his shop in order would be a fair exchange.

Then there were ingredients. Not having to go himself to hunt for fresh sea cucumbers, specific corals, and other sea life would be a great help. Severus didn't mind diving, but he would rather enjoy a good swim than spend time hunting for ingredients that sometimes could not be found in the areas that were safe for swimming – that didn't involve getting dashed up against the rocks. And there were other things – like butterflies, local beetles, flowers, roots, bark, leaves and other ingredients – he didn't feel like paying full price for at the local apothecary when he could harvest them himself for “free” in the nearby forests. Spending his time doing that did not necessarily make it free, since time was money.

The children were well versed in the local flora and fauna of their island, so he felt confident that he would be assured quality ingredients that were fresh for his needs, and correctly identified. He would pay a fair market price, more than what the local apothecary would pay, but cheaper than purchasing them at full retail price. The children could then use that money to pay for Potions lessons, or pocket money for themselves. It was a win-win situation that would free up more of his time and be more cost-effective.

Severus made a list of those parents who had approached him about reducing tutoring due to costs. He began drafting letters to each of them, requesting an appointment to discuss a solution to address their financial difficulties while not cutting back on their child's or children's education.

Having grown up poor himself, he could certainly empathize. If his education growing up was based solely on how much his parents could afford to pay for tutoring, instead of a formal academic environment like Hogwarts, then he would have had major gaps in his education. Given Severus' love for knowledge, he did not want anyone who truly loved knowledge as much as he did to be deprived of it either. But they would still have to pay for his services somehow.

Showered and dressed, after a long and exhausting day, Hermione promised Neville she really would go with him to that Greek restaurant and bar. A quick owl to Neville the week before explained there was an emergency at work and she had to take a rain check for next week. She didn’t bother to explain she was at her aunt's, divulging a lot of secrets and baggage to her, while helping Lavender contract her aunt for some consulting work.

Because she was gone for an entire Saturday the week before, Hermione had double the chores to catch up on at Albert's. She had to move a lot of potted plants from the greenhouses out to the fields at Neville's nursery.

Dressing in her best Muggle wear, since Neville did say it was a Muggle Greek restaurant in
Palmers Green, a Greek enclave in the borough of Enfield, Hermione Apparated over to Neville’s place first.

He was living in the little cottage his parents had, moving into it after graduating from Hogwarts. It had been kept in fine condition for him until he came of age.

It had a lovely front garden filled with snowdrops poking up through the late winter snows, with a low wall of aged and worn brick demarcating the front edge of the property.

Knocking on his front door, Hermione was greeted by Neville who was sporting some very modern Mugglewear that would certainly make sure he blended in. He was wearing a nice button-down shirt, gray Muggle-style trousers, and some stylish shoes.

“Ready to go?” he asked, eyebrows raised and eyes cheerful, picking up a potted cactus before heading out the door.

They Apparated together to a spot in Palmers Green that Neville knew would be a safe place to arrive.

Walking into the restaurant, Neville was greeted by the host in a very friendly manner, involving hugs, kisses upon the cheek and lots of excited chatting in Greek. They spoke so fast, Hermione had trouble keeping up with the conversation.

Neville introduced Hermione, who was soundly kissed upon the cheek, having been introduced as an old friend. She could have sworn there were some hand gestures by the host remarking about Hermione. She caught the word “beautiful” before catching snippets from Neville that they were nothing more, using the word appropriate for non-romantically attached friends of the opposite sex.

At the end of their greetings, Neville presented a new cactus to the host, so he could place it by the front door with the other cacti the herbologist had brought as gifts over the years.

“What's with the cacti?” Hermione asked, glancing at the collection of cacti near the front.

“In Greek,” he gently reminded her.
“Why do you bring cactus?”

“Why did you bring a cactus” he corrected her before answering in Greek.

“Because in Greek culture, the thorny spikes ward off the evil eye.”

Hermione nodded, making sure to remember that custom.

Other staff members of the restaurant came over to greet Neville as an old friend. They were shown to a nice table near the dance floor.

“If had know I there be dancing, I would have worn dance shoe,” Hermione said.

“If I had known there would be dancing, I would have worn dancing shoes, he corrected her. “Trust me, the flatter the shoes the better, for this type of dancing. When you get the hang of it, if you want to come back, then you can wear heels. But for learning to dance, your shoes are just fine,” Neville assured her, his Greek easily tripping of his tongue. He spoke without hesitation as if he was a native speaker, though Hermione didn’t speak Greek well enough to know if Neville spoke it with much of an accent.

Neville offered to pay for dinner as his treat, since he was getting free labor out of Hermione, even though her labors were going towards her apprenticeship.

He recommended the avgolemono soup, a chicken and lemon soup with rice that Hermione found quite savory, despite the surprise of the citrus flavor. Neville had the moussaka while Hermione ordered kleftiko, a piece of bone-in lamb slowly baked with lemon and garlic. While they ate their entrees, the restaurant began to fill up and the band began playing.

Early on in the evening, most of the patrons sat while enjoying the music, but as the evening wore on, more and more people began dancing.

The two friends chatted while they ate, discussing some of the seasonal aspects of Neville's business. They also discussed his relationships with some importers and exporters, including one who had recently moved her business to Spain – a witch by the name of Katherine Bigelow, who’d mentored him.
As they sat finishing up a bottle of Italian red wine, waiting for dinner to settle before Neville took Hermione out onto the floor to teach her how to dance, he asked, “So what do you plan to do once you become a Potions mistress?”

The two had given up speaking Greek when the wine started making Hermione's head a little fuzzy near the end of the second glass. It was taking too long to conjugate some verbs for there to be any flow in the conversation.

Hermione had been focused so much on just getting an apprenticeship in the first place, she had given little thought as to what to do with her accreditation once she attained it. Right now, she was so focused on learning all she needed to reach the level of mistress and mastering her five languages, she really hadn't thought much beyond that. The only thing she considered was that one day she might go to Hawaii and hopefully join Severus there. As to how to make use of her knowledge in a strange new land, she hoped it would all work out. There was still time to make plans.

“I'm not sure what I'm going to do exactly,” Hermione pondered aloud. “It will be a while until I master everything I need to know. Perhaps an opportunity will present itself in the meantime. I have a couple years to go, or longer depending on how quickly I master certain skills, learn the basics and four more languages.”

The taste of lemons throughout the evening had reminded her that she had a mound of dried lemons back in her flat; she hadn't bothered to unravel their secrets yet. She had been too distracted – with work, her apprenticeship studies, learning Greek, the recent murder of Blaise Zabini which was barely mentioned in the papers, reviewing Severus' two memories over and over for hints to how to find a way to prove his innocence, and dealing with her Aunt Christine for whom she was acting as a temporary liaison – to even consider working on the lemons.

Hermione knew there was something significant about the lemons, but could not decipher why Dumbledore had a lemon tree growing out of his gravesite. There was a hint on his headstone's epithet about the lemons, but Hermione just had no idea what the importance of it was, and how it fit into the tree that grew lemons with little juice and dry pulp.

Sighing, while swirling her wine in her glass and studying the way the liquid clung to the side of the stemware's bowl, all Hermione could think of was how much Severus would have enjoyed the wine, and the lamb she ate. Hermione wondered if Severus had started up his own Potions shop by now, as he mentioned he might do.

Sensing Hermione in a melancholy mood, Neville decided it was time to dance as a way to cheer
her up.

Holding out his hand, he nodded his head towards the dance floor.

Hermione had watched the people dance during dinner, and while she could see there was a repetitious pattern to the footwork, the movements seemed almost counterintuitive. When she thought someone was going to step twice, they stepped only once, sometimes moving on a four-count, sometimes as if moving on a three-beat count, changing directions in a way that seemed arbitrary but was part of the pattern.

Neville assured her that as long as she was having fun, she couldn't dance wrong, and there was no one who was going to judge her so. The only purpose was to enjoy the music and feel joy in dancing.

The people on the floor joined each other side by side, grasping each other's arms or hands, moving sideways. It took a couple songs, but Hermione eventually picked up the pattern of the steps.

Laughing, she felt her troubles ebbing away for a short while. There were no thoughts about how her loneliness was starting to consume her bit by bit each day. There was no fixating on the fact that there was yet another Death Eater killed (and this one in her own block of flats), pushing away fears of what might have happened had Severus and Draco still been living there at the time and if they would have been victims too. There were no dark thoughts about murders, aching hearts or anxiety about an uncertain future with Severus – only feeling her movements in time with the music, and the infectious revelry of everyone on the dance floor having a good time.

A few of the staff, who were on the dance floor guiding patrons to the steps that went along to the music, broke away to the inner circle. Neville was coaxed to join them, and the small group of men began dancing with and around one another. There were shouts of “Opa!” when one man did a particularly graceful movements or complex step. Neville did his own squat-and-bounce step. It almost surprised Hermione what a good sense of rhythm Neville had, given she still had old impressions of him being a clumsy and shy boy those first four or five years at Hogwarts.

As the evening wore on, Neville and Hermione periodically sat down to take a break. They were starting to sweat with the exertion on the dance floor, which could sometimes speed up with dancers running around in large circle.

Neville ordered a bottle of Tsipouro, a distilled grape marc spirit. To Hermione's relief, it did not include any anise or fennel in the manufacturing process, as some distillations did. It was bad enough she could smell the Ouzo (distilled anise) coming from neighboring tables, which only
reminded her of the libido-killing antidote she and Severus had used during their weeks of Potions experiments.

In-between trips to the dance floor, they downed shots of Tsipouro. Hermione swore never to mix the grape and the grain again, but Tsipouro was distilled from the pressed leavings of grapes, so technically, it was not a grain spirit. Hermione made a promise to stop after the third shot, remembering that two weeks' prior she had drunk far too much.

They stayed until closing. As the rest of the patrons trailed out at the end of the night, Neville and Hermione stayed behind. Neville and some of the staff were sitting in chairs chatting in Greek like old friends while Hermione, in her pleasantly inebriated state, tried to follow and occasionally made a few comments when she understood what the topic was about and caught most of what was said. The other men and the few women who were there chatting encouraged Hermione and complimented on her proficiency, given she had only been learning the language for almost three months.

Eventually, farewells were said, with effusive hugs, kisses upon the cheek, and shaking of hands.

Neville and Hermione decided to hop on a late train and ride it north for a while, letting the alcohol work through their system until they were sober enough to Apparate home from some station stop along the route. Neville wanted to be the gentleman and insisted on making sure Hermione made it home safe without splinching herself, given she had drunk the same amount as Neville but with far less body mass than him to metabolize it.

Eventually, they Apparated inside of her flat, since Hermione explained briefly why she didn't want to Apparate to the outside of her building. Neville was partly aware of Zabini's murder and was kind enough not to press her on details, especially since the Aurors had asked that she not share any information as they still had not caught the murderer(s) yet.

Neville gave Hermione a brief hug before Floo-ing home.

As Hermione laid on her back in her bed, still drunk and dressed, feeling a little bit carefree for the first time in a while, a hallucination of Hagrid and Remus stood by her bedside. They were leaning over her.

'Oh, my' the vision of Remus remarked in his particularly eloquent accent, 'had a bit too much to drink tonight?'
'Neville seemed quite the gent'elman, not taking advantage of our Hermione, now,' Hagrid added in his gruff voice and thick accent. 'But then again, Neville 'as always been a gent'elman. His Gran raised him right.'

Had Hermione been sober, she would have judged the sudden ghostly appearance of two dead friends, who she always considered as a source for good advice and companionship, as shocking. As it was, she was drunk, so it seemed like this was just part of a very surreal hallucination brought on by some very strong foreign drink. The swirling colors of the bed curtains didn't help either.

'Does this mean you're dating Neville now,' the ghostly vision of Remus asked.

“No way. We're just friends. Besides, I don't think of him that way,” Hermione insisted, ignoring the memory of him looking quite attractive the night of the Ministry's Halloween masked ball.

'Besides, Remus, 'Ermione is still in love with Severus. How would it be if her an' Neville were more than friends?’ the large manifestation of Hagrid reminded the vision of Remus.

'Yes, how indeed?’ Remus dryly replied.

“I must be really blind stinking drunk if I'm hallucinating you two both discussing my love life or lack thereof,” Hermione groaned, wishing she had the strength to get out of her clothes she had been sweating in for most of the night.

'Or maybe we're just manifestations of your conscience, since you seem to be battling a small attraction to Neville, feeling as if it is somehow being unfaithful to Severus,' her former Defense Against the Dark Arts professor noted.

The vision of Remus nailed the source of the small pit of guilt that had gnawed at Hermione during the evening.

“Nothing is going to happen between us. I promise you,’’ she insisted, pulling a pillow over her head to try to block out the sight and sound of the two wizard apparitions.

If Hermione's flat was haunted, she wondered why Severus never made mention of it or had never seen the two ghosts before that moment. Perhaps it was a manifestation of her subconscious mind. If it was, this was a new type of magic she had never heard of, but would not be surprised by.
Before she could meditate on the matter much further, Hermione fell asleep in her clothes.

Of course, of all the days for the sun not to be cloaked by London's morning fog, it would be the day after Hermione had drunk too much the night before and left her curtains open.

As the sun pierced her eyes and straight into her brain with the needle-sharp precision of a surgeon, finding the right spot in which to cause maximum pain, she groaned and rolled over, pulling the bedclothes she had fallen asleep on top of over her head. The mere fact of making any noise and the changing of her body's orientation caused even more grievous injury to her skull, which throbbed like a big bass drum in time to each beat of her heart.

“Marf,” she whimpered pitifully in a whisper, “hangover relief potion.” Her hand shot out blindly beyond the covers, her fingers waiting for the house-elf to fetch a vial of the much-needed elixir.

Fortunately, Hermione had the foresight to brew several doses ahead of time, given the fact she'd be attending a monthly binge party with her Potions master in the months to come.

Marf gently placed the vial in her hand, which slithered back under the bed-covers. There was a rustle of the covers, indicating that Hermione had tipped the vial back, and a gentle sigh of relief escaped her lips.

Hermione swished her wand and the curtains were closed before she removed the bedclothes from over her head. She was no longer suffering from a hangover, but that didn't mean that the morning sun wasn't offending her eyes that day.

After slipping out of her rumpled clothes, which smelled of dried sweat and garlic, and into her terrycloth dressing gown, she stumbled into the kitchen.

It was a good thing Hermione had already taken her hangover relief potion, as the scream she let loose upon seeing the shimmering apparitions of Remus and Hagrid – sitting at the kitchen table, smiling at her as if awaiting her arrival for breakfast that morning – would have surely caused her head to feel as if it was a ripe melon splitting open.

“Wait, I'm not drunk anymore. Why are you two still here?” Hermione asked, her face frozen in
stunned amazement.

She knew they couldn't be ghosts, since Remus and Hagrid had passed to the other side and left no part of themselves behind.

'As I mentioned last night, we're just manifestations of your conscience.' Remus smiled at her.

'An' it does seem you have been in needin' of unloading some parts of your subconscious as of late, 'Ermione, Hagrid added in explanation for their appearance last night and this morning.

Hermione knew it was definitely not the ghost of Hagrid, as the original Hagrid's vocabulary was not expansive enough to use the word “subconscious” nor understand the finer aspects of psychology. It surely must be a manifestation of her mind, as the vision of Remus had already explained.

Slumping into an unoccupied chair, Hermione put her face in her hands and her elbows on the table, which still wobbled just a little.

“God, I miss Severus. This wouldn't be happening to me if he were here,” she moaned sorrowfully into her hands.

'Probably not. But as it is, we are here, which means you must need to resolve some issue you are battling within your head or heart.' Remus remarked.

'I don't need this shit,' Hermione thought to herself.

'No one asks for 'this shit,' but here we are.' the pale manifestation of Remus replied to the thoughts in her head.

'Such language, and from a nice witch like you,' Hagrid gently chastised her.

Now she knew that these really weren't ghosts, since “Remus” read her thoughts. She just really might be going mad, or this really was some strange way for her mind to deal with the fact that she no longer had Severus, her confidant and confessor, around anymore.
Standing up from the table, suddenly filled with anger, she blurted out, “If you're in my fucking head, they why can't I solve the problems of these damn lemons?” She stomped over to the counter and picked one up, throwing it at the head of Remus, who did not flinch. The lemon passed right through the silvery vision of Remus and hit the kitchen wall behind him, rolling across the floor before coming to rest by the leg of her chair.

"As I said, we're in your head. So if you haven't figured that out by know, we would not know either," Remus answered before amending his statement. "But given that Dumbledore hid the Philosopher's Stone in a rather unique but simple way, it would not surprise me if he had a simple answer for unlocking the secret of these lemons."

The thought had already crossed her mind before, but hearing it said aloud from another source, even if the source was her own mind, gave Hermione something to ponder.

If the answer was so simple, then why hadn't anyone at the Ministry unraveled the secret yet. Since Hermione no longer worked at the Ministry, she would not have access to what methods the Ministry used to determine the significance behind the lemons or what tests they had conducted. Even if she still worked there, she wasn't even in the right Department anyway. Perhaps Kingsley would know what the Ministry had done so far, so she would not waste time replicating their experiments. But even if they did conduct certain experiments on the lemons, she would probably do them herself, just to confirm the results or see if it was just sloppy work resulting in error.

Dumbledore had once mentioned how witches and wizards were prone to use magic, not logic, to solve their problems. She figured that this problem must be something that would require more common sense and deduction than any spell to figure out.

Hermione didn't have time to spend that morning on the enigma of the lemons on her counter. She had to eat breakfast and head over to Albert's home.

Sundays were intensive study days, making up for time during the week that she spent doing work for Lavender that didn't apply towards her apprenticeship. There would be brewing, preparation of ingredients for preservation, including pickling and dehydrating, discussions delving deep into the theory of Potions, and the assignment of more books and scrolls for her to study during the week. Though Hermione had been out of school for over five years, she now wondered how she'd had the stamina to spend all that time at Hogwarts studying, in addition to going off on various adventures with Harry and Ron, and attending Quidditch games. She didn't think her energy could have flagged so much within a few years, since she was still young. Perhaps the constant fear of dangers lurking around most corners of Hogwarts with the rise of Voldemort had spurred her on, but maybe it was that she was no longer a teenager full of boundless energy.
Of all the things she wished she could bottle, it was that vim and vigor of youth she wished she could brew and distill. Invigoration Draughts only did so much.

Once at Albert's, she spent her time in his laboratory, skinning, eviscerating and butchering snipes, which the Potions master had hunted and caught during the night. He promised to take her snipe-hunting next month, which was best between the new moon and the full moon in the middle of the night. March was usually the peak of the season when the little buggers were plump and ripe for mating season. The ones Hermione was butchering were still a little on the small side, as it was still February, but February was almost over.

Hermione hated this part of her apprenticeship. If she inserted the knife in the wrong place or too deeply, she punctured the bowels of the snipe and the lab would smell of fecal matter and some parts of the offal would be ruined. The liver and spleen were exceptionally valuable, and the contamination of fecal matter from pierced intestines meant that she had to catch and prepare that many more snipes next month. Then there was the blood. It was thickly sticky and was an odd vibrant pink. Had it been more viscous and darker red, she would have needed a Calming Draught, as the sight of that much blood would have brought back memories of the war. The harvesting of the brains from the skull was a rather gruesome task that truly tested the limits of her stomach.

Once the meat and organs were harvested and prepared for immersion in preserving fluid, she moved onto the bones. She would have to boil them to remove the remaining bits of meat and dry them for the next month. In one month's time, the Potions apprentice would have to then grind and powder the bone and cartilage for various potions Albert brewed.

Since Albert had experienced a great deal of financial hardship during the contesting of his wife's will, he had to refrain from buying more ingredients, and even sell off some of the more valuable Potions ingredients in order to keep himself financially afloat. Since his stores were depleted, it was up to Hermione to help Albert restock his personal inventory with the preparation of new ingredients.

While the two were filleting snipe, removing the membrane surrounding the small hunks of meat, Hermione asked, “Albert? What would happen if I couldn't finish my Potions apprenticeship with you? You know, just for the sake of curiosity, as I'm definitely going to finish my apprenticeship.”

Albert gave Hermione a curious look. “Is there a reason why you wouldn't finish your apprenticeship with me that I should be aware of, Hermione?”

“No, but after Zabini... I was thinking, what would happen if something happened to you?”
There was a long pause before Albert replied, as he formulated his response. “Well, I know I'm not as young as I used to be – no, hold the blade at a shallower angle so you'll leave more of the meat behind,” Albert said, interrupting his answer to instruct her on how to improve her knife skills. “Yes, perfect, like that. As I was saying, I know I'm not as young as I once was, but even wizards younger than me have passed away from natural causes. I can understand your concern. But should something happen to me and I was unable to finish instructing you, another Potions master or mistress would step up and offer their help. Niles, Braxton, or Royston would probably offer to help you finish.”

“Not Royston,” Hermione immediately responded.

“Yes, I could certainly see why, given the propensity for masters and female apprentices to marry. Especially since he is close to your age.”

Hermione could not help but think about Severus' offer to teach her, offering himself as her master if she agreed to come with him.

“Of the situations where a bachelor master and a single female apprentice work together, how often do they wind up marrying? Just out of curiosity?” Hermione added for clarification.

“I can't think of a single instance within the past 300 years where a single Potions master who was unattached and a single female apprentice, who were within 30 or 40 years of age of one another, didn't wind up getting married. And of the married Potions masters, cases of infidelity with a female apprentice, whether she is married or not, is fairly high.”

“Infidelity in the wizarding community without masters and apprentices is already pretty high,” Hermione said darkly.

“Yes, I suppose that is true,” Albert freely admitted. “But be that as it may, it's easier for female apprentices to get apprenticeships with female mistresses. That is why some married male masters tend not to take female apprentices, married or not.”

There was a pause in the conversation which Albert mistook for awkwardness from Hermione as she had not said anything.

He amended his answer by saying, “Not unless the age difference is great. So I don't think there is any risk of us, in case you were worried. Plus, I'm still mourning Dangerose and probably still will
for quite some time. And I can tell you're mourning yourself, which is a bit understandable even if you said you're happier now after the divorce. You seem quite heartsick, if I may be so bold as to state the obvious.”

Hermione had not been worried about her and Albert falling into each other's arms at all, now realizing he'd mistaken her silence regarding that particular matter. The revelation that in 300 years, every single male Potions master wound up marrying their single female apprentice set Hermione's heart aflutter. She could only wonder if Severus' apprenticeship offer had been his indirect way of proposing to her. She knew about Severus’ first marriage and how he had been thrust into it against his will, so she could see his reluctance to flat-out ask her to marry him. It had taken until the last month of them being together before either one of them could openly say those three words to one another that always changed the dynamics of a relationship.

Given Hermione's bad marriage and the tragic end of Severus' first marriage, it would be that much harder for either to say two more words: “Marry me.”

Dragged back from her reflecting upon Severus’ offer to teach her with Albert's last comment, she almost instinctively said she was not mourning over her divorce of Ron at all. To admit as much would only then lead to speculation about whom she actually was heartsick over.

Maybe this is why the old fortuneteller had told Hermione to go with Severus if she could.

She felt a sudden urge to see how much money she had in her Gringotts vault at that very instant. The potions she was receiving royalties on were doing well, and the twins said her butterfly hearts idea was a huge success at The Sirens' Secrets. She hadn't bothered to count how much was in her vault, but merely noted each time she went back, she took out far less each visit than she had accumulated since the last visit. Hermione was amassing a nice amount of gold on her own, and she wondered if it would be foolish to suddenly splurge for a Portkey to Hawaii.

Filled with a certain notion, Hermione suddenly wondered if she did go to Hawaii, could she have the strength to leave Severus to go back to England and finish her apprenticeship with Albert.

“Since we are talking hypothetical situations: What would happen if you were perfectly capable of teaching me all the way through my apprenticeship, but I chose to switch to another Potions master or mistress to finish? Has that happened before? Not that I'm going to leave you, since I think we have a fine working relationship, but just out of curiosity.”

Albert shook his head as he finished up one batch of meat, chucking it into a large wooden bowl before grabbing more pieces of meat to de-membrane. His mouth was set in a grim frown. “Those
sorts of instances have happened, but it's not good. It's a sign that the Potions master did not take the time to fully vet his apprentice, and his apprentice did not have the discipline to see their term through to the end with his or her first master. And then the apprentice who is finally accredited is not looked upon kindly in our little sub-set, since it seems everyone knows everyone.

"Hypothetically speaking, should I still be living and able, and you left for another Potions master to finish your studies, it would be a move that would haunt you for the rest of your career, unfortunately.” He paused and amended his statement adding, “There is the instance where if you wanted to study a language I may not be versed in, you might partially study under another master or mistress who was fluent in that language, but it would only be for between two to six months away at most. But then you would come back and finish your apprenticeship under me anyway.”

Hermione kept her face as impassive as possible.

Albert looked over at Hermione, pausing in his task, to add, “Had I taken Trevor Spawn, and he did not have the discipline to be an able apprentice, given the history of his failures at the Department S & R, I think I might have made the move to pawn him off on another master. As it was, I would have been stuck with him out of financial obligation, being paid handsomely by his father to take him. I think it's hard to tell from a few interviews and letters of recommendation if a master or mistress and a potential apprentice will get along well. I think it is a bit short-sighted and discriminatory for our community to take such a petty attitude regarding switching masters or mistresses. But unfortunately, that is the prejudice we currently have, and it is one I hope will eventually vanish. It's like divorce – sometimes it just doesn't work out in the end, and both parties are happier if they part, given from what you've told me of own your divorce so far. I hope I'm not being too bold.”

“No, not at all Albert,” she assured her master.

It figured that the same attitude regarding divorce in the wizarding world would be the same between master or mistress and apprentice, both parties encouraged to stick it out and suffer, no matter how disastrous or unhappy they are with the arrangement.

With Albert's insight, Hermione squashed the idea of running off to see Severus before the end of her apprenticeship. If she saw Severus, she would probably never leave his side again.

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It certainly didn't take long for the invitation to arrive at Severus' shop. The wedding invitation to Tina and Manny's wedding arrived via snowy owl, as the couple had chosen to use white owls to deliver their invitations, other than those they handed out personally.
Severus wondered if he was invited because Tina was in hope of accruing a large pile of gifts from guests, or that Manny considered him enough of an acquaintance to bother inviting. It seems that Draco and Ginny had received an invitation as well. He would have to ask Ginny for recommendations of a gift for the couple, that was under a certain denomination.

Severus’ wedding gift to the Malfoys was based on the fact that Draco had already bought *everything* to set up house for Ginny, so his gift was more for something to enjoy immediately on their honeymoon.

Draco still occasionally grumbled that he wished he could retrieve his mother’s sterling silver flatware since the Ministry had seized Malfoy Manor, all its contents, and his entire Gringotts vault in London. Perhaps as a first anniversary present, Severus would send Naomi off to England in search of his mother’s sterling flatware, since it was a full service of 24 place settings that had been handed down through the Black family for over 300 years before Narcissa received it as part of her hope chest and dowry. Not many families needed a silver service for 24, or wanted one associated with a family more renown for being Death Eaters than of the headmaster that once ran Hogwarts a long time ago.

For his lunch break, Severus went over to the shop where the wizard who was building his house was busy planning a beam of ‘ohi’a wood. He had picked ‘ohi’a for the main support and frame of his house because it was a very hard and dense wood, he wanted something that would last a long time, since Severus had no intention of ever moving away from Malu Palekaiko. Many other houses on the island used koa wood for construction as it was a very good hardwood, but Severus wanted something a little bit more durable, and something a little different, though the price was just a bit more.

Draco had fronted Severus all the money he needed to purchase the land and also for the construction of his dream home. He hated to be literally in debt to Draco, but he was willing to put his pride aside since he would be able to pay Draco back, eventually.

Severus had worked with the builder for a few weeks on the design of his house. He preferred tall open-beamed ceilings, especially in his Potions lab so there would be room for the smoke and fumes to rise above into the rafters and not choke him out of his own lab. This was because a few advanced potions required the burning and scorching of some ingredients in order to unlock some of their magical properties.

There were specific requirements for the room he had designed specifically as his library. Severus had visited the island’s one and only bookstore many times, compiling a long list of titles he wanted to purchase, but refrained until he had his house built. Currently, Severus was storing his entire library at his shop, and there was barely enough shelf space for both his work and personal library. Once his house was built, about half of the books would be coming back home. He made sure to have enough shelf space to hold his entire library, plus room to grow in hopes that
Hermione might join him someday, and since buying and reading books was one of Severus' few compulsions. And it was a fine hobby to have, especially since he could afford to buy most of the books he wanted now. But since opening his shop, he wasn't able to spend as much time reading as he once had.

Running a business was a full-time job. It was almost as demanding of his time during his tenure at Hogwarts during the school year, but there were no sudden calls from the Dark Lord to drag him away from scrolls of Potions homework that needed correcting anymore. At least during the summers, while teaching at Hogwarts, Severus had plenty of time to catch up on reading that he didn't have during the term. But running his business was a week-in, week-out demand of his time. There were some scheduled breaks coming up in the year, as there were various harvests throughout the year that would demand much of the children's time as they helped on the various farms all around the island. There was sugar cane, pineapple, mango, papaya, taro, coffee, other exotic fruits, plus the cut-flower trade, all of which was exported mostly to the mainland and other countries. There were some Potions ingredients that were harvested and exported, but the amount was much smaller than the agricultural side of the export trade.

But given how the schedule seemed to run with six to eight weeks of tutoring with a one- to two-week break, this actually would be more beneficial to the students retaining knowledge, since there would be none of the degradation of the students' knowledge from a three-month break that he normally encountered at Hogwarts. For some reason, a three-month break meant that some of his lessons and pearls of wisdom he imparted to his students dribbled out of brains and out their ears, since it seemed he spent the first month of every year going over the previous year's lessons that the students seemed to have forgotten during their lengthy break. Frequent short one- or two-week breaks would mean that knowledge would still remain fresh between the ears.

Such a break was coming up soon in early April. It would be a one-week break for Easter, since many of the island's multi-generational inhabitants were practicing Christians, a hold-over from when Christian missionaries first came to the islands, unaware that before they came Hawaii had an integrated society where Muggles and wizards lived side-by-side. It was shortly after the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy that the islands were discovered by not only Muggles, but by the rest of the wizarding communities, which forced the segregation of Hawaiian society. There was still a lingering resentment over that fact, but the resentment seemed to wane more and more as the generations passed, and the last of the ones who had lived during the days when their society was split in two had passed away over one hundred years ago. It was for the fact that Muggles and wizards had once lived harmoniously with one another in the Hawaiian Islands that Muggle culture was not shunned to the degree it was in England.

Severus was certain that if he had been born and raised in Malu Palekaiko, he would have been a different person. His parents still might have been just as awful, abusive, and neglectful, but the people who would have surrounded him in this community would not have been of the same caliber as the Slytherins with whom he'd attached himself at Hogwarts – who had seduced him into the Dark Lord's cult.

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It was time for the weekly staff meeting at The Lovely Lavender Company. Hermione had fetched her Aunt Christine from in front of the Leaky Cauldron and escorted her through the old pub, out the back, through the moving brick wall, and into Diagon Alley before arriving at the company's headquarters, which was located past Gringotts and off on a side street.

Aunt Christine, despite being through Diagon Alley a few times before, kept craning her neck around to see all the various quaint stores and odd dress of the wizarding population, which seemed to find Christine's business suit just as equally strange, garnering stares back. Even the trip to Gringotts and the introduction to the goblin bankers was quite the experience, since Christine could not have Lavender deposit funds into her Muggle bank, and would require a vault at Gringotts for the wizarding side of her consultation business. The goblins would then convert Galleons into Muggle money as Christine needed. However, Hermione or Lavender would always have to be with her to help her get into Diagon Alley and deal with the goblins, since goblins were reluctant to deal with Muggles unless they were accompanied by a witch or wizard. It was an issue the Muggle Alliance Network leadership promised to look into, once the Alliance was large enough to be taken seriously by the goblins.

As the four staff members sat there, Lavender had Wonkle bring tea, which caused yet another startled response from Hermione's Muggle aunt. The sight of house-elves was quite disturbing, having her preconceived notions about elves being cute and adorable smashed with the grim reality of seeing an actual elf, with bulbous eyes, bat-like ears, wrinkled skin, sparse wisps of hair, tatty rags and all.

Christine found her composure once again as talk of business began. There were layouts for new ads that Lavender found ingenious in their concepts, but made some suggestion for her to change regarding word choices, since there were a few Muggle cultural references that didn't translate very well into the wizarding world. The launch plan for India was in the beginning phases and Christine was in her element, as her specialty was launching into new regions.

Albert and Hermione had updates regarding the latest Potions they were testing. Unfortunately, since Christine was a Muggle, she could not participate in the trial phase, or even sample a potion. It was up to Hermione and Lavender to give Christine feedback regarding a product's effects.

It seemed that the business at hand was drawing to a close; however, it wasn't. Lavender was holding a very weather-beaten letter in her hand. It seemed to have traveled a long way, given how it was worn around the edges and along the fold, and the water stains.

“I was wondering how your apprenticeship is coming along, Hermione?” Lavender questioned, fondling the letter.

“Well, Albert would be the better judge of that since he knows how much I have left to learn,
though I still have four languages to master,” Hermione deferred.

“Four more languages?” Christine asked with astonishment.

“Many Potions books have anti-translation spells. Trade secrets and such,” Hermione answered.

Now Christine recalled walking in on such a conversation before between Hermione and her sister, Wendy. She finally pieced together what the two had been talking about when she walked in on them in the kitchen at Hermione's birthday party.

“I can help you with French, if you need any,” Christine offered.

“Thank you, but next I'll be working on Latin,” her niece replied.

“Which brings me to something I wanted to discuss with you, Hermione. After you master Latin, what other languages did you have in mind to master?” her boss asked.

“Well, I was thinking of Arabic, German, and Chinese.”

Lavender folded up the letter and moved it back and forth, playing with it, almost like a fan. “What if I were to suggest that perhaps you might consider Japanese and Spanish instead of Arabic and German?” Lavender asked, her brows raised, almost looking amused.

“Well, I guess I could, though learning German allows me to learn other Germanic and Scandinavian-based languages faster. And Spanish will be quite easy to master once I've learned Latin,” Hermione surmised. “Why the interest in those two languages?”

Lavender leaned back and began slowly swiveling her chair from side to side. Smiling, she said, “I figure by the time you have finished your apprenticeship, I'll be ready to launch in eastern Asia, Australia, and the Americas, given my launch in the Americas was put on hold. And given that Mexico, Central America, and most of South America speak Spanish, it would be a very useful language to learn.”

“You're launching into India soon. Wouldn't Sanskrit serve me better, given that India is home to a
population nearly as large as China?” Hermione countered.

“Well,” Lavender said slowly, smiling secretly to herself, “there is more than just expanding into these markets I'm considering. You see...” She paused wondering the order in which to reveal several bits of new information. “I'm thinking of possibly having you run the Asia-Pacific region of The Lovely Lavender Company, in addition to developing Potions for regional markets, as the Eastern Asian markets have certain cultural preferences that would be far different versus European and American markets.”

Hermione stammered. “I... I don't know what to say. I'm flattered you would consider me, but I know nothing about running a business, especially a regional office for such an operation.”

“Oh, but you will. You see, I want to train you to help run my company, Hermione. As I will definitely need your help in the near future. Say in another eight months or so, I'll be a bit too busy with other things in order to come into the office full-time, and I'll need your help,” Lavender admitted, lazily stroking her still flat abdomen.

“You're pregnant?” Christine accurately guessed, recognizing the unconscious stroking of her abdomen from her own pregnancy and the way Lavender smiled.

“Yes!” Lavender gushed with a huge smile.

Christine jumped up and ran around Lavender's desk to congratulate her one and only client. Albert also got up and walked over to shake Lavender's hand in congratulations as well.

Hermione's initial reaction was to say, “Better you than me,” but held her tongue. Thinking about it, she was actually happy for Lavender and Ron. Ron had wanted children, and better that he have them with someone whom he truly loved.

“So, Hermione. I need someone who will help me run my company while I'm recovering and spending time with the baby. The twins wanted you to run The Sirens' Secrets, so if they wanted you to run that, I have faith in you to help run my company while I'm working with far, far, fewer hours for a while, and to eventually run operations for Asia-Pacific. What do you say?” her boss asked.

It was a thrilling prospect, running an operation of near equal size, plus developing Potions, making use of her talent, but suddenly, she wondered how Severus would fit into all this. She
wanted more than anything to be with Severus and was ready to turn Lavender down, even though she and Severus had made no promises to one another.

“I... well...” Hermione hoped it would be somewhere close to Severus so that perhaps she could Portkey into work. “Do you have an idea where you want this Asia-Pacific office to be?” she asked, feeling nervous that it might be someplace like Tokyo, Beijing, or Lima – and keep her traveling so much that it would strain her possible future relationship with Severus.

“What better place to have you manage that region from than to have you smack dab in the middle of it. I was thinking someplace like, oh...” Lavender said, dragging out the suspense, “... like... Hawaii?”

Hermione didn't know if she should laugh or cry. In short order she was doing both, feeling relieved and thrilled that the fates were working to put her and Severus back together.

“Hawaii? Where's that?” Albert asked, which confirmed Hermione's suspicion that Dumbledore not only wiped Hawaii and Malu Palekaiko from books and maps, but from the minds of the British wizarding public.

Christine looked over at Albert and asked flatly, “You are joking, right?”

Hermione looked at her aunt and minutely shook her head, indicating this was something not to question and she would fill her in on it later.

Lavender, sensing the potential for a future problem, interrupted the conversation between Albert and Christine. “So, Hermione, are you interested?”

Hermione jumped up and ran around and hugged Lavender, thanking her profusely and also congratulating her on the happy news.

For some reason, this news about eventually moving to Hawaii gave Hermione the courage to finally view the third and last memory from Severus. For some strange and silly reason, she couldn't view it before, fearing what his message to her might be. She had no reason to assume it would bear bad news, but she couldn't find the strength to pour it into Lavender's Pensieve until now.
The only reason Hermione could think of Lavender suggesting setting up operations in Hawaii was because Severus had owled her with the suggestion. She wondered if Severus was going to go back to working for Lavender, or if there was something else he would do. Maybe he'd opened his Potions shop and this was a way to bring her back to him once she was done with her apprenticeship. Lavender did say that around the time Hermione was done with her apprenticeship she would be launching in the Asia–Pacific region. Maybe if Hermione applied herself even more, she could finish her apprenticeship quicker, and be on her way to be reunited with Severus that much sooner.

Albert and Christine left Lavender's office, heading back to their respective offices, as Lavender had set up a place for Christine to work when she was on-site for Fridays. Hermione stuck around, hanging back, eager to talk more with Lavender.

“Is there anything else Severus says in his letter,” Hermione asked, eager to hear more news about him.

Lavender's smile faltered. “Severus didn't write to me, if that’s what you were thinking.”

“Well, the letter in your hand, and your decision to set it up in Hawaii...” Hermione could feel the tears filling up in her eyes. She had hoped it was Severus who had written the letter, but it was not.

“I'm sorry if you assumed he wrote it. It was Draco,” the blonde witch admitted.

“Draco?” Hermione didn't know what to think. She thought Draco still couldn't stand the sight of her, given that murderous look he had given her when he was Polyjuiced as Harry the day they fled. They grated on each other's nerves.

“It seems Draco misses doing advertising and marketing, finding it more rewarding than his current occupation,” Lavender said without giving away even of a hint of what Draco was doing for work.

Hermione flopped back into her chair feeling a bit defeated. She had thought that Severus had found some way to bring her back to him without outright begging, which was not in his nature to do. Well, except for that one time she was blindfolded and their hormones got the better of them. But Hermione remembered how it had almost pained him to beg her to come with him. She should have known. Her heart felt a little less elated.
Lavender must have seen the chance, between teaching Hermione how to run the business for her upcoming maternity leave and Draco's suggestion to open up a regional office in Hawaii, to blend them into a new opportunity for Hermione.

Squaring her shoulders, Hermione put on a brave face and went back to her own office. Even with her hopes wavering between elation and disappointment, she made a promise to stay late and view Severus' third and final memory that night. Her curiosity had finally become stronger than her fear, or so she thought.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to both of my lovely betas, JuneW and Hope, for their work on improving this chapter.

You can read about Palmers Green, the Greek enclave in North London, on wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmers_Green

“No Greek home would be complete without at least one cactus positioned somewhere near the front entrance. In a big ‘Feta’ can or garden pot, a cactus with its thorny spikes, takes it place proudly warding off the evil eye from the property.”
http://www.faliraki-info.com/susie/superstitions/greek-traditions.htm

You can read more about tsipouro here:

Snipes are the mythical creatures Muggle men say they are taking women in search for as a euphemism for taking them some place discreet for a bit of canoodling.

“ 'Ohi’a (METROSIDEROS POLYMORPHA) is unique to Hawai‘i. It is one of the trees initially used by native Hawaiians for critical construction applications such as tools, and wear-strips along the gunwales of canoes. Its modern applications are typically in flooring, furniture and cabinetry. It is the most common endemic tree in the state, can be a major component of mixed forest stands, and is one of the very first trees able to take root on new lava fields. The tree is present in shapes ranging from shrubs to 100 feet in height. The wood ranges in color from pale brown to a dark reddish brown. It is fine grained, very hard, strong, and dense (specific gravity .70) In furniture and cabinetry applications, 'Ohi'a is nearly indestructible. However, great care and experience must be brought to bear in the seasoning of this notoriously unstable wood.”
http://www.winklerwoods.com/ww/hawaiianwoods.html
“Never Provoke a Friendly Slytherin”

Chapter Summary

Akela decides to ask a favor of Severus, which brings back the full-blown snarky Potions master. Hermione visits some memories in Lavender's Pensieve, one memory having the distinct hint of lemons.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: NSFW fan art embedded into story further down as you scroll.

On Friday, Lavender had proposed that Hermione move to Hawaii to open a regional office and manufacturing facility. Despite Hermione's promise to herself to look at Severus' third and final memory that Friday, she waited until the following Monday. She had hoped that Severus might have sent an albatross by now. Given the fact Severus had only written to her twice before – a sweet missive under the guise of Calleo and a terse note as himself – she wasn't surprised. Besides, Severus was paranoid, and justly so. She surmised he probably considered it prudent not to create more incriminating evidence linking himself to her, as the hunt for the two Death Eaters who had escaped England was still not solved. Given that Moody had recently searched her flat and found her books on Hawaii, it was a good thing she had no letters from Severus laying about. At least her escape box where she kept Severus' memories was left undisturbed, as she had hidden it in her underwear drawer with a charm to remain unnoticed. Thank Merlin, the Aurors had left it alone.

Opening the simple, brown wooden box that she had luckily been storing in her escape box, Hermione pulled out the vial with the yellow cap. His note said that this memory was for her
personally.

Her door was already locked and everyone else had gone home for the day.

Falling into the memory, she found herself back in her flat, though actually in the memory it was still Severus' flat. He was sitting in one of the wingback chairs, dressed in his black frock coat, a dark burgundy shirt, and black trousers – the outfit that she had last seen him wearing. In the background, Marf, Dheef, Wonkle and a few other house-elves Hermione recognized from work were Apparating in and out of view, each time carrying a towering stack of books to set on the floor behind Severus, only to disappear and return with another teetering stack of books.

Hermione could place the memory to their last night together. She must have just left and the house-selves were bringing his books back from being secreted away for temporary storage in the office loft space at The Sirens' Secrets.

It was good to see the Severus she knew so well once again. She had seen the Pensieve version of Severus looking emaciated and haunted, his soul threadbare during the last days of the war, many times during her quest to re-examine his memories to find a way to clear his and Draco's names.

He was staring straight ahead as he addressed the air in front of him, knowing it would be Hermione who would be seeing him in a Pensieve.

“Hermione, if you are viewing this memory, then hopefully you've seen the two other memories.”

Hermione stood in front of the memory of Severus, his eyes focused beyond where she stood as if seeing through her like a ghost.

“I want to start by saying that come morning, or some later time, after hearing my confession about my wife, should you choose to reconsider your choice to clear my name or join me in the future, I will not hold it against you. Your insistence of your constant love for me and trying to find the best in people is what makes me love you that much more. You're one of the few decent people in this world who has yet to disappoint me, forgiving those small indiscretions in your youth. I'm made unforgivable mistakes in my youth, so I cannot fault you for those small ones anymore.

“You have made me fall in love with you, as much as I did not want to and fought against it. My heart is not easily won over, and yet you have done just that.”
Severus paused for a moment, inhaling sharply as if in preparation of something.

“It is my hope that someday, when you finish with your apprenticeship, you will come to join me once more. If you have seen the memory with the blue cap, then you know where you can find me.”

Severus' gaze dropped and Hermione could see him struggle within himself.

“And should you choose to not follow me, coming to your senses that you wouldn't want to live with your old professor who was once a Death Eater and who killed his wife...” Severus lifted his head up higher, putting on his own brave face. “... then I hope you have a wonderful life full of love, joy, and success. You've given me a chance to experience love as I've never had before, and I will always cherish how much you made me feel needed and treasured by you. And I hope the light that is inside of you, that is like a beacon, never diminishes.”

Severus stood up from his chair, continuing to gaze towards the wall on the other side of the room.

“Goodbye, Hermione.”

Finding herself back in her office, Hermione slumped to the floor and wept, her heart aching as much as the morning that Severus fled.

The old fortuneteller's nebulous words came back to haunt her now. “But if you do not leave with him, you will see him again in the future.” Seeing Severus just now in the memory fulfilled her prediction. The certainty she would see Severus in person again, even with the news of her future employment in Hawaii, seemed even less so now.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

To Severus' relief, he did not have to take Akela on as a tutoring student in order to help her get over her crush on him. A handsome local wizard about three years older than her, by the name of Ulrich, had finally noticed what a lovely young witch she had blossomed into and the two were courting.

Ulrich was quite comely, and unfortunately knew it. There was something about the boy that hit a particular nerve in Severus, like the twinge of an old injury if aggravated. It was his cocky attitude, driven on by his talent as a wizard and his good looks, that reminded the older wizard of Sirius Black and James Potter.
Mounga said he was a good boy from a good family and didn't get up to trouble like others, and given that Mounga was the local judge, he knew who the trouble-makers were. His reassurances still didn't ease Severus' suspicions about the young wizard.

Severus didn't think there would be anything left for him to teach Akela in preparation for her SAT's anyway, since the questionnaire she had filled out, and had signed by her mother, indicated she had mastered all the necessary Potions in order to pass her test with flying colors, plus she had taken on some more advanced elixirs on her own. If Akela was interested in still becoming a Potions mistress, he would contact a couple Potions mistresses he knew back in England, probably under his nom de guerre, since Severus Snape was still persona non grata, even in Potions master circles.

It was late Friday afternoon. Severus would be closing up shop in another hour so he and Draco, along with Ginny, could join the Finaus for their habitual end-of-week drinks.

The shop was quiet, as Draco had just finished with his last student for the day before the week-long Easter break began. Severus had some homework that he needed to finish grading before they could close up shop.

The door opened as Severus had his head down over his desk, checking over the ledger and appointment book to see how busy he would be next week with his students off. With the chime of the bell, he bid whomever it was to come into his office.

“Uncle Severus?” Akela addressed him. She had adopted the addressing of him in the same manner as her little sister, as her crush had waned and she wasn't quite as infatuated with him anymore.

“Akela. Come in. What is it?” he asked, curious as to why she was there.

Walking through the threshold, she kept her eyes down and quietly closed the door. Taking the seat on the other side of Severus' desk, she sat down, looking timid and demure.

“Is there something the matter?” Severus asked, wondering if there was some bad news, since she normally was a cheerful and effusive girl.

“I would like to pay you for a commission,” she stated, her gaze briefly flitting up to meet the Potions master's eyes.
He could have stopped her right there, since underage witches and wizards could not request commissions without parental approval. And anything that she was legally able to buy for Potions brewing for her age, she could easily purchase at the apothecary, and probably cheaper than what his brewing time was worth.

His eyes narrowed slightly as he scrutinized the young witch in front of him who was acting strangely. Severus leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. His curiosity was piqued, and given how she seemed to be there clandestinely, judging by her behavior, he wanted to know what she was seeking.

“And just what potion are you willing to pay me to brew for you?” he asked in a cool tone, keeping his face impassive.

Akela's eyes glanced back up at Severus only to dart away again nervously. “I want you to brew a contraceptive for me.”

It was that Ulrich boy. Severus wasn't sure if he was pressuring her into sex or if she felt she was ready. That young wizard he strongly disliked was the impetus behind Akela asking for that particular elixir.

“You do realize that contraceptives are available for purchase at the local apothecary,” he prompted her.

“Yes.”

“Then why don't you purchase them there instead of seeking to pay me for my time and skills?” Severus prodded. He knew the answer, he just wanted to draw her along a line of questioning like a barrister in a courtroom would draw a defendant out into admitting his guilt. This is why Slytherins made the best lawyers.

“You know why.”

“Enlighten me,” he said firmly, his voice becoming deeper and more serious.
“Because I'm not seventeen yet. I'm under the age of consent,” she confessed, her eyes firmly fixed on the box of tissues Severus had placed at the edge of his desk. Akela didn't need a tissue, but it was someplace convenient to fix her gaze other than to look Severus in the eye.

“And what makes you think that if you could not go to an apothecary that I could brew one for you?” Severus continued with his probing questions.

Akela's eyes flitted up and were pleading. “Because you're my friend?”

It angered Severus that this girl could think that because she called him “Uncle Severus” that he would break the law and the Potions Master Code For Ethical Behavior by brewing this underage girl a contraceptive potion behind her parents' back.

Madam Pomfrey did hand out contraceptive potions like candy back at Hogwarts, but she did so because there was an unspoken rule at Hogwarts that they didn't want witches suddenly leaving their education because of a little “complication.” Severus didn't exactly tell his underage students to go to Madam Pomfrey, but by informing the students who were of age during their seventh year, word trickled down to the younger students who began exploring their sexuality before turning seventeen. Severus did his best to discourage further incidents and accidents by roaming about the castle to stop those caught in the act, especially the Astronomy Tower and numerous broom closets that dotted the vast school.

But given that Akela was not at a boarding school, far away from her parents for months at a time, he was under obligation to follow certain rules of conduct and laws. And even if he could, he would prefer not to, especially since that arrogant upstart twat, Ulrich, was involved.

“Do not think that because we are on familiar terms with one another, given the friendship I have with your parents, that I would break the law by providing a contraceptive to an underage witch without parental consent,” Severus lectured, his eyes piercing and simmering with umbrage.

“And why not? You don't want to see me get pregnant, do you?” Akela threw out as a challenge. Her rhetorical question was phrased as an implied threat that if she did have sex and became pregnant because he didn't give her a contraceptive potion, it would be his fault, not Ulrich's.

Severus was a master of spotting a fallacious argument from a mile away. She was doing a poor job of hiding her shoddily constructed argument from being torn to shreds.
“Should you find yourself with child, it will be through no fault of my own, but from your poor choices in not waiting until you are of age, and your choosing a partner who would pressure you into anything you are too young to do,” Severus hissed, glaring at the young witch who tried not to cower under his penetrating gaze.

Jutting her chin out defiantly, Akela countered, “Ulrich isn't pressuring me to do anything. My sixteenth birthday is in a couple weeks and I figure that it's time. It's my virginity, I'll do what I want with it. And I'll give it to anyone I choose, and I choose Ulrich.” Akela sounded more petulant than certain of her choice.

“Ulrich is an arrogant boy, who you have accused in the past of ignoring you, having heard you wail about like a lovesick fool,” Severus snarled. And he had heard her whine about Ulrich shunning her until quite recently.

Given how over the past few months, Akela was blossoming even more, becoming more shapely, he could understand why Ulrich was suddenly taking an interest in the young witch.

Continuing on with his lecturing, he added, “I think Ulrich is only interested in your superficial charms, not appreciating the person you are without your beauty. And a person who only is attracted to you by looks alone, disregarding you when your mind and personality was not enough, is not someone worthy of such a gift you are offering him.”

“But I love him!”

“And if he loves you, he will wait until you are of age or have convinced your parents of the deep and unshakable love between you,” Severus said, his voice booming, as he stood behind his desk, his palms flat on his desk as he leaned forward to drive his point home. “But I would bet my sterling silver cauldron that if you refuse him, he will quickly direct his affections towards another young and more foolish witch whom he will bed without a care for you.” There was a smirk upon his lips, knowing he was right.

Akela sat there stunned by this side of Severus she had never seen before. There was almost a cruel satisfaction in his tone.

Severus continued on with his diatribe. “And because you came to me, I must inform your parents of your request.”
“You wouldn’t,” she breathed in disbelief. “Your sign says ‘discretion guaranteed,’ you can’t.” Her eyes darted to the wand in her pocket, wondering if she could cast an Obliviate on him so he wouldn’t tell on her, but she knew he was faster with a wand and it would only wind up getting her into more trouble.

“I can and I must, given you are underage,” the Potions master informed her. “If you are so keen on studying to become a Potions mistress, you would have already begun to familiarize yourself with the code of ethics involved to becoming accredited as one. And while some Potions masters choose to ignore some aspects of the code, I will not disregard my principles because you perceive that our chumminess supersedes the code of ethics I am bound by.”

Akela stood up and pulled the door open, stopping at the threshold to turn at glare at Severus, her eyes full of tears and hatred that only a teenager could direct at any adult who questioned her decision.

In a shrill voice, she screamed, “I thought you were cool, but I was wrong. You’re an asshole, JUST LIKE MY FATHER!”

Stunned to be talked to in such a tone, and by a girl who had always been sweet and a bit overly affectionate with him, Severus almost yelled, “Fifty points from...” but suddenly remembered he was not at Hogwarts anymore. The last time any young witch addressed him like that was while he was still teaching there, and would easily result in point deductions and lots of detentions.

Draco stood up and ran to the threshold of his office to see Akela run past him and out the door, tears streaming from her eyes. Glancing back at Severus' door, he saw his mentor standing behind his desk, a fury in his face that he had only seen when Potter had been impudent and cheeky with him in the classroom.

Seeing the perplexed look on Draco's face, he shouted, “Go on! Go after her before she does something infinitely more stupid.”

Draco had no idea what she did, but it must have been something pretty spectacular for her to get Severus to yell at her like that.

Rushing out the door, Draco saw Akela run around the corner. He heard her footsteps stop once she was out of view of the shop.
Walking to the end of the lane, Draco peered around the corner to see her sitting there on the sidewalk, slumped down, her back braced against the brick wall.

Raising his brows up questioningly, he asked, “Mind if I join you?”

“Not if you're going to yell at me like he did,” she sniveled, sniffing and wiping away at her tears with the back of her hand.

Draco walked around the corner and sat down on the sidewalk next to her, aware that Severus had sneaked up behind him and was right around the corner, ready to listen in, with Akela not knowing. No doubt, Mounge would later be filled in on the details of what had transpired, and Severus was better at remembering everything said, down to the last word.

“Care to tell me what happened? You must have really gotten under his skin for you to make him yell at you like that.”

There were a great many things that made Severus yell and snarl and growl at people, but since coming to Malu Palekaiko, the causes for him to react as such had become few and far between. Miss Brown no longer was throwing little bombs into his lap, buttering him up with tea and fancy biscuits. He no longer taught at Hogwarts, and Hermione wasn't giving him mixed signals anymore. But Severus never yelled at his students anymore, especially since parents were paying per session and could take their business away should he prove too curmudgeonly. Akela was not a student of his, but she was the daughter of the Finaus, Severus' friends, who they were going to meet for drinks in about forty-five minutes.

Hiccuping through her gasps and hitching breaths, Akela whined, “Ulrich and I are in love. I wanted to have sex with him for my sixteenth birthday to prove my love for him, but Uncle Severus said that Ulrich only wants me for sex. That's not true. All I asked him for was a contraceptive so I wouldn't get pregnant my first time.”

“Oh, boy,” Draco sighed, as he conjured a handkerchief for Akela to blot her moist face. “Akela, I can't say you should wait, since it would be hypocritical of me to say wait until you are seventeen, but I can say from experience, you would do well to wait.”

“How old were you when you first had sex?” she asked.

“Too young.”
“How old,” she asked him, her voice indicating she was not in a mood to be bullshitted by hemming and hawing.

“How old.”

“Fifteen.”

“See, and I'm almost sixteen, and girls always have sex at a younger age than boys,” Akela surmised, thinking Draco's answer justified her decision.

“Akela, it's not like that. Trust me when I say that having sex when you are too young can be an awkward, embarrassing, and – for the witch – a possibly painful and boring experience. Especially since a lot of boys have no clue what they are doing,” Draco admitted, rubbing the back of his neck with his hand nervously.

“If you're worried about my hymen, I lost that a long time ago. I do ride a broom, you know.” she said sarcastically.

Letting out a sigh of exasperation, Draco said, “Listen, if Ulrich really loves you, he will wait. Love is patient; it transcends time by waiting for when the time is right for you to be together.”

“But that time is now. I love him, and he says he loves me,” she insisted.

“And if he really loves you, he will wait until you are a little older. I mean, how long have you two been seeing each other now?”

“A little over a month,” Akela mumbled.

“A month? Come on! That's barely time enough for him to get a hand under your shirt at your age.”

Severus almost fell over at Draco's comment, but stilled himself to remain quiet. It would not do Draco any good for Severus to give away he was listening in the whole time.

The blond wizard, who was closer in age to Akela than to Severus, nudged her with his elbow.
“Don't you think you're taking things a little too fast by pushing things ahead so quickly?”

“But he's so cute, and I want him so badly,” she pleaded longingly. “And I'm sooo horny I could snap a broom between my legs,” Akela growled with frustration.

Draco burst into fits of laughter over Akela's blatant honesty. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't laugh, but that's an amusing turn of the phrase. But if you are really that frustrated, there are potions to turn down the heat. And trust me, they do work. I know how vexing it can be with your hormones running amok, but sex doesn't make the desire go away, it only feeds the fire. Trust me, I know what I'm talking about and I'm young enough to remember it all.”

“Uncle Severus, the way he reacted, you'd think he never had sex or was in love. And here I was thinking he was some sexy experienced guy. Turns out he's a big, fat prude,” Akela pouted, crossing her arms in front of her, kicking at a stone just beyond the reach of her foot. “Probably a virgin,” she added out of spite.

Draco would pay Severus a hundred Galleons just to see the look on his face in a Pensieve memory of overhearing Akela's assessment of his mentor.

Valiantly, Draco succeeded in keeping his face serious and not letting his amusement at her comments seep into his voice. “Severus is a complex wizard. There is a lot you don't know about him. Even I don't know everything about him. But if he refused to brew you a contraceptive, it’s probably because first and foremost because you are underage. He could get into a lot of trouble if he provided one to you without your parents knowing. And your father is the town judge. How would that look to your father that a wizard who he trusted and was his friend broke some pretty basic and fundamental laws? I mean, if anything, if you really want to have sex with Ulrich so badly, then you’ll just have to convince your parents that not only are you old enough, but mature enough to make this decision yourself. You have to convince them, not Severus.”

Akela sniffed a bit more, wiping away the last of her tears, seeing the logic in Draco's argument begrudgingly, especially since he didn't bark at her like Uncle Severus had.

“Yeah, I guess you're right,” she reluctantly agreed. “I don't want him to get into trouble, but I hate the way he just lit into me, and said Ulrich only paid attention to me for the sole purpose of sex.”

“Severus is a pretty observant person,” Draco noted with admiration. “He is very astute, so I wouldn't necessarily discount his opinion. He may be older, but he's been around long enough to recognize certain things.”
“Yeah, well, he's still a jerk for yelling at me.”

“And did you yell at him first? Were you disrespectful?” Draco asked, knowing she probably got into his face or got demanding.

“No,” she replied in a way that Draco knew she was lying and trying to kid herself.

Letting her lie slip this once without calling her on it, remembering how petulant and deluded he used to be at that age, he said, “Well, I recommend that you tell Ulrich you want to wait. And if he really loves you, he’ll understand. He may be frustrated, but he will understand. Consider it a little test of his love. Just don't 'test' him too much.”

“Okay, thanks... I guess.”

Severus could hear the two getting up off the pavement and he silently rushed back to his shop and slipped inside before Akela crossed the small lane on her way home, since she was supposed to be home to babysit her little sister. This meant being at home before her parents left for their weekly date night.

Sitting in his office and pretending he had been there the whole time, he heard Draco enter.

The younger wizard stood in his doorway, studying the older wizard who had his nose firmly planted in his ledger.

“Did you hear the conversation?” Draco asked.

“Every word of it.”

Draco made to turn to go to his office to lock up for the night when Severus said, “Thank you for diffusing the situation.”

He didn't look back, but nodded that he understood.
It was close enough to closing time, and Severus didn't think he would have any more customers for the night. A couple of his students, as payment for tutoring, had already cleaned up his shop for the night, making sure everything was ready for the next day – fresh candles were in place, counters and bathroom cleaned, floors swept, trash taken out, cauldrons scrubbed and neatly stacked, and recent deliveries put away in the back for Severus to sort later. After checking on some potions that were simmering away in his work lab, Severus locked up and walked with Draco to the bar where Ginny was already waiting for them with Mouna and Rainbow, who waved at the pair of wizards as they entered.

Bongo called out “Aloha,” to which the rest of the bar joined in welcoming the Friday night regulars.

“Ogden's Old Firewhisky, and make it a double,” Severus ordered, his face austere as his voice. The few decorations placed around the bar for Easter were only slightly more insipid than the St. Patrick's Day and Valentine's Day frippery Bongo put up. It was all Severus could do not to blast the hopping bunny to bits with his wand.

“That good, eh?” Rainbow chimed in cheerfully.

Severus' eyes glanced sideways at the witch's offhanded remark before Summoning a quill and bottle of ink Bongo kept by the cash register.

Grabbing a bar napkin, Severus began scribbling down some notes.

Mouna, intrigued by Severus’ mood and what he was writing leaned over sideways, but could not tell what he was scribbling.

Done with his scribbling, Severus stood up and handed Rainbow the napkin with instructions for a potion.

“What's this?” she asked.

“Mint, cilantro, and finely chopped black licorice macerated with plain vodka. Strain and add the blood of an Arctic mongoose,” Severus said before dropping his voice just quiet enough so that just Rainbow and Mouna could hear, leaning forward. “That should cool the most fiery and fervid ardor of the most hormonally-addled teenagers, given your daughter just approached me to brew a
contraceptive potion by claiming she was ready to become more intimate with Ulrich.”

“What?!?” Rainbow shouted. This caught the attention of the whole bar, as everyone stopped talking to turn and look at her. Even the four people playing some honky-tonk tune on guitar, piano, hammer dulcimer, and a small drum kit stopped momentarily before playing once more.

With a glare from Rainbow, everyone went back to minding their own business.

Mounga put a hand over his face, obviously pained.

“What?” Ginny said, having not heard.

“I'll explain later, Ginny” Draco explained.

“You were there too?” Rainbow asked, looking to Draco.

Severus gestured towards Draco. “You should thank him, as I think he may have talked her into waiting, since I yelled at Akela after she tried to pin blame on me should any unfortunate consequences occur, causing her to run away in tears.”

Bongo served up Severus' drink, which he downed most of in one go.

“Oh, she didn't,” Draco remarked with astonishment, having not heard the conversation since Severus door was closed until the end. Now the blond wizard understood exactly why the Potions master blew up at the young witch.

Severus smiled sardonically, giving Akela's parents a look to let them know he was not pleased by her attempt to twist his arm in such a fashion.

“Oh, fuck me, dude,” Mounga groaned, putting his face back into his hand. The large wizard rarely swore, so for him to do so indicated the gravity of the situation.

Severus was still so livid over the experience, he said, biting out his words, “And should you care
to know word for word what transpired, I'll gladly offer up my memory of your daughter's petulant whinging for viewing in a Pensieve.”

Rainbow looked like she was ready to take Severus up on his offer, but Mouna shook his head and put his hand on Severus' arm. “That won't be necessary. Thanks for coming to us, I'll talk to Akela about it. I'm sorry she put you on the spot like that.”

“I'm obligated by law to tell you,” Severus reminded him.

“I know, but still. Thanks for telling us,” Akela's father said. “And that potion you wrote down, what does it do exactly?”

“It's an antidote for when Potions masters work on love potions and other such brews of an ardent nature. It truly kills the libido. Trust me,” he assured them.

Rainbow folded it up carefully, putting it in her pocket with the intent on brewing some up as soon as possible.

Severus downed the rest of his drink, the fire of the spirit burning his throat with the same fire with which his temper was aflame.

“Also, she called me 'an asshole, just like her father,'” Severus threw in, just to make life just a little bit more difficult for the young witch, given that she had truly gotten on his bad side.

Looking back up at Mouna, having that tidbit out there, Severus saw the larger wizard looking quite serious. “What did she say?” he asked quietly, in a controlled voice barely above a whisper.

Severus repeated it, which Mouna drank in.

Standing up straight to his full height, Mouna somberly said, “I apologize for my daughter's behavior, Severus. That was uncalled for and not something her mother and I taught her. If you will excuse us, Rainbow and I need to cut our date night short. We have some matters to discuss with Akela. Immediately.”
The Potions master had never seen a look quite like he saw in Mouniga's eyes before, nor his face look so stern. He just hoped he would never have Mouniga ever look at him in the same way, since it was fierce enough to make even Severus a little bit fearful. It was on par with a very upset Dumbledore. Mouniga was a gentle and patient wizard, but it seemed that Akela had finally overstepped a certain boundary with her behavior and she was going to be in a whole lot of trouble, and shortly.

“If you will excuse us,” Rainbow said somberly. “Ginny, Draco, Severus, you are welcome to have use of the hot springs tonight since we will not be using them. We need to go home.”

Mouniga and Rainbow paid for not only their drinks, but Severus' as well as a small gesture of contrition for their daughter's behavior.

As Severus stood at the bar next to Ginny and Draco, he felt a certain smug satisfaction that Akela was going to wish she never addressed him in such a manner. Her parents seemed to have taken her request of a contraceptive potion in stride, but her disrespectful attitude was not at all to be tolerated. He was glad that her parents seemed to have the decency to not let such an impudent attitude run rampant. The former Head of House and professor wished more parents of Hogwarts students took a firmer hand with their children's attitudes, as he was the one mostly left in charge of shaping their character. It was nice that for once he didn't have to dole out the detention.

“Why don't you take the hot springs tonight,” Draco offered, patting Severus on the back softly. “I think you need a chance to unwind after today.”

Severus nodded his head in thanks for the offer. He would definitely need something to help him relax, given that the last time he was this upset, Akela had shoved that calendar of Weasley into his face.

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The Red Ginseng was becoming a money-sink for Lavender. Having gone from four gigolos earning their keep down to one apprentice she was subsidizing for housing, Lavender could afford to lose money on this property, but she didn't like it. It was decided that she would renovate the Red Ginseng and make it more appealing to attract new tenants, with the promise to Hermione she would leave her flat alone until after she moved out of it in the future.

The renovation was a gesture from Lavender for Hermione, given that Hermione had sworn never to step foot in that atrium ever again. Perhaps with a complete remodel, it would look drastically different from the old one and no longer remind Hermione of the sight of Zabini’s body hanging from several hooks, his skin peeled, his organs removed and piled on the floor. Lavender was glad she had not seen Blaise's body that way; she had enough memories from the war.
Hermione was too busy with work to notice the construction taking place on the other side of her front door. She was at work most of the day and into the night, coming home after the work crews had gone home, and rising before they began.

Marf made sure to have a hot meal ready for her when she came home, since she was often so tired, some nights she fell asleep before eating anything.

Hermione's schedule was quite full, even more so with the news that she needed learn how to run the business while Lavender was on maternity leave. In addition, with the news that Lavender was to have her start up a regional office in Hawaii, Hermione was even more driven to finish her Potions apprenticeship that much quicker.

Sitting down with Albert and Lavender, the three of them worked out a schedule for Hermione to come up to speed on the operations of The Lovely Lavender Company, while also keeping her on track with her Potions apprenticeship. Albert gave Hermione a list of the books that she would be required to read and learn during her whole apprenticeship, instead of handing them off to her a week at a time. It stunned Albert what a quick and voracious reader Hermione was, and he decided to let her read at her own pace instead of dictating the speed of her reading curriculum.

Getting up earlier than usual, Hermione began showing up to work one hour early to have the goblin accountant teach her bookkeeping, as they did it in the wizarding world. It was similar to that of the Muggle world, but there were Charms that made entries in one book show up in other ledgers automatically so one did not have to write the same numbers down multiple times. There were accounts payable and receivable, plus the goblin accountant showed Hermione how to calculate price based on materials and labor, and factor in other sundries, such as advertising costs.

Since she was getting up earlier, Hermione began making a daily trip to the Twenty-Four Blackbird Bakery. The Red Ginseng atrium, when it was finally remodeled, no longer reminded her of unpleasant visions, so she was able to walk to work once again. She had missed her habitual morning runs to the place, and the bakery also brought back ghost memories of Severus. She could almost hear the sound of his boots echoing along the empty cobblestone streets, or see the flash of a black cloak disappearing around a corner as she strolled towards work.

Instead of saving money and enjoying a free lunch cooked by the house-elves at The Lovely Lavender headquarters, Hermione Apparated to Palmers Green daily to eat at a little greasy spoon cafe near the restaurant Neville took her most Saturday nights after a day of working together at the nursery. The married couple who owned the little lunch spot had a couple of their children working there too. The whole family bickered at each other in Greek, which added more time for Hermione to immerse herself in the language. Neville was impressed with how her Greek was getting better with her little lunch trips, and even with the few vulgar words Hermione asked about, unsure what
they meant since she couldn't find them in any dictionary.

Right now, Hermione was focused on mastering Greek as soon as possible so she could move on to the other languages. She now had a goal to strive towards, and blowing a few quid on a lunch special was definitely worth it to her if it would bring her closer to Severus sooner.

With her grueling schedule, even though she was truly exhausted by the end of the day, Hermione was beginning to find it harder and harder to fall asleep at night. Her attempts to masturbate in the months since Severus left had become less and less satisfying, and the tension within her was mounting. The change from having a lover she had sex with several times a week to having nothing was testing even her resolve to not become snappish. Fortunately, her work in Albert's garden and Neville's nursery gave her a chance to exorcise the nervous energy she had building up inside of her during the week, but it was still not enough.

It was Friday night and Albert said he was going to go home a little bit earlier to spend some time in the garden, puttering about. He wished Hermione a good night and reminded her that the monthly booze-up was tomorrow night.

Smiling and nodding that she was still up to going, she waited until Albert was gone before throwing her head down on her desk to groan. At the March binge party, Royston had playfully given Hermione a pat on the arse and she nearly broke his arm over it with a hex she had recently learned from Harry.

Harry had been worried about her, given that two murders had happened recently in and around the Red Ginseng and had been adding to her knowledge of defensive spells – some not so defensive. But even with her expanding knowledge of nasty jinxes and hexes, Hermione wasn't sure it would be wise to employ them at a social gathering of fellow Potions masters, especially when some of the wives would be there as well.

Hermione just wished she could just have one good shag with Severus, or at least one solid orgasm to take the edge off, so she could face tomorrow night.

Lifting her head up off her desk, she spotted the Pensieve sitting over on the shelf, having been put there when she wasn't using it to review Severus' memories.

As wrong as the idea initially seemed, there was something deliciously forbidden and erotic about the idea. It also made her a bit self-conscious. Then again, she was rather turned on by watching Ginny and Draco go at it, when she first discovered the redhead was cheating on Harry. Hermione didn't like to admit it, but she liked to watch. Even Severus was bemused and aroused by her
blooming voyeuristic tendencies she was reluctant to embrace.

Checking about the office, she found out that Lavender had already gone home for the weekend, suffering from sudden bouts of fatigue. Earlier in the day, Hermione had already escorted her Aunt Christine back out to Muggle London, done with her latest projects for the week.

Secure in the knowledge that the only ones left were the house-elves, who would leave her in peace unless called for, Hermione locked her office door and put the Pensieve on her desk.

Now came the hard part. Which memory should be brought forth? As it was getting close to dinner, Hermione suddenly remembered one particular memory.

Placing her wand to her temple, she tried to recall it with the greatest clarity. Hermione pulled her wand away from her temple, she held it over the Pensieve and let it slip like amorphous silken threads from her wand, dispersing and swirling about the glowing waters.

After securing her wand in her pocket, she placed her hands on either side of the bowl and leaned forward, letting herself be pulled in to her own memory.

In the memory, Hermione burst forth from the kitchen laughing, followed by a mischievously smiling Severus, who was chasing her, holding something in his hand.

“But you know that won't work,” Hermione insisted, trying to be serious, but failing as she kept laughing lightly as Severus tried to pin her into a corner.

“Oh, but how do you know it will fail unless you try it first? Some of the greatest discoveries have come from witches and wizards challenging long-held notions that were later proven false,” he purred with a smirk.

“But honey, as a body paint?” Hermione questioned.

The real Hermione watched, remembering what was going through her mind at the moment, concerned about what a sticky mess it would make all over Severus' bed.
“Are you adverse to a little experimentation?” Severus challenged her, quirking an eyebrow at her, a smug smile plastered across his lips.

“But...”

“But what? You don't even know what type of honey I have. It is a delectable and rare honey, even one where I can stand the taste straight without finding it cloying,” the Potions master informed her, holding it up like some rare artifact for her to admire.

“Really?” The real Hermione could see her memory self drawn into Severus' trap based on the fact he used her own curiosity against her.

Moving closer to look at it, Hermione was suddenly grabbed by Severus and pulled up into his arms as he swiftly kissed her, devouring her mouth.

Initially she resisted, but quickly surrendered, kissing Severus back with equal need.

As Severus ceased kissing her, he whispered, “But this is still not as sweet as your delectable mouth.”

Hermione remembered how his wooing words made her head swoon, delirious for being called sweeter than honey.

The real Hermione now knew why she had called this memory up, as it was one of the few instances in which Severus was very playful, since he tended to be quite a serious person. His playfulness showed up in small ways, but this was one of the instances in which he was more lighthearted than usual.

Enthralled by Severus' desire for her, Hermione's eyes slipped shut and craned her neck in submission to him.

Setting the jar of honey on the table, Severus began unbuttoning Hermione's blouse, slipping it from her shoulders and arms as his mouth worked on languidly kissing her neck.
Her own hands went to work on her skirt, slipping off her shoes and kicking them across the room. One of the shoes passed through the real Hermione who was watching Severus seduce her.

It was almost as strange as watching her real self during her third year when she had used a Time-Turner and viewed herself, retracing steps that night she and Harry saved Sirius.

Severus made short work of her tights and underpants, chucking them over his shoulder carelessly before quickly undressing himself. Hermione crawled onto the bed backwards, still a bit uncertain, but game to play.

Now that the pair of them were nude, Hermione laid on her back while Severus fetched the jar of honey. Twisting the lid off, he placed it on his bedside table and held the jar above Hermione's body, a glint in his eye.

“This shouldn't be too cold,” he promised.

Dipping one finger into the jar, he coated his finger and pulled it away.

The pale amber liquid fell in a long and thin thread atop Hermione's breasts, making small curls and circles as he moved his finger that he held high above her body.

Feeling the cool honey make contact with her body, Hermione inhaled and arched her back against the bed.

“Oh look, it's not as warm as I thought it was,” Severus remarked with bemusement, noticing how Hermione's areola and nipple reacted to the contact with the cool honey. “Let me warm you up.”

Severus placed the open jar back on the table before lowering his head to began to gently licking and suckling at Hermione's breast.

Both the real and memory Hermione let out a sigh, both similar in pitch and cadence.
The real Hermione slowly slipped a hand under her skirt and underpants. Standing by the edge of the bed, she watched as Severus' eyes closed and his mouth continued to work on her nipple as his finger began smearing the remaining honey on her other breast, his fingers playing with her nipple just to make sure that he wiped the last of it off.

Watching herself and Severus, she noticed how his hair clung to her breast where he licked the honey off not moments before as he began attending to the other breast.

“What does it taste like?” her memory-self sighed.

Severus moved up and kissed her firmly. Hermione recalled how it tasted like toasted marshmallows with hints of vanilla mixed with the taste of Severus.

Lifting his head up from her face, he smiled down at her, stroking her hair out of her face lovingly.

“Let me try,” she sighed, licking the tip of Severus chin, catching the tip of his nose in the swipe of her tongue.

Severus let Hermione push him off her, and she ordered him to roll onto his stomach. Placing his chin on his hands, arms resting to his sides, he closed his eyes.

Hermione kneeled next to Severus before dipping a finger into the jar of honey. As the long thread dripped from her finger, Hermione trailed it back and forth along his spine, starting from just below where his long hair ended to the top of Severus' arse crack.
Kneeling down, Hermione began licking along Severus' spine, humming and sighing, enjoying the sweet clean taste of the honey that tasted like marshmallows and the taste of Severus' skin. Her tongue worked, laving and flicking down his spine. One hand began to slowly caress his arse cheek.

As her tongue reached the top of Severus' arse crack, her tongue continued to go down further. Hermione was not into rimming, but she loved playing with the area above that spot, knowing how good it felt, having had Severus give attention to that area on her before. She wanted to return the favor of that sensual experience.

“Did the honey go down that far?” he asked in a curious tone.
“Hmm, have to make sure I get all of it,” she mumbled into his skin.

Severus let out a long sigh, indicating his increasing arousal.

Using her hand, while still licking along the top of his arse, she nudged him to roll over onto his side. From between his legs, she reached forward and grabbed his stiffening cock, stroking it while her tongue continued working on him from behind.

The real Hermione gazed in wonderment at the look on Severus' face, seeing it so serene and lost in the pleasure she was giving him. She had not seen his face as she was busy elsewhere during the creation of this memory. Now she saw how enraptured he was by her ministrations.

Severus rolled onto his back as Hermione guided him so she could take him into her mouth, licking him once before taking a small bit of honey and drizzling down the length of his cock. Hermione engulfed him fully, sucking, slurping and greedily licking with gusto. She paused for a second to slather her own saliva along her middle finger before moving it down and between Severus' legs.

Severus adjusted his legs knowing what his lover would do next and welcoming it. As Hermione's mouth worshiped his cock, giving it most of her attention, her finger pressed up against his anus and sought permission to enter. Severus made himself relax and Hermione slipped her finger into him.

The real Hermione watched as his face momentarily twitched and winced, suddenly relaxing once more, his face beatific in a euphoric smile as the memory version of herself had found his prostate and began to gently stroke and massage it with her finger, her mouth still wrapped around his member.

A plaintive sigh escaped his lips, a sound she had missed before reviewing this particular memory.
It was sweet in its surrendering susurrations.

The sounds that came from his mouth spurred the real Hermione on and her fingers began to stroke her clit in earnest, feeling the tension within herself building. Hermione had missed the sound of Severus' voice, especially while they made love.

Her memory-self continued to bob her head up and down, greedily devouring Severus until he decided he could wait no more.

Severus hauled Hermione back up onto the middle of the bed, throwing her down onto her back and he quickly settled himself between her legs, sliding into her quickly with a short grunt.

The memory version of Hermione let out a wail of pleasure, her back arched and her hands reached up over her head for the headboard, temporarily forgetting that Severus had her sideways on the bed. Instead her hands moved to reached up and began clawing at Severus' back.

Watching, fascinated by this play of give and take, Hermione could feel herself close to orgasm.

Severus began pumping furiously into Hermione as her legs began to slide up and around his waist, higher and higher, spreading herself as wide as she could to take more of him deeper.

The real Hermione moved around to watch Severus thrust into her. She loved the curve of his back, and the times when they had used a mirror, was fascinated with the way the muscles in his back flexed and bulged when he fucked her.
“Oh God, Severus,” her memory-self began to wail over and over again, eyes shut tight and hand reaching down between them to stroke her clit.

The real Hermione watched Severus' face begin to screw up, signaling he was close. She loved the look of his face when he came.

Suddenly, the real Hermione came, falling over, slumped against the side of the bed while an orgasm rippled throughout her body, warming her all the way to the tips of her appendages in the glowing thrill that coursed through her.

Slumped on the floor, next to the bed, she heard her memory-self finally climax, and a few minutes later she heard memory-Severus grunt and growl as he did when he also peaked.

The bed finally stilled.

She could hear the soft murmur of tender words spoken between them. She didn't have to hear them since she remembered them.

Suddenly she heard Severus say in a louder voice, “I love it when you speak nomenclature at me.”

Hermione recalled she had asked for the name of the type of honey Severus used, to which he informed her it was meadowfoam honey. She had given the Latin name for the plant, which caused his response.

The memory ended as Hermione's laughter at Severus' joke ebbed away.
Using her wand, Hermione put the memory back into her own mind, not wanting to leave it unattended in her office.

Once she was back in her flat, Hermione ate a quiet dinner and decided to go to bed early that night, feeling quite sleepy.

Hermione slept deeply and undisturbed, feeling far more relaxed than she had in months.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to my betas, thegrey ladies and JuneW, for their excellent beta work cleaning up this chapter.

NSFW fan art by LadyKenora, commissioned by me, to go with the honey licking memory scene available for viewing on my Tumblr page here: http://67.media.tumblr.com/94a4fb755e22e939e5703ec2187ad387/tumblr_inline_oand74nNrr1tcck http://ladykenora.deviantart.com/

Meadowfoam honey really does taste like toasted marshmallow.
Almost everything was finally packed up. Severus had been living at Justina's hotel for almost five months by the time his house was finally ready for him to move into. All of the items he had temporarily stored in Justina's kitchen were packed away, as well as all the new clothes and personal items he had bought since arriving in Malu Palekaiko.

The only things that still needed to be packed were the photograph of Hermione and his still unfinished letter to her. It was his exasperation in being unable to scratch out a simple letter that led him to tramp about the jungle and find his new home. Since then, with working with the builder and the shop, he had been too busy to sit down and work on the letter again – or so he convinced himself. He had maybe two passable sentences he had scribbled down over the nearly three months since he'd first attempted to write his lover.

Picking up the photograph of Hermione, he wondered if she was still intent on joining him or if she had come to her senses. Severus still had no idea if she had viewed the memories he'd left for her, but given that Marf would make sure she would receive them, he was sure she had viewed them by
Most Potions apprenticeships took between two and three years to complete, but he had finished his in two, even if one included the months of working at the Department of Standards & Regulations testing Potions ingredients which was required as part of his apprenticeship.

Hermione was a quick learner who already had a great deal of experience from her years in the same department, so that would shave some time off of her apprenticeship. She had been reading a lot of Potions journals as part of her job, and was familiar with many theories and concepts most apprentices aren't introduced to until their apprenticeships begin. He knew that the only thing stopping her from finishing her apprenticeship in as little as a year would be the mastering of five languages.

Severus wondered if Hermione had mastered Greek yet and was on to Latin as she had planned. It had taken him nearly six months to master his first language during his apprenticeship, and it was Arabic; he was already fluent in Spanish, since his mother spoke it at home and it was his second language growing up. At least the Latin was easy to learn, given he already was fluent in a Latin-based language. Unfortunately, Reginald Chuff did not allow Severus to count Spanish as one of the five languages he had to master since he was already fluent in it before he began his apprenticeship. It was one of the many reasons why Severus considered Chuff a right bastard.

At least Hermione wasn't apprenticing under Chuff, as he was the sort of unscrupulous lech who would secretly spike Hermione's experiment with a love potion in order to bed her, and probably make her feel like it was her fault for not recognizing the effects of a love potion afterwards. If Albert was taking Hermione to the monthly Potions master drinking binges, he would have the good sense to not let Hermione accept a drink from Chuff.

He calculated that the best of all possibilities would be that it would be at least another year and a half, possibly two until Hermione would be done with her apprenticeship.

Glancing at the unfinished letter, Severus wondered how he was supposed to put to parchment and ink how he had been feeling as if he was missing part of an appendage that had been splinched off and had not been reattached yet. Then there was the question of what to put in his letter of the long wait ahead for her to finish. If anything, he knew he should not tempt her to abandon her apprenticeship to finish with him, knowing how it would damage her reputation as a Potions mistress. When he had first asked her to join him, it was early enough in her apprenticeship that it would be easily forgiven and overlooked, but given how she was now fully into her apprenticeship with Dobmeir, switching masters was nigh on impossible at this point. He would just have to wait for her, and he would.

Severus Snape may have been in love with Hermione, but he was not prone to spout off flowery words of wooing and worship. All his attempts to craft a letter that plainly spoke his heart had been later reduced to piles of cinder upon reflection. No, writing Hermione a love letter could not convey his sentiments without him tripping over his own words. Instead of packing his draft of a
letter to Hermione, he destroyed it, as anything else would not have been true to his nature. Hermione may have stripped Severus of his masks, but he still wore armor around his heart, which had grown thicker with her prolonged absence.

Finally checking out of Justina’s hotel, Severus walked up the street to Mouna’s house. Before Severus could step foot in his new house, he needed to make a proper offering to Pele.

Not only did the granting of sanctuary require a visit to the caldera to make an offering to Pele, but building a new home or new business required one as well, Severus making his trip the week before he opened his shop. Had Severus bought a house already built, the trip would not be necessary, but given how every so often a lava flow could destroy one house while leaving the one right next to it unscathed by the fiery temperament of the goddess, it was prudent to follow tradition. Even Draco and Ginny had made a trip after their week of seclusion to make an offering to Pele, seeking protection for their new home from her lava, even if it was already built. Hopefully Severus’ offering would please her, and his house would remain undisturbed for many decades to come.

Fortunately, the migrating dragons that had temporarily nested atop the volcano had moved along, continuing their migratory flight path from Japan to Peru where they would mate on or near Easter Island and lay and hatch their eggs along the chain of volcanoes in the Andean mountain chain. If not, Severus would have had to wait before making the trek to the summit.

Climbing the side of the volcano, Severus carried a basket filled with ohelo berries, red hibiscus flowers, banana, red fish, and a bottle of palm sap wine fermented by the Potions master himself, as Justina suggested. He had worked on his Hawaiian with Mouna, who would give the prayer at the edge of the caldera. Mouna had needed to make the trip himself, since it had been about a year since he had last made an offering to Pele on behalf of his family.

It was warm, but Severus wore his denim pants, given how the last time he climbed down, after making an offering for the opening of his shop, he’d almost tripped and fell on some sharp a’a lava flows. At least the thick fabric would give him some protection. Even Mouna wore his heavy pants, telling Severus about some nasty lacerations he’d received on one trip when he was foolish enough to wear thin fabric pants.

“So you're having a house-warming party?” Mouna asked his friend, surprised by the fact as Severus didn’t seem like the party type.

“I wasn't planning on one, but Ginny insisted I have one. I told her, since she was so enthusiastic about the idea, she could throw it for me, since I am not the party host type,” Severus replied, reinforcing his friend's perceptions.
“You’re not a big crowds type of guy.” Mounga reached out and picked a couple ohelo berries to add to his own offering to Pele he was carrying.

“Put me in front of 300 students in an academic setting and I can command their attention. Stick me in front of more than ten adults in a social setting and I’d rather be home with a good book.”

“Not everyone is cut out to be a social butterfly,” Mounga noted. “As my dad used to say when it comes to friends, it's better to have one gold Galleon than 493 bronze Knuts. Only reason why I know so many people is because of my job and position on town council. Also, Rainbow drags me out of the house. Otherwise, you'd probably find me with my nose in a good book, like you. I've become less outgoing in my old age.”

“At least Ginny is keeping the guest list to under twenty, though Draco says she's cooking for fifty, a habit she no doubt picked up from her mother,” Severus said, a bit of bitterness in his voice when referencing Molly.

Mounga gave a heavy sigh, and it wasn't because of the size of his basket he was carrying. “She's got a lot of hostility regarding her mother. I hope one day Ginny and her mom will patch things up. It's not good to hold on to anger; it will eat you alive and consume you just as lava will cut a path through the forest. Both burn and leave nothing but barren ashes in their wakes, and it takes a long time for anything to grow afterwards. You don't have to forget, but at some point, you should forgive.”

“Given the feeling of betrayal and manipulation, I think you can understand that it would take a while for that to simmer down before being trod upon,” Severus remarked continuing the analogy between lava and Ginny's anger.

Severus still couldn't get what this big deal about forgiveness was about. The little stuff he could understand, but some things were just too egregious to forgive for him.

“So any word from England?”

“Nothing. Which could be good or bad. For the fact that Hermione has not shown up seeking sanctuary herself tells me that her part in it had not been found out. Yet.”

Severus wondered if he and Draco were to be exonerated, whether Moody would still seek to
persecute Hermione, should her part in their escape ever be discovered. It would be typical of Moody to want to prosecute her for helping them even though they were not guilty of anything anymore.

“So, mentioning you in front of a bunch of students... Draco and your proposal for a proper school, ages ten and up, is moving forward,” the larger wizard updated Severus. “There is the question of how to pay for it, but we have something in the works that might address that.”

“Really? Because for tutoring alone, I have several families I'm working with, employing their children doing mindless chores or collecting ingredients in order to pay for lessons. If these families are struggling to pay for tutoring lessons for one subject, how can we be sure they can pay for a proper schooling, given you mentioned that state and federal give little toward wizarding education versus Muggle?”

“There is a company that is interested in setting up a regional office here, but that's in the works. It's all very nebulous right now. It could wind up employing some people, especially those who need the money to help pay for school, but we'll also start up a charity fund to help pay for those who can't afford to pay for it. Plus, taxes alone from the business could help cover the costs of the school, so there would be little in terms of costs for the parents other than school supplies, if we're lucky. There will be partial and full scholarships, as you've mentioned your Ministry did with Hogwarts for books and supplies, since you did say tuition was free at Hogwarts. Worst case scenario is that tuition won't be entirely free, but we can get some federal funds to help cover books that children borrow for the year. Draco and Ginny have already offered to chip in and cover in case the charity fund doesn't have enough for those in need.”

Severus was pleased that Draco had not taken his father, Lucius', attitude regarding money and access to a decent education. Lucius had made very disparaging remarks about the Weasleys and their finances over the years. And then, as if suddenly remembering that Severus was in the room, the elder Malfoy would give a halfhearted amendment to his comment that the Potions master was an exception to the rule given the near abject poverty he had grown up in. It was condescending at best, and a backhanded slight to remind Severus that Lucius perceived himself superior to him in many ways when it came right down to it. Draco and Ginny's offer was no doubt spurred by Ginny's large dose of empathy towards money issues for children growing up.

Nodding, Severus said, “Well, given that many of the witches will have free time if they aren't schooling their children daily, this possible business opportunity for employment will certainly help offset the costs of schooling.”

Severus did not inquire to the nature of the business that might come to the island, as it was still uncertain and details would come later. Mounga would tell him.
As they reached the top, a witch and wizard that Severus recognized, but didn't know the names of, were just finishing their offering to Pele. Everyone exchanged the habitual Aloha greeting before the couple excused themselves and began their trek back down the side of the volcano.

Severus grabbed a few pieces of lava rock and arranged them in an aesthetically pleasing manner. He wasn't allowed to use his wand, as recommended by Mouna. The reason why was the same as why Severus and Mouna could not Apparate to the top of the volcano, and had to make the long trek by foot. The effort was part of the way of making an effort to show gratitude and honor the goddess. Only the old, the very young, and infirm could Apparate to the top of the volcano, children Apparating with their parents if they were too large to carry safely and too small to walk the whole way. Pregnant witches were allowed a Portkey dispensation, since they couldn't Apparate.

Mouna also created his own impromptu altar. Both wizards placed their offerings upon the rocks.

Standing near the edge, Mouna held out his arms in supplication and began to sing his prayer on behalf of Severus. A normally quiet man with a soft voice and economical with his words, a large and sonorous voice came booming forth, filled with feeling and reverence. It was a clear and deep bass sound that seemed to echo off the sides of the caldera.

Severus had heard Mouna sing on occasion at the bar on Friday nights, egged on by his wife to belt out a tune now and again, but this was nothing like the voice he used in the small bar. There was a lot of power behind the voice, a sound that matched the wizard's size.

Once Mouna was done, Severus threw a few ohelo berries into the caldera.

Mouna began a prayer for his own home and family. The cadence and pace was faster, and the tone seemed not as somber. He too threw in a few ohelo berries once his prayer was done.

As the two trekked back down the side of the volcano, heading back towards the village, neither spoke. Severus collected some ohelo berries for himself in his basket, since he had already made his offering of them to Pele first.

Coming around an outside bend in the trail atop a particularly steep cliff, they came upon an old woman walking down the same trail. They had not seen her during their trek up and figured that she had come along from one of the spurs off the trail along the way, coming from a more secluded part of the island.
The old witch ambled along at a slow pace, using a cane made of ohia wood to assist in her walking.

“Aloha,” Mounga called out in greeting to avoid startling her, since this part of the trail was particularly narrow and the drop-off was rather steep. They had wands to stop anyone from falling too far, but avoiding a slide down a steep hillside of sharp lava was preferable.

The old woman with long white hair waved at the two wizards. She looked to be particularly old and tired.

Remembering the custom to offer strangers along the trail rest and respite, the pair stopped. Severus conjured a stool and offered her a few of the ohelo berries he had already picked, while Mounga created a bit of shade with a charm and offered water, which she refused while munching on some berries.

She didn’t stay for long and rose from her stool. She thanked the two for their kindness and asked if she could walk with them a bit down the trail. At one point, Severus and Mounga waited for her, offering to help her, which she refused saying she was almost where she needed to go.

Coming around another blind outside curve in the trail, a sizable rock avalanche suddenly let loose down the side of the volcano directly in front of the three, the sound a roar of rock gnashing against rock.

Severus threw out an arm to protect the old witch who was directly behind him, but when he turned, she was suddenly gone.

“Madam? Madam?!!” Severus called out.

Neither of the two wizards heard her Apparate away, as neither heard the telltale vacuum pop. And given that she was right behind Severus not a moment before, he would have felt the rush and eddies of air with her disappearance.

Mounga gazed blankly ahead once the dust settled. He noticed how wide the avalanche was that covered the trail.

“Severus?”
The Potions master was confused as to where the witch went, but turned his attention back to his friend when he heard his name called.

“Where did she go?” Severus asked, perplexed. “I know she didn't Apparate.”

“How much do you think that old woman slowed us down, Severus?” Mounga asked, still looking at the amount of trail covered in several feet of lava rock, with a few sizable boulders.

“I don't know. Maybe a minute or two at most?” he said absentmindedly, looking along the trail, which was otherwise barren of any plant life this high up on the volcano.

Mounga’s chest heaved with the rush of adrenaline as he was still trying to catch his breath. “And if we hadn't come across that old woman, do you think we would have been caught up in that avalanche?”

“I don’t know, possibly...” Severus looked along the trail ahead, now seeing the amount of rock that had come down suddenly. Realization dawning on his that he and Mounga were almost caught in the rock slide.

“Do you think we could have Apparated away in time?” the larger wizard asked.

“It was rather sudden,” Severus replied.

The two just looked at each other, wondering if the old woman was indeed Pele who had appeared and slowed them down long enough for them to avoid getting caught in the avalanche of rock and boulders. In Hawaii, there were the odd tales of an old woman or beautiful young woman, both with flowing hair, one white-haired, the other dark. Those that had offered her rest and help had been saved from a terrible fate or accident, in gratitude for their kindness.

Severus tried to remember the face of the old witch, but could not clearly recall any defining features of her face, as in the shape of her nose or eyes, but as if recalling a face from a long forgotten dream, undefined and slipping away from his mind.

Using their wands, they cleared away the rock from the trail, before continuing their trek back.
Back at Mounga's house, Rainbow greeted the pair and asked how the trip was, to which Mounga gave his wife a reassuring smile and replied it was just fine. Severus had grabbed Hermione's handbag, filled with his possessions, which he had left at Mounga's house.

As the two walked toward Severus' new home, the Potions master asked, “Why didn't you tell her?”

“Because then I'll have everyone in town asking about what Pele looked like, asking you and me to rehash details ad nauseam. I don't want to do that. Do you?”

Severus looked at Mounga, noting the slightly shaken look on the large wizard's face.

“Where's the funeral?” Draco said, as he suddenly popped up, having come down from his house with Ginny to join Severus at entering his new home. He had noted the rather graven faces of his friends.

“We had a rather close call on the trail back home,” Severus admitted.

“You're both all right?” Ginny asked with great concern, noting the slightly shaken appearance of Severus.

“Yeah.” Mounga put on a brave face, trying to reassure the young couple they were fine.

Once the four of them reached the front gate, they stopped. The front yard was still overgrown, but the path had been restored up to the newly-built house that had incorporated the design of modern Balinese architecture with some American craftsman design elements. Severus didn't know what the architecture styles were called; he had flipped through several books the builder had, indicating what he found appealing and functional for his needs. His home had a tropical feel to the overall look, but still had a simple homeyness to it.

“Severus?” Draco said, offering up a pineapple.
Severus took the fruit and impaled it onto the fence post, right next to the front gate, indicating he was receiving guests and that they were welcome. Well, as welcome as Severus would make them feel, depending on who it was.

The four walked up the path to the house.

“That front porch looks like it will fit a hammock nicely,” Mouna noticed.

Severus imagined Hermione in a hammock reading a book back when he was in England as he pondered inviting her to join him. Now that vision seemed that much clearer, envisioning the light coming from the west slanting across the front porch in the early evenings, given the south-facing orientation of the house.

Placing his wand to the door, Severus unlocked it and entered his home.

Severus had been to the house many times during its construction, but now that it was complete and it was all his, it seemed as strange and foreign as the first moment he arrived in Malu Palekaiko, the scents of the ocean and jungle unfamiliar and peculiar. He’d had a home once, during his youth, but it was the brick hovel that he’d grown up in and was as unwelcoming as it was familiar. It had been taken away from him by the Death Eater Decree. This new home was his, and he would fill it with pleasant memories this time.

Sensing the portentous moment, Ginny walked over to her friend and gently touched his arm. “Welcome home, Severus. Ho'omaika'i i 'ana.” She embraced him, remembering what it was like the moment she first stepped into her new home with Draco, feeling a sense of finally belonging, another long sought-after dream finally realized.

He hugged her back, and also received hugs and claps on the back in congratulations from Draco and Mouna. Only these three understood how much this home had meant to Severus. Hermione understood too, but she was not there, and her presence was missed. Even though Mouna had only seen Hermione once when Severus was Polyjuiced into her form, he knew that Severus had designed this house in hopes that she would someday join him.

This was not a house built for a bachelor, but for a family. Severus may not have consciously designed the home as such, but that's what it was built for.

Mouna offered to help unpack, but Severus declined his offer, knowing where everything was
going to go. It didn't take long for Severus to pull everything out of Hermione's old handbag. The armoire was the trickiest part to pull free, as a drawer pull had caught on the button loop of the bag, but that was easy enough to fix. The rest involved putting away clothes or kitchen items.

Severus had purchased a large bed and had a custom frame made for it. It was already delivered and set up in the master bedroom. It was in a dark-stained teak carved with heavy posts, supporting a canopy and draped in mosquito netting. Neither Ginny nor Draco made mention that it looked very similar to the bed Severus had back at his old flat that Hermione was most probably sleeping in now. Though this one looked much larger – it could easily sleep two and then some – and the bed curtains were white instead of black, essentially it was nearly identical.

There were a few other pieces of furniture Severus had bought ahead of time, such as a bedside table, a comfortable chair for reading in his new library, a kitchen table and chairs, and some necessary linens, but the rest of the house was unfurnished. Severus would move his books from his shop later that week.

Mounga went to help Ginny and Draco bring food, more chairs, a spare table and other items to help host Severus' house-warming party. By the time Severus finished putting nearly everything in its place, the party was set up and ready to go. There were a couple other things Severus needed to put away, but he would do that once company had left at the end of the night.

Ginny had set up the food in a buffet-style service with plates, flatware, and napkins, and cooked some of Severus' favorites that he'd taught her over the years. There was gazpacho, paella, and other dishes she had learned from various cookbooks, in addition to heaping mounds of fresh fruit. There was a fresh fruit punch Ginny had made by mixing guava, pumpkin, and orange juice with slices of strawberries floating in it, in addition to other more sophisticated libations.

Severus did offer to reimburse Ginny and Draco for the cost of the party, to which they insisted it was their housewarming gift to him.

With the pineapple now displayed by the front gate, the guests began arriving.

Rainbow and the children came, presenting Severus an umeke, a bowl carved from koa wood. Severus placed it in a place of honor in his entryway, considering it was a gift symbolizing that all who enter are welcomed as family. For the time being, he transfigured one of his kitchen chairs into a console table in which to display it, since it was a gift given with considerable thought. The Finaus had brought a Hawaiian umeke for the Malfoys as a wedding gift, so he was familiar with the symbolism behind the present.
Kaimi made Severus another lei in congratulations of his new home, a gift which he accepted graciously and wore. Iakona and Akela congratulated Severus on his new home, the latter very subdued in her manners. Akela was no doubt feeling very shameful over her behavior, given the last time Severus and Akela talked, she had called him an asshole.

Halulu and Greg showed up shortly afterwards, looking very relaxed and blissful from a long overdue two-week vacation. The newly-returned couple presented Severus with a fine vintage of Italian Chianti brought back from their trip, and a bouquet of coral-colored roses as a symbol of congratulations.

Gary and Iolana arrived right behind them with an orange tree, a common tree given to symbolize sweetness and generosity in Western culture, and happiness and prosperity in Chinese culture. The tree's orange fruit also symbolized gold, a harbinger of wealth and good luck, often given around Chinese New Year. It seemed nearly every house on the island had some Chinese residents at one time over the decades, as at least one orange tree was planted in most yards or sat in a large pot on their front porch.

Arnold and Ranjit were the last to come, bringing Severus Potions equipment for his personal lab at home for their gifts.

Everyone who was invited was finally there. Ginny even brought over her music box, setting it to play something non-obtrusive to the conversations going on about the house.

Ginny declared the buffet open and people went to fill their plates, eager to try some of Ginny's cooking.

Gary looked about the table and said, "You have salsa, but where's the chips?"

"What salsa?" Ginny asked.

"That salsa," Gary indicated, pointing to the bowl of gazpacho that people were not serving up in the bowls Ginny had brought over. Instead, they were using the ladle to pour the gazpacho over the paella, thinking it was a condiment.

It was culinary sacrilege.
Reminding himself that there were no current Spanish expatriates in Malu Palekaiko, Severus calmly said while trying not to grit his teeth, “That's not salsa, that's gazpacho. It's a chilled Spanish summer soup.”

Digging into the paella, with the soup dumped on top of the rice and seafood mixture, Gary said, “Well, it makes a great salsa.”

Severus could feel the corner of his mouth twitch, but decided he would merely use this as a chance to expand the culinary knowledge of this gastronomically diverse community.

Draco muttered under his breath, “Bloody peasants.” It amazed Severus how much he sounded exactly like his father at that moment.

Fortunately, Draco and Ginny had brought over enough chairs for all the adults to have some place to sit. The Finau children sat on the front porch while they ate, their feet dangling over the edge, given that Severus had not installed a railing, the front porch feeling more like an open veranda.

Once everyone was done with their food, Severus gave everyone a tour of the house at once, spending the most amount of time in the Potions lab, talking with great pride about how he had designed his lab. It had a lovely view of the town below and ocean beyond with the shutters opened. The ventilation he planned was based on the predominant winds that came from the east-northeast. There were the benches built at an optimal height for him, and shelving that would soon be filled with jars, boxes, pots, canisters and containers holding a variety of ingredients.

Mounga and Iakona seemed most impressed with the library, wondering if Severus had enough books to fill up the shelving already or was it made in estimation of more books he would add to it over the years. Ginny and Draco liked the outdoor shower he had installed, based on the fact Draco and Ginny had one at their house. They had remarked about how nice it was to have one right off the bedroom, which reduced the amount of humidity introduced to the inside of the house, cutting down on mold they had to fight in the bathroom, in addition to the enhanced romantic atmosphere.

Twilight settled in and Ginny had set some tiki torches about the outside of the house for those that decided to talk outside.

Severus had decided he needed a moment to himself, having been far more social than he was used to, even with his business and Friday nights at the bar. He sat on a felled log in the backyard that had been cut down to make room for the second story tier he had built above the living room that held the master bedroom and Potions lab. The north walls were level with the ground, given the slope of the land.
Gazing up at the sky, Severus noticed that the house's roofline blocked all light pollution from the town below, what little there was. He made a mental note to build a deck for a telescope for a bit of star-gazing.

Enjoying a bit of solitude from the noise of the party, he almost didn't hear Akela approach.

“Uncle Severus?”

She was climbing up the slope of the hill towards where he was sitting.

“Yes?” he asked, his voice a bit curt. Severus was still upset with her, given he had not received an apology from her regarding her behavior.

Even in the light of the gibbous waxing moon that was already rising in the sky, he could tell that she had been crying.

“I want to apologize,” she choked out, trying to hold herself together until she could finish what she was saying, which only seemed to make her cry more.

Given how petulant she had behaved, it surprised Severus how remorseful she was, which pleased him.

Since she seemed genuinely sorry, Severus accepted her apology. “Very well, I accept your apology,” he said a bit stiffly. “I hope you understand now why I was upset with you.”

Before Akela could apologize any further or grovel at Severus feet, admitting her most grievous sin of behaving so poorly towards him, she threw herself onto the log next to him and buried her head into his shoulder while wailing pitifully.

Severus recognized this particular type of crying, having been exposed to it so often.

Akela opened her mouth and began sobbing her woeful tale, confirming his suspicions.
“I told Ulrich I wanted to wait and he dumped me,” Akela confessed, pausing every few words to try and speak the words before dissolving into tears each time. “You were right, you were so right.”

Severus put an arm around the girl and patted her consolingly, hoping she wouldn't mistake it as anything other than friendly support. Too often witches who had come to him as a gigolo in such a condition had thrown themselves at him as a form of comfort, often mistaking sympathy for interest, hoping to shore up their flagging confidence with validation that another wizard found them desirable after being dumped.

Reminding her, “As I said, a boy who does not value your mind and personality without your physical charms is not worthy of you.”

Akela burst into tears once more. “He called me a frigid prude.”

Remembering how Hermione had been so equally sexually dismissed by her own husband, Severus' anger toward Ulrich became more intense. Granted, this young witch was deserving of some of this misery, given how poorly she had behaved towards Severus, but she was naive and a bit foolish, as young people sometimes were wont to do. If he wanted to rub salt in the wound and be cruel, he could have brought up the fact that she owed him a new sterling silver cauldron. But this latest parallel between Weasley and Ulrich made him loathe the young wizard, who had treated Akela with casual cruelty and callousness, that much more.

Severus just hoped that Rainbow was still giving Akela that libido-suppressing potion, as he did not want this young witch throwing herself at him, much like when Hermione suddenly performed fellatio on his fingers after suddenly confessing how her husband called her an ice queen.

“There, there,” he said, making sure to choose his words carefully.

Before he could figure out what else to say while not giving the distraught witch any wrong impressions, Akela burst into hysterical tears once more, her breath periodically hitching. “And... and... and what's worse... (hic) is he's now dating my best friend... (hic) Kiki!”

'So much for best friends,' Severus thought dryly.

Severus conjured a handkerchief, something he was well practiced at doing, and handed it to the young girl so she would stop using his shirt as a snot rag, especially since he was in short sleeves.
Akela just clutched to Severus' arm, leaning heavily against him, like a little girl would fully throw herself up against her father in the midst of a crying fit. Severus was glad she wasn't clutching on to him in a more affectionate manner at least.

Rainbow came looking for Akela and saw her crying up against Severus. Spying Akela's mother spotting them, he gave Rainbow a look that she should come get her daughter.

The older witch, either oblivious to the look on Severus' face or deciding this was payback from when they had crossed horns before, decided she could leave her emotionally fragile daughter in the arms of an older wizard who once was a surrogate father figure to so many young witches before. Obviously, Akela must have been over her crush of Severus for Rainbow to just acknowledge to Severus that she was happy to leave the two alone to talk.

“First loves rarely end happily,” Severus reminded her.

Lily had crushed his heart when she took up with Potter, but it was just that, a crush. A very deep and all-consuming crush, that felt like love, but it was not. Even his own marriage to Gabrielle was one that had turned into love, but it was an amicable sort of love built upon the convenience of them thrust together. No, his first true and real love was Hermione. There was nothing convenient or easy about their love affair, but despite the difficulties they had, they had fallen completely and hopelessly for one another. He just hoped that Hermione would not meet an untimely death like Lily and Gabrielle. It seemed that the witches he had become attached to did not live long.

“Who was your first love?” Akela asked innocently enough.

“The last person I ever expected to fall in love with. As I was with her as well.”

He didn't know why he admitted as much to this young girl. Perhaps to give her hope that love sometimes can be found in the most unexpected places at the most unexpected times, but perhaps to remind himself why he loved Hermione.

Sitting up straighter, Severus gently grabbed Akela by the shoulder, encouraging her to pull herself together and find her dignity. “Dry your eyes. Ulrich is not worth the tears you shed for him. I understand the sense of betrayal you must feel, but you are strong enough to move past this and be a little wiser for it. A harsh lesson in the ways of men, but better you learn them when you are young versus when you are older and possibly married to a man who will not treasure you accordingly and be a 'big, fat jerk' to you.” He used the phrase to remind Akela of what a terrible
husband Weasley had been to his “dear friend” he once referenced a while back.

Akela wiped away her tears, feeling a little better now. “I really am sorry for screaming at you. My mom has me on that potion you wrote for her and looking back, now that I don't feel all crazy and hormonal, that really was unfair of me,” she admitted. “And I'm sorry I called you a big fat prude.”

“You called me a big fat prude? When was this?” Severus lied convincingly, pretending he hadn't listened in on her and Draco.

Akela just gave him a glare. “C'mon, I know you were right around the corner. I have Iakona as a brother, you don't think I know when someone is trying to eavesdrop on me?” She made some disparaging snort at Severus' stealth skills. “You know, it's a good thing you were never a spy, you would have been terrible at it.”

The young witch hopped off the log and walked back towards the party as Severus sat there, his mouth agape that he'd had his spying skills so easily dismissed by this teenager who knew nothing about what he had done or accomplished. Most of all, Severus wasn't about to set the record straight with her.

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The written part of the test wasn't so hard. In fact, Hermione found it the easiest part of Albert's test to see if she truly had mastered Greek well enough that he could accredit her the language towards completion of her apprenticeship. Hermione's pronunciation was still a little off, but Albert attributed that to the particular dialect she had picked up from the Greek restaurants she frequented. The final test was when Albert handed her a Potions text with an anti-translation spell; she had to brew and complete something from the book. It was a way of testing how far her brewing skills had advanced, and her ability to decipher the ingredients listed, given that some of the ingredients were listed using Greek euphemisms as a way to further trip up those who might be using a dictionary instead of knowing the language itself.

Hermione had used all the correct ingredients, understanding that a few of the ingredients were puns. Had she used ingredients based on the literal translation, Albert would have halted the test, given the fact he didn't want to blow up his lab at home.

In the end, Hermione had a cauldron of Dionysus' Fever, a potion that caused a certain mad frenzy of dancing and blissful drunken-like euphoria, that Albert was very pleased with. It had the right color, consistency, and smell. As the final test, Hermione had to take the potion herself so that she could feel the effects of it, in order to better understand the potion itself. Albert made sure to relieve Hermione of her wand and handed her a specially charmed garment to change into. It was made of young deer skin and would prevent her from disrobing, given the fact the potion got its name based on the periodically naked dancing that the maenads sometimes participated in during their worship rites of the ancient Greek god.
Albert had placed a protective charm barrier about the two acres of wild woodland he had behind his house. The barrier would keep Hermione close for observation while the potion ran its course over the next couple hours.

There was a general antidote that Hermione had prepared ahead of time, should she get too carried away from the effects of a potion and hurt herself. Albert would administer it in much the same way that Hermione used to administer the antidote to Severus during their testing days together, most notably with a binding spell.

Standing on the edge of the twilight-cloaked forest, dressed in the simple fawn-skin shift, Hermione tipped the vial back and felt the strange tendrils of magic from the Dionysus' Fever potion pulse through her veins, as if they were vines snaking around the bones in her body, pulling her like a puppet held by invisible strings. Her mind drifted into a state of careless bliss, as her body began to move to the song of some distant drum and flute that seemed to draw her into the woods. Her body felt numb, similar to when she was drunk, her muscles unaware of any fatigue as if filled with boundless energy that she could not contain.

The trees around Hermione began to sway and move, dancing with her like a corps de ballet and she was the prima ballerina in this delirious production. Their branches reached down to her and she reached up to touch their tips as if dancing a reel, moving between trunks that were her partners where only fingertips touched.

Albert watched Hermione begin dancing to some unheard tune as she moved off into the woods, with him keeping an eye on her from a distance. There were other potions he could have had Hermione brew and sample as final proof of her skill at this juncture, but he felt that since she had been pushing herself so hard lately, she needed something a bit frivolous. Even at the last booze-up in April, it seemed more like she was drinking and doing the skill-based bets more out of obligation to strive towards an end than for a chance to relax and cut loose for a bit. He hoped the Dionysus Fever would do her a bit of good and give Hermione a chance to relax for once instead of working herself into a near state of exhaustion if she didn't take a break. He had seen other apprentices push themselves this hard only to nearly break down during their apprenticeship. Hermione had a great deal of mental discipline and he admired her for it, but even Albert knew that she needed to relax once in a while.

The golden light dripping down from the branches swirled and dissipated like fairy dust in the darkening night sky, causing Hermione to raise her hands up and run her fingers through the floating illuminated particles, laughing at the obscene beauty of it all.
From around a tree, she saw a pair of eyes staring at her. It was a game. Running around the tree, the eyes were just beyond her ability to find who they belonged to in the silvery light of the waxing gibbous moon, yet the eyes were chasing her and she was equally running away from them. She could not even tell if she was the prey or the predator. Perhaps both, since there was this duality inside of her seeking to tear everything apart, yet finding harmony with herself and peace with the world. Had Hermione been in her right mind, she would have called it madness, but under the thrall of the potion, it was perfectly logical.

The eyes finally revealed themselves to be a pair of black eyes surrounded by a familiar head of long black hair and a mischievous grin that seemed to recall some memory from long ago, as if from a recent dream. Strangely enough, Severus was wearing a beard. He looked good with a beard, filling out his face and making him look even more masculine. Emerging from behind the tree, Severus was looking more muscular than she remembered him from before.

Of course, now it all made perfect sense. Severus was a satyr. Satyrs represented the carefree life, lovers of women and wine, and ready for every physical pleasure. Hermione had never felt so carefree as when she was with Severus, and he had pleased many women, plus he was quite the wine connoisseur. He obviously was a minor Greek deity.

Severus and Hermione chased each other about the trees, the witch laughing gaily at their game. Severus' very erect phallus bobbed and enticed her, arousing Hermione further. She certainly didn't remember Severus being that large, but she longed to be filled by him, and violently.

“Make love to me like the Greek god that you are,” Hermione begged him, yearning to be ravished by her lover.
Severus produced a flute and began to play it seductively, which made Hermione dance without accord. Her body writhed, enticing Severus to play on with even more sensuality; Hermione's movements and his music fed upon each other until Severus pounced on Hermione knocking her back onto the ground as he began to take her, yanking her shift up in order to mount her.

From between the trees, Albert saw the darkened silhouette of Hermione fall onto the ground as the next segment of the potions hallucination began, which usually included vivid sexual dreams. She had fallen gently and he was sure she had not hit her head, given the soft ground. There was some
garbled mumbling she shouted out, but he had not been able to discern what she had said. Presently she was grabbing at her shift, and would have already rid herself of any and all clothing if it had not been charmed to remain in place to retain some of her modesty while under the influence of the potion. And now the cries of ecstasy and thrashing commenced.

Severus the Satyr mounted Hermione without foreplay or preamble, thrusting into her quickly. She felt like she was nearly going to be split in two, filled by Severus' now larger than normal erection. Hermione shrieked, more out of pleasure than out of pain, rejoined with Severus after such a long separation. The endurance Severus displayed seemed to go on forever with Hermione orgasming time and time again as they rolled about the forest floor, sometimes with her on top riding him and sometimes with Severus entering her from behind, braying and howling like a wild animal. Severus didn't talk at all, but it was almost as if she could read his thoughts, or was it merely a projection of her thoughts upon what Severus would say. She could not tell, as the whole vision seemed to flood and overwhelm her senses.

Albert could tell that Hermione had brewed a particularly strong batch as Hermione was taken into quite a deep trance with this elixir. He had brewed it a few times before, once during his own apprenticeship, and it lasted almost two hours. It was nearly two and a half hours before the effects of Hermione's potion finally wore off and she groggily stumbled out of the caliginous woods.

“Was that all a hallucination?” she asked, still uncertain what was real and what was not.

It seemed so real, and she could almost feel the ghost sensation of Severus inside of her, like waking up from a dream of falling down and still remembering the sensation of one's body hitting the ground.

“Yes, but don't worry, your shift kept you covered and I could not understand anything you said,” Albert assured her. “You mostly danced and thrashed about on the ground.”

Hermione could not help but blush, given the very sexually graphic vision she just had and what she was doing in that hallucination. Albert had the good sense not to mention that he probably figured out what her visions entailed.

“How do you feel?” he asked, hoping the Dionysus' Fever took a bit of edge off the tension that emanated from her.
Still feeling a touch disoriented, Hermione put her hands to her head to try and accurately gauge how she felt. “Actually, pretty relaxed. And a bit tired.”

“Well, your brew seemed to last two and a half hours, a bit stronger than anticipated, but desirable nonetheless.” Albert smiled and patted his apprentice on the back. “Congratulations, you mastered and passed your first language. Now you can move onto Latin.”

Hermione felt a sense of relief, now that she was one step closer to being with Severus once again.

Albert gave Hermione a list of Latin books he recommended at the end of the day before she Floo'ed back home. Once back at her flat, even though she felt quite worn out, Hermione felt too excited to go to sleep or eat, as Marf had a hot dinner ready and waiting for her.

Instead, Hermione headed out the door to Flourish and Blotts to buy the list of Latin books Albert recommended. Fortunately, Hermione had been to the bank recently and had the money to buy all of the books listed on the parchment.

As she meandered the foreign language section, Hermione heard a voice that was familiar, but she couldn’t quite place it by sound alone.

“Hello, Hermione.”

Spinning around, she could not find the source of the voice until the lone figure emerged at the end of the aisle.

“Alan?”

It was that wizard she'd carelessly flirted with briefly at the Three Broomsticks that one night after watching a play, and who harassed her the night of her anniversary dinner at the Grand Royal Supper Club that Viktor rescued her from.

“You remembered my name. I'm impressed.” Alan smirked as he sauntered down the aisle looking like a cat assessing its prey.
Hermione glanced behind her making sure that the aisle behind her was not blocked, should she need to make a quick escape. Alan was charming, which is why she initially flirted with him, but just talking with him set off some alarm bells in her head. There was something slightly unsettling about him that she could not name.

Hoping that he would get the hint, Hermione decided to merely nod and go back to looking at the basic Latin grammar book she had been eyeing when Alan made his presence known. She pulled the book off the shelf and flipped through the first few pages. Her eyes weren't really reading anything, as her attention was on the wizard approaching her on her left. She wondered if she could reach for her wand with her right hand without being noticed, should it become necessary.

Stopping a few feet away from her, he leaned up against the bookshelf in a very self-assured manner. “No husband around tonight?” Alan asked with amusement. “Oh, that's right. I read about your divorce. And I don’t see any international Quidditch stars to come and bother us.”

Was this a subtle threat that she was unprotected, or merely some failed attempt at seduction?

“How observant,” she drolly remarked as she kept her eyes focused on the page in front of her while casually moving her elbow in such a way as to free her cloak so that it would be easier to whip out her wand.

“Latin grammar? My, such light reading.”

At this rate, Hermione was never going to get all the books on her list should this arse keep bothering her all night long.

Snapping the book shut with a crack, she turned to face Alan with a somewhat bored look on her face. “Is there something I can help you with?”

Alan ran a finger lazily along the edge of the bookshelf in front of where Hermione was standing. “My throat is parched. Care to join me for a drink?”

Glaring at him, she drawled irritably, “Not really, I have more interesting things to do.”

“Reading about Latin is more fun than having a social drink?” Alan's finger was now playing with the edge of the book in Hermione's hands.
“Studying Latin, actually. And yes, that is more appealing to me.” Hermione was getting aggravated the longer this continued on. She wondered what it would take to give this wizard the hint she isn't interested any more. For a brief second nearly a year ago, she was, but wasn't any more.

“It's not like you have an apprenticeship you're working on,” he threw out dismissively.

Hermione's eyes flashed wider momentarily, wondering if he was making a blind stab in the dark to dismiss her remark, or if he somehow knew about her apprenticeship and was being insulting.

Alan's eyes narrowed. “You do have an apprenticeship.” For a moment, he took a half step back in disbelief. “But...” Alan stopped whatever he was about to say and schooled his features once more.

“And I have a lot of Latin to catch up on. Good night.” Hermione turned and marched away, discreetly placing her hand on her wand under her cloak as she turned her back on Alan.

She didn't bother looking back as she went up to the front to pay. There were several other books Hermione needed to buy from Albert's list that he'd given her, but she could always come back another time. And if Alan was waiting for her again, she could always order and have them delivered via owl.

As she pushed the door open to leave, Alan called out halfway across the store, “You looked lovely in that slinky blue dress at the Ministry ball.”

Hermione's pace nearly faltered and she almost stopped with Alan's remark. He had recognized her somehow. Most probably because Ron didn't wear his mask half the night and she was with him a good portion of the time. Hanging out with Viktor and Lady Battenberg, given that Viktor and Ron were photographed together that night and listed as good friends of one another, might have also given it away since she did dance with Viktor that night and he was pretty recognizable, even with a mask on.

It was then that Hermione remembered that Viktor and Anne's wedding was going to be in about a month's time. They had picked June for a wedding date and Hermione was invited. No doubt Ron and Lavender would be there as well. Hermione realized she might have to go shopping again for yet another dress. The plum outfit she wore to Lavender and Ron's wedding would not be appropriate for the evening event, and her red and black dresses would not be appropriate either, since those were definitely inappropriate colors to wear to a wedding. Her blue dress was also just
a bit too revealing to be decorous. Another trip to Madam Mandel's would be in order.

Back in her flat, Hermione threw the Latin book on the bed and went to her wardrobe instead. Opening it up, she looked through her dresses. Not one could she wear to the wedding next month.

It irked Hermione that it seemed like she was getting all these nice dresses, but could wear them for one night and nothing else. There was that black dress she wore for Severus on her birthday a second time, but they never went out in public that day.

Pulling the black dress out, she held it up to her body, remembering how Severus looked at her in the dress after a memorable day at the spa. There was that same hunger in his eyes she recalled from her hallucination earlier in the day. The satyr version of Severus took her without holding back.

Hermione hung the dress back up and went to the kitchen to eat the hot dinner Marf was no doubt keeping warm for her. Eating the lamb stew that filled her, not realizing just how hungry she really was until she sat down, Hermione's eyes kept glancing over at the bowl of lemons.

The lemons from Dumbledore's gravesite were completely dried out, as she had done nothing with them for months.

“That's it,” Hermione huffed at no one in particular.

Putting down her fork, Hermione got up and stomped over to the bowl of lemons. “What is it with you,” she snapped at the inanimate pile of fruit.

Summoning her best knife, a cutting board, grater, shredder, and other various implements, Hermione began dissecting them. She spent the rest of her Sunday night boiling, baking, simmering, stewing, frying, broiling and grilling the lemons she had. At the end of the night, all she had was a pile of pulpy mush, and she was no closer to figuring out what it was behind those damnable lemons.

The conundrum of those lemons was as frustrating and perplexing as how she could prove Severus and Draco's innocence. She was no closer to creating a solid argument for taking in front of the Wizengamot.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Thank you to my betas, Hope and JuneW.

Fan art of Hermione and Severus as “The Maenad and the Satyr” by akatnaedeaster, commissioned by me: http://akatnamedeaster.livejournal.com/
Also posted on my Tumblr page here: http://atdlheabetz.tumblr.com/post/149207832555/chapter-eighty-four-the-maenad-and-the-satyr

Ho'omaika'i 'ana: Congratulations in Hawaiian.

“The Hawaiian umeke, or calabash bowl, is a symbol of welcome and aloha. Early Hawaiians were very communal and generous when it came to their possessions and food. Families often shared a meal of cooked vegetables, fish, or steamed taro out of a communal bowl or umeke.

“Throughout generations up to modern Hawaii, the umeke symbolizes sharing and aloha to all who enter a home. Umeke are often given as housewarming gifts, wedding gifts, or birthday gifts. This classic Hawaiian bowl is placed in a place of honor in a living room or entry room to signify that all who enter are welcomed as family.”

https://www.martinandmacarthur.com/blog/item/262-hawaiian-umeke-symbol-of-aloha

Regarding the Dionysus rites: "During these rites, the maenads would dress in fawn skins and carry a thyrsus, a long stick wrapped in ivy or vine leaves and tipped with a pinecone; they would weave ivy-wreaths around their heads or wear a bull helmet in honor of their god, and often handle or wear snakes."

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maenads

In the classic Greek interpretation, satyrs did not have faun-like legs, horns or goat-like tail, which was a modification of the satyr myth by Romans. In the classical Greek interpretation, satyrs were strongly built, with full beards and long elf-like ears. I ditched the ears for Severus.

And thanks for the wait for this latest chapter. I was away on vacation, sans Internet, for 10 days.
As Albert and Hermione filed into Lavender's office for their weekly meeting, they chatted back and forth in Latin. Hermione had picked up the ancient language as if she was born to speak it. Given the fact she was so familiar with the nomenclature of so many plants and animals, it helped greatly. So many spells were based in Latin which also was a boon in understanding the language, and the conjugation of verbs and sentence structure seemed to make more sense to Hermione than Greek.

Christine was already in Lavender's office, deep in discussion with the company president and founder. The arrival of the two Potions experts signaled it was time to begin the meeting.

“The launch for India – starting in October when the monsoons end – is right on track. And as I've been advised not to Portkey the last few months of my pregnancy, I've decided you, Hermione, will have to be there in my stead, since I am appointing you vice president. It makes sense, since you are taking on so many duties and will be running the company during my maternity leave,” Lavender announced. There was congratulations from Christine and Albert with Hermione's promotion.
“Of course there is a pay raise, given you are coming up to speed and have been taking on some aspects of the company. Christine will also be going to India, and I'd like you to be there as well, Albert. It will be a weekend event. Unfortunately, I can't get a Portkey for you, Christine, so you will have to fly out on an ae-reo-plane. That won't be a problem, will it?"

“Not at all, travel via airplane will be fine until end of November,” Christine assured her client.

Puzzled, Hermione looked at her aunt. “Why would travel by plane be a problem?”

“Because I'm pregnant,” Christine announced, beaming brightly.

Hermione hugged her aunt, joyful that she was able to conceive again and quickly after her miscarriage. “Congratulations. Uncle Tim must be over the moon.”

“He is,” Christine said, trying to not break into tears, feeling her emotions suddenly go all wonky and intense.

Albert congratulated Christine with some kind words and encouragement before they went back to discuss business.

“Christine will make the arrangements, you just have to show up, say some pre-scripted words Christine will come up with for public relations, look lovely for the photographs – I'll have a stylist on hand to take care of your hair and make-up, and Christine's too,” Lavender assured them both. “Also shake a few hands and do the same sort of thing I did at the Ministry ball. Talk shop, make a few business connections and such.”

Hermione wanted to roll her eyes. That is exactly the sort of stuff she hated. She didn't want to schmooze. She would rather have a nice lengthy discussion about Potions theory with some of the Indian Potions masters, not hobnob with the press and “the beautiful people.”

She guessed if there was a promotion and raise involved, there would be some unpleasant aspects of the job which would be compensated with pay.

“In addition, Christine has told me that in the Muggle world they have beauty products just for babies. So I've decided to have you both create a line of products just for infants. Shampoos, soaps, bubble bath, lotions, and so on. Christine and I are still working on a name for the line, but we'd
like you to begin work right after you finish with that roll-on henna tattoo kit you've been working on.”

Hermione couldn't wait until they were done with the roll-on henna tattoo kit that didn't require users to sit still for several minutes to hours to apply like the traditional method still employed by witches in India, even with Charms to add an extra hand, literally. Her skin felt raw from having to scrub off the henna that was guaranteed to stay on for two weeks, no matter how many times you bathed, swam, or exfoliated. Albert gave her a solution that could remove it, but it really was wreaking havoc with the skin on her arms and legs where she tested the product. The henna tattoo stayed on for two weeks, but they didn't have the right color yet, since the ingredient used to make it last longer lightened the intensity of the color, which was undesirable.

Working on a line of products gentle enough for a baby's skin sounded preferable to scrubbing off henna tattoos.

The rest of the meeting went quickly, which Hermione was thankful for. She was glad Lavender kept meetings to the point, after hearing her Aunt Christine go on about how some meetings in the Muggle world could go on for over an hour with nothing much said at all, and people having no idea at the end of the meeting what they were supposed to do.

At the end of the day, Albert swung by Hermione's office.

“Ready to go squonk-hunting tonight?” Albert said, a chipper gleam in his eye.

“I understand that squonk tears are valuable in beauty potions, but the poor animal is just a pitiful creature,” Hermione complained, feeling more sympathy for the creature than Albert did.

“Despite their horrid appearance, they are rather prolific breeders, and if we don't capture them, their population will get out of control.” Albert lectured her, knowing her stance on killing animals for sport alone. “Besides, they are very destructive to some forests, gnawing away the bark of some old and ancient trees. Neville has a nest of them who have been destroying some fruit trees he has at his nursery, so we'll be doing him a favor by capturing them.”

“Well, when you put it that way, I am not so reluctant to participate.” There were other potions ingredients just as effective as squonk tears for use in beauty potions that improved skin tone, but if the animals were a nuisance and there was no threat to their population, Hermione was willing to go.

It looked like Hermione was committed to going squonk-hunting after all. Instead of staying late in
the office Friday night and viewing Severus' memories, and possibly recalling another memory of her and Severus being intimate, she'd be tromping about underbrush of the full June moon following a trail of tears by wandlight and bagging squonks.

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There was a torrential downpour as Severus and Draco walked to the bar after locking up Friday night. The Parapluie Charm that arced over their heads, shielding them from the rain, did not stop the rain from splashing up from the sidewalk and all over their shoes.

This was supposedly the dry season, but that didn't mean that they didn't have the occasional rainstorm. Hurricane season did officially start at the beginning of the month and it was only June fourth. This wasn't a hurricane, but it certainly was quite a storm.

Entering the bar, Bongo greeted the pair, followed by all the other patrons.

“Aloha,” Severus and Draco called back in greeting.

Mounga was singing some Barry White, his voice perfectly mimicking the disco behemoth’s deep bass range. The large wizard waved at his friends as they entered since he was busy. No doubt Rainbow had harangued him into singing again.

The matriarch of the Finau family had been bugging Draco and Severus to sing at least once during their Friday nights at the bar. Ginny had already sung a couple times, belting out a few songs that were popular back in England that had made it to the states and were played on the local WWN. Her voice was sweet and a little breathy, and she stayed in key except for a couple high notes she had trouble reaching.

Severus ordered an old fashioned and Draco ordered a gin and tonic, the sultry evening demanding they have something refreshing to quench their thirsts.

Mounga finished and came back over to join his wife, the Malfoys, and Severus. Ginny was nursing an ice cold beer, with the glass charmed to keep it chilled. There was a local brewer who made a pilsner which was almost as good as what was available in England, but Draco and Severus preferred their ale and bitters on the warmer side. They were unable to understand how Ginny could drink it so cold, despite her insistence it was perfectly palatable.

The band consisted of Maurice playing his accordion, a witch on piano, the same old wizened witch on guitar, Agnes, and another couple wizards who brought their trumpet and violin. They
were playing some mellow impromptu jazzy country-western composition.

“Draco, Severus, are you going to try your hand at the beard-growing competition this year?” Rainbow asked. “And you can't use any potions. It has to be all natural.”

Ginny broke into peals of laughter. “Facial hair on a Malfoy? Buahaha!”

Draco gave his wife a rather nonplussed sneer. “Malfoys can grow facial hair. You have never seen the portraits back at Malfoy Manor. My great-grandfather, Ransom Malfoy, had a rather prodigious beard.”

“Only because of the rumor that he was the bastard child of a werewolf,” Severus threw out, knowing that old story that had not a lick of truth to it would nettle him.

“Pure speculation and malicious conjecture based on bitter accusations of a jilted mistress, I assure you,” Draco insisted, lifting his nose up in the air.

“Ten Galleons says I can grow a better and thicker beard than you,” Severus threw out as a challenge.

“Ten Galleons and the loser has to make cassoulet according to the winner's preferences,” Draco accepted, upping the bet.

“Wait, there is a contest already for who will win that will be judged at the Pele Festival,” Rainbow butted in.

“If neither of us wins, the bet is still on,” Draco said.

“It will be a snowy day in Malu Palekaiko before I make cassoulet with lamb, tomatoes... and bread crumbs,” Severus drawled haughtily, pronouncing the last ingredient with great distaste.

“Not the fucking cassoulet again,” Ginny mumbled to herself before taking a long sip of her pilsner.
“Are you backing out of our bet?” Draco asked, looking smug.

“Not a chance.” Severus stuck out his hand and the two wizards on it shook.

“What's a cassoulet?” Mouna asked, noting there must be some serious history behind the story for those two to get in each other's faces over it.

“A sublime French dish made with primarily beans, carrots, onion, and various cuts of pork and duck.” Severus elucidated his dear friend, taking a sip of his drink while exuding an aura of cultural sophistication.

“And lamb, tomatoes, and bread crumbs,” Draco added, his own aura a bit more imperious and haughty.

“A proper cassoulet does not need bread crumbs to get the proper crust,” Severus insisted, getting into Draco's face.

It wasn't an outright hostile skirmish, but it was a dog-eared debate which had once again brought back old prejudices and firm opinions that could not be budged.

“Will you two just shut it!” Ginny snapped, slamming her fist on the bar top. “Draco, go sing!” She pointed angrily over to where the musicians were just finishing up their song. “You promised you'd sing for me tonight.” To drive her point home, she folded her arms in front of her, an indication she was in no mood to bicker or to put up with their frivolous nattering on any more.

“Fine. I'll sing,” Draco announced with a smirk.

Walking over to the piano player, Draco leaned over and talked with the witch, who nodded her head and talked briefly with the other players before Draco stood up and took his place by the piano.

Draco started singing, the band beginning after the first count of four.
“Ain’t no sunshine when she's gone
It's not warm when she's away…”

Severus watched as Ginny beamed a glowing smile at Draco, overwhelmed with love for him and the song of pining he sung for her.

"And I know, I know, I know, I know,
I know, I know, I know, I know, I know,
I know, I know, I know, I know, I know,
I know, I know, I know, I know, I know,
I know, I know, I know, I know, I know,
I know, I know, I know, I know, I know,
Hey, I oughtta leave the young thing alone
But ain't no sunshine when she's gone”

The crowd in the bar cheered, impressed with Draco's control and ability to sing the whole repetitive stanza in one breath, his voice emoting the aching of longing. He dredged up the painful memories of heartbreak and yearning for Ginny after reading about her marriage to Potter, giving an exceptionally soulful rendition.

As Draco finished, the bar erupted in cheers, amazed Draco had been hiding such a good voice all these months. There was clapping and whistles from several patrons, including Bongo, the bartender.

The aching in Draco's rendition only served to stir up repressed emotions for Severus of how much he was missing Hermione and the simple joy of bathing in her love that she radiated towards him. The lyrics only reminded him of how much his own house did not feel like a home without her.

Joining the group back at the bar, Ginny gushed at her husband, “You remembered!”

“Was that your song?” Rainbow asked.

“Right after the end of the war, before that stupid decree passed, Draco and I went out to a movie,” Ginny answered.

“The decree – you mean the law that Severus and Draco were prosecuted under?” Rainbow asked for clarification, since she hadn't been filled in on the details.
“You mean the same movie where Miss Brown spotted you both?” Severus asked, knowing that Draco had only ever been to a movie theater once before.

Severus had advised Draco not to go out in public with Ginny back then, since there were Death Eaters still roaming about Great Britain right after the war. Either of them could have been spotted and one or both hurt in a wand battle in a dark movie theater, or Ginny used as blackmail against Draco, had they figured out Draco was a spy.

“Yes, that one,” she replied to both questions. “Well, it was one of those romance type of movies. There was a point where the boy and girl are separated, and they played that song to show how much the boy missed the girl. Not that we watched much of the movie after that song played,” she added with a smile, remembering their first kiss.

Severus thought how very accurately the song embodied a sense of longing, given how morose he was suddenly feeling, longing for Hermione.

Ginny turned back to Draco. “When did you memorize it?”

“Lavender loaned me her Pensieve,” Draco admitted, and Severus could have sworn he added under his breath, “a few thousand times.”

Lost in thoughts about Hermione, Severus had to be nudged by Draco's elbow to bring his attention back to conversation.

“Hmm?”

“We have been given the pleasure to finally hear Draco sing. Can we finally convince you to sing us one song?” Rainbow coaxed Severus, trying to be sweet without pressure.

Severus was confident he had a good voice, since Chuff had made him sing for hours on end in order to improve his voice so when his Master finally deigned to drag Severus to his first Potions masters booze-up towards the end of his apprenticeship, Chuff would not be embarrassed by his apprentice singing poorly. During his apprenticeship he felt like he was being trained like a caged bird ordered to sing for their amusement alone. Severus did not want to be pressured into singing when he was not inspired to do so. He was usually inspired when he was alone, when no one else could critique his ability. Old resentments bubbled up, making him feel as if he was an animal
being prodded to perform upon command for the entertainment of others, and not of his own volition – and without inspiration.

'You want to hear me sing?'

Severus dredged up the most maudlin and heartbreaking ballad he could think of at the moment. He wanted to sing something which would be such a downer and kill the jovial mood in the bar, no one would ever harangue him to sing again.

“Fine,” he bit out shortly, his eyes flashing.

Mounga didn't think this was going to be such a good idea and wished his wife would have waited another night to pester Severus. It was evident she was oblivious to the sudden somberness that stole over the brooding Potions master during Draco's song. Mounga could tell that his friend was missing Hermione, recognizing the look he would get on his face whenever she was brought up – even very briefly in passing, and never in front of his wife.

Severus spoke to the violin player before setting his drink down on top of the piano.

He momentarily closed his eyes, and recalled the way the one wizard from the Highlands at the Hog's Head sang the song. It was mournful, and even the most hardhearted of wizards often did not have a dry eye when he was done singing. Well, except for Aberforth, but he heard the old wizard sing it many, many times over the years.

Drudging up every ounce of longing he felt for Hermione and the agony of being separated from her, Severus opened his mouth and began to sing acapella, the wizard from the violin joining in after the first stanza, once he could discern the notes and cadence to play along.

“A wizard call'd Eòin Greumson
Of bonnie Blackbriar Dornoch
Was bid to fight the goblin horde
Rebellion rose an' duty call'd

He left his love, fair Maighread
His promise: a gowden ring
That they should wed 'pon his return
No later than the Spring
A year had passed and not return'd
Poor Maighread was waefu'  
Her lover fear'd lost for dead  
Maighread's breast brokenheart'd

A poison quick upon her lips  
The witch did drink 'ere deeply  
To see her Eòin on the other side  
Join'd e'er in eternity

As Eòin came home, he found his bride  
Light fading from her eyes  
She thought she had join'd him beyond the veil  
And pass'd to the other side

No ghost remain'd, her soul pass'd on  
Though Eòin was not to be found  
She wandered lost without her love  
Maighread found no relief in death's bound

Young Eòin gaed to join his bride  
His heart could beat no more  
In gravely beds, they lie aside  
Join'd e'er beyond Grim's door.”

Severus' baritone voice rang clear and true to this slow funeral dirge of a happily ever after denied. He captured the essence of the song with the same commiseration and sorrowfulness as the Highland wizard who used to sing it in the Hog's Head.

When he finished, the bar was deathly silent, except for the odd sniffling noises from some of the witches who had broken down into sobs during the song.

Severus lifted his glass to his lips and drained the last of it before slamming the empty glass back down on top of the piano, and quickly stormed out of the bar.

Ginny grabbed a bar napkin and blew her nose. Even Draco wiped a few tears from the corner of his eyes, remembering how it sounded exactly as he remembered the few times Severus had taken
him to the bar during the war, on business for the Order.

Rainbow wiped away the tears from her eyes and said in a manner trying to lighten the mood, “Severus has got to get laid one of these days.”

Mounga could not understand what his wife's fascination with Severus' personal life was. Maybe it was the fact that Severus didn't share a lot of his past openly, and that left a lot to her imagination. Maybe it was because since Severus had been informally adopted into the family, she felt it was her obligation to make him happy and know his business, as if he was something to fix. Maybe it bugged her to no end that she didn't have any juicy gossip on him that she had to fill in the blanks in her own mind, but Mounga was getting tired of Rainbow's obsession with the private details of Severus life that he didn't share. Knowing Severus' secrets didn't make it any easier for Mounga to bear, knowing the pain his friend felt.

Mounga drained the last of his own drink, after wiping away the last of his own tears, and set it on the bar when he fixed his wife with an impatient glare. “Rainbow, remember that I love you when I tell you this, but shut up. It's none of your damn business.”

Rainbow stuttered and stammered a bit, trying to find some way of saying she meant well, her eyes flashing several different colors before turning black.

“And Ginny and I really should get going to dinner,” Draco said overly brightly, knowing that there was a possibility of a fight brewing between the older married couple.

They paid for their drinks and bid them a good night while the Finaus glared at each other. Draco could tell it was going to be an awkward night at the hot springs.

Severus strode back home, glad for a chance to stretch his legs before he got home, as it gave him a chance to cool down. He didn't like wearing his heart out on his sleeve, and he felt as if he had just laid bare his soul for the town to see with all the emotion he poured into that song. He wouldn't have done it if he had a much cooler head, especially after he and Draco both got riled over that cassoulet bet.

His snipping at Draco was partly because he had a case of blue balls that was backing up into his brain, making him a bit short as of late. More so than usual. With the increase in temperature and the lengthening of daylight, Severus' testosterone levels were increasing, making him even more sexually frustrated. It didn't help that he had run out of Polyjuice Potion, and the current batch he was working on would not be ready for at least another week, given the lengthy time required to stew lacewing flies.
He had used up the last of his vials of Polyjuice Potion over a month ago, and he longed to see Hermione one again. Not that he had a mirror, which was something else he needed to buy for his barely furnished home. There was a mirror charm he could cast and it would serve his needs, but a proper, non-enchanted mirror, is what he needed.

Severus sat on the bed and picked up the photograph of Hermione he kept on the bedside table. He hadn't put it by his bedside the day he moved in until all the guests had left for the night. He didn't want to field any questions as to who the witch in the photo was, though some of the people at the party would have known.

Next to her photo, Severus kept that dried lemon that Hermione had given him as a promise that she would clear his name and one day he would truly be free. He wondered if she had made any progress on that front.

He felt emotionally drained. Lying back on his bed, he didn't even feel like a wank, which usually helped when he was missing Hermione. Severus knew he should have something to eat for dinner, but he didn't feel like getting up and cooking. Even the thought of sitting in his reading chair with a book in his library brought him no solace. There were chores to do around the house, but even he couldn't find the motivation to get up and do them.

Severus still sent his own clothes out to be washed by the elf who ran the laundry service, but he no longer had an elf around his home in order to dust, do the floors and dishes, wash the windows and other various things he got used to with Marf around. There were the summer’s home from Hogwarts when he had to take care of his own housecleaning, but it had been years. Now the drudgery of keeping house fell squarely on his shoulders alone, and he didn't feel like hiring an elf to clean house, finally having a place that was all his with no one else wandering about.

There was a brief moment when Severus pondered how much it would cost to buy a Pensieve. At least then he could visit the memory of Hermione, but wondered if that was just a bit too desperate. Right now, he didn't care how pathetic it may have seemed, his bones ached for Hermione and her touch.

At least he would go out flying with Mounaga and his family tomorrow, since they had invited him. Perhaps a little flying would improve his mood the next day.

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“Lumos!”
Hermione could finally see the trail of tears, glistening by wandlight. Neville was off in another patch of woods, following a squonk that had left another trail to follow, while Albert was on the trail of a third. There was a whole nest of them.

She had seen some of the damage done to Neville's inventory when she arrived that night; the squonks had really gone to town on wreaking havoc at his nursery since her last visit nearly a week prior. At least they didn't get into his greenhouses where some of his more valuable plants were kept. Now Hermione was enjoying the hunt, feeling no pity for the destructive little buggers.

The trail was fresh and it didn't take long for Hermione to find the four-legged creature, covered with warts and odd growths, ambling about the underbrush of some overgrown hedges. With the use of her wand, she corralled the creature into her sack and Apparated back to the spot where they had a pen to hold the squonks before they started to liquefy.

The pen was already filled with a few other squonks who were weeping pitifully, in the process of dissolving into a pool of bubbles and tears. The pen was built to capture all the fluid left behind after the creatures would cry themselves into non-existence. There was a slot and a funnel at one the end of the pen, and a large jar to collect the fluid.

Hermione opened the door. While the other squonks scurried away to the other side of the pen, she dumped out the squonk in her sack that had begun sobbing.

“Serves you right for ruining Neville's nursery,” she said with some satisfaction.

Neville's nursery wasn't completely trashed, but he had probably lost all of his month's profits with the damage done.

Squonks had been imported into England about 200 years ago for use in beauty potions. However, some had gotten loose and the squonk population had flourished, hiding out in the countryside ever since.

Now she needed to go find a new trail of tears, since it was estimated this nest held about nine squonks and they had only captured six so far. Squonks tended to nest in multiples of three, and they didn't think there were twelve squonks in this nest. Albert and Neville were on the trail of two more, which meant Hermione had to find one more for the night.

Stalking about as quietly as possible, Hermione thought she heard the rustle of a squonk off
towards her right near a large tree. She kept her wand dark in order to prevent scaring it off and having to give chase. Quietly creeping along, she heard the crinkle of some leaves right behind the tree.

Hermione leapt out from behind the tree right when Neville also jumped out, thinking Hermione was a squonk herself.

The pair had startled each other in the process. Hermione began to stumble backwards and Neville, in an attempt to prevent her from falling, tried to grab hold of her. With his long arms, he reached for her, but in the process, he lost his balance as well, his one foot positioned upon a wobbly rock.

Neville slammed up against the tree with his back, Hermione clutched in his arms protectively.

There was a great expulsion of breath and a slight groan as the wizard made contact with the stout oak, a nob on the trunk digging into his back.

Neville and Hermione began laughing at the fact they had scared each other and nearly caused the other to fall over.

The laughter died down as each suddenly realized how they were in very close proximity to each other. Neville's chest rose and fell, Hermione's hand pressed against it as she was leaning into him from their stumbling.

The moon was high in the sky, casting their faces with a dappled silvery pale light beneath the great spreading oak.

It had been too long since Hermione had felt a man's arms about her. It felt so good to be held like this, and she could not move.

Glancing up, Hermione saw Neville gazing down at her with desire shining in his eyes. Hermione's stomach began to flutter, realizing Neville was attracted to her, as he had never indicated any interest in her that way before. And suddenly, she was feeling very drawn to Neville as well. Hermione knew her friend was merely a substitute for Severus, but didn't stop her from wanting to stay in his strong arms just a little bit longer, missing the touch of another man.

The shout of joy in the distance indicated Albert had found another squonk, interrupting the
moment of intensity between the two friends. Hermione pulled herself off Neville and began smoothing down her clothes, fidgeting nervously over the moment that had almost happened between them. Had Albert not yelled, it would have been natural for Neville to crane his neck down and kiss Hermione.

Neville pulled himself away from the tree, hissing and rubbing at the spot where the knot jabbed him.

The two were about to make some awkward apology or dismissive remark, both feeling a little embarrassed, when there was another rustle off towards the left this time.

Hermione and Neville followed the sound until they were sure they were close. By wandlight, they found a pair of squonks in the middle of mating, the source of the noise. Squons, because they cannot stand even their own reflection in the water, mate with their back towards each other so they do not have to look at something as ugly as themselves.

Considering how Hermione and Neville had been in an intimate embrace not moments before, it only added to the awkwardness of the situation to find the two creatures mating.

Neville and Hermione wrangled the pair who were stuck together, as the male squonk knots during copulation, into the sack and Apparated back to the holding pen.

Albert had just finished closing the cage when the two appeared, Neville with the sack over his back.

“I think this makes nine,” Neville said, as he put the last two in the cage, still joined at the genitalia.

Albert noticed the nervous shuffling of Hermione and the way that Neville seemed to try to avoid looking at Hermione.

“Yeah, yeah,” Hermione said hastily. “We thought each other was a squonk and sort of ran into each other.”

Neville rubbed the spot on his back still aching, knowing it was going to leave a nasty bruise.
It would take another fifteen minutes for the last of the squonks to be done transforming and its liquid collected in the large jar. The three humans made conversation, using Latin, since Hermione had become quite fluent in it.

After Albert screwed the lid on the jar, Hermione used her wand to fold and collapse the holding pen into a small box Albert could put into his pocket and place back in his lab.

Neville was happy that he'd had a free extermination service performed. Albert was thrilled he could sell some squonk liquid to Lavender for a pretty Sickle, and for less than what she would have paid for it wholesale.

Hermione shuffled her feet, kicking the toe of her shoe at the gravel on the ground. “I guess I'll see you tomorrow after I'm done working at Albert's.”
“Yeah,” Neville replied a bit nervously.

They exchanged a somewhat awkward hug, both unsure how friendly or platonic to embrace the other given their encounter earlier.

Albert refrained from rolling his eyes at the awkwardness, spotting the reluctant sparks between them.

Severus had agreed to go flying with the Finau family, but he didn't fly alongside of them much. Iakona, Mounga and Rainbow's son, challenged Severus to a speed race. Severus was older, but he was still the better flier. He left Iakona in his dust, eating the older wizard's eddies. If anything, the simmering frustration Severus felt, hating himself for needing Hermione so much and how it was affecting him so, spurred him on, giving him the will and desire to fly away from his troubles as fast as possible.

By the time Severus had crossed the landmark they used to designate as a finish line, Iakona was far behind him and the rest of the Finau family was even farther yet.

He had made mention he needed to do a bit of collecting during their flight, so he flew over towards the sheer cliffs where white-tailed tropicbirds were nesting, in order to collect a few eggs. Grabbing his bag from a pocket on the leg of his flying gear, Severus hovered his broom over towards a nest that had a couple eggs in them.
Being careful, as the nest was located just above some viciously thorny bougainvillea, Severus reached over sideways. He was hoping to not crack the shells during the collection process since they were very fragile.

As he reached a little farther, he felt something in his back twinge and he seized up, twisting his body. Grimacing in pain, he also swore, as his broom faltered, and Severus and his broom drifted suddenly into the cascade of bougainvillea, scratching him up badly in the process.

Severus dropped the bag and winced as he set himself upright on his broom, in pain from having to bend over and grab his broom handle. As he sat up as straight as possible on a broom, Iakona joined him.

“You all right, Uncle Severus?” the young wizard asked.

“No,” Severus ground out between gritted teeth. “My back.”

Iakona sped off and got his mother, who was over half a mile away still.

Rainbow flew over and saw the way Severus was sitting on his broom. “Oh, dear. You wrenched your back, didn't you?”

“Yes,” he said, his eyes shut tight as just trying to balance on the broom was making his back hurt that much more.

Rainbow brought her broom alongside Severus and pulled out her wand.

A few spells and Severus' back was well enough to get him back home, but he would still need to see a specialist. Rainbow said she knew someone who could fix him up good as new, and she would owl the person once they got back to their home.

The flight around the island was cut short as Severus, much to his humiliation, was escorted back to the Finaus' home.

Once they were back, Severus was set up in the guest bedroom with a charmed ice-pack on his
lower back while Rainbow contacted the specialist.

“Don't feel bad, Severus,” Mounga assured him. “My dad was as fit as they come, and he threw his back out when he was five years your junior on the amateur adult Quidditch league during one dive for the Snitch.”

Severus had seen family photos. Mounga's father was as large as Mounga, possibly larger. If he was a Seeker, he was probably the world's largest Seeker ever to have played in a game professionally or as an amateur.

Mounga's comment should have consoled Severus, but it didn't. It made him feel old and decrepit. Severus had promised to act as a substitute referee for the junior league game of the Warriors versus Sharks the next day, as one referee had to bow out due to family illness. Now he would have to abdicate and another referee would have to be found last-minute. Severus acted as an alternate referee when one of the referees could not make it, and this would have been his fourth game substituting, but it seemed he would need a substitute for himself now. Mounga assured him not to worry about it, as there were a couple others who could fill in.

Rainbow came back into the guest bedroom where Severus was laid out on his stomach. “Well, you have an appointment with a chiropractor and masseuse who will fix you right up. She takes care of Mounga when he tweaks himself periodically. You'll be right as rain by tonight.”

She took the time before Severus' appointment to clean up the scratches on his face, arms and legs. The bougainvillea had torn right through the fabric and punctured and scratched him with its long, piercing thorns.

Lunch was being served up, and Severus was asked if he wanted to join the family, but he decided to just continue laying down, his appetite severely diminished due to the pain. Rainbow's spells to help with the pain reduced the severity, but still did not take away all of it. She could have given Severus a potion, but she said that the specialist he was going to see had her own potions to give him for his treatment session.

When lunch was over, Rainbow came back into the bedroom and gave Severus the address of where to go. Severus said he'd come back later to pick up his broom, to which Mounga said he'd keep it in the broom shed until he could fetch it later.

As Severus slowly hobbled the four blocks to where this “specialist” had her office, he hoped she could help provide him some relief. He would have Apparated, but he feared the act would wrench his back even more, and the specialist's office did not have a Floo connection.
The initial awkwardness between Neville and Hermione quickly dissipated as they got to work on deadheading some of the early-season roses and other late-spring perennials which had already finished blooming. Neither said anything about the incident in which they found themselves in each other's arms. They were back to their usual friendly banter, talking in Latin, and discussing the upcoming election where Amelia Bones was challenging Cornelius Fudge for the seat of Minister of Magic.

The election would be held around mid-August, so there was a lot of time before people would vote on the matter.

As the day was coming to an end, Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas stopped by the nursery at closing time, as they had done periodically, to visit their old school chum.

“So Neville, you up for a pub crawl tonight?” Seamus asked. His eyes periodically darted over Neville’s shoulder to view Hermione’s backside, as she bent over to pick up a bag of potting soil to move to the potting shed. “We’re hoping to hit all four countries – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – tonight. Last one who doesn’t splinch themselves wins. You game, mate?”

Neville gave his friends a lopsided smile. “Sorry, but I’m taking Hermione out to dinner tonight.”

It was all very platonic and innocent, but not the way Seamus interpreted it.

“All right! Banging the divorcee. Good job, mate,” Seamus congratulated him, with a jocular clap upon the shoulder. “It’s about time you got back on the old broom after Luna dumped you.”

Hermione barely caught what Seamus said, and what little she did hear, she chose to ignore. What she definitely heard was the sound of Neville’s fist making contact with Seamus’ face. Neville could have used his wand, but there was something a bit more chivalrous about him hitting their old classmate instead of hexing him.

“What the fuck did you do that for?!?” screamed Seamus, his hand held to his nose to stem the flow of blood, as he laid half-sprawled on his arse while looking up at his old classmate.

“You apologize to Hermione right this instant,” Neville demanded, whipping out his wand and pointing it squarely at Seamus’ chest.
“What for?” Seamus questioned, sounding like he had a cold as his nose began to swell.

“How dare you talk about Hermione that way!” Neville stood up to his full height, towering over Seamus.

Dean said nothing. He held his hands up in surrender, a reminder that he had nothing to do with the choice of his friend's words.

“She must really be a fabulous piece of cunny for you to deck me like that,” Seamus bit out with a snarl, spitting out some blood, giving his friend a contemptible look.

“Hermione and I are just friends. And if we were more than that, it would still be none of your business. As for Luna, you know nothing on that matter either.” Neville's voice became deep and threatening, full of promise to make Seamus regret his words. The look on his face matched his words. “Now apologize to Hermione.” He prodded the tip of his wand at Seamus' throat to encourage him to do the proper thing.

Seamus had seen Neville like this only during the war. The herbologist was normally a very sweet and affable fellow, but when provoked, he could be as dangerous as any well-trained Auror.

“All right, all right.” Seamus put his hands up. Glancing over at Hermione, who was standing with her arms crossed over her chest with a glare, he said, “I'm sorry, Hermione. I shouldn't have said that. I assumed—”

“That's right, you assumed.” Hermione didn't want to be the center of gossip, especially if Neville would be dragged into it. He was too nice to be subjected to the rumor mill that she had been through enough over the years. She was still dealing with the looks she got for being known at that witch who divorced her husband, the star Quidditch player.

“I'm sorry. I thought that since he was taking you to dinner, you two were dating,” Seamus explained with a meek shrug as he hauled himself up off the ground.

“Hermione is doing part of her apprenticeship working for me... for free. I don't pay her, but I take her out to dinner as compensation for all her hard work she does around the nursery. She certainly works harder than you did, and that was when I was paying you,” Neville chastised his friend.
Seamus winced as being called out as a lazy worker. His nose was still bleeding and if he stuck around much longer, who knows how much more his ego would be bruised.

“I guess I'll catch you later. *Mate,*” Seamus said begrudgingly.

Dean gave Neville a faltering smile and shrugged, not knowing what to say about his friend's poor behavior, but not abandoning his friend either, choosing to leave with him.

The pair of wizards Apparated from the spot, leaving Neville and Hermione alone in the main nursery greenhouse.

Neville was still breathing heavily when Hermione came over to him.

“Thank you, Neville. You didn't have to do that, but I appreciate it,” Hermione said with admiration.

“A lady like you shouldn't have to put up with talk from a wizard like that,” Neville said solemnly. “Who cares if you're divorced or not. Ron wouldn't have gotten the same attitude for being divorced, there is no reason why a divorced witch should be treated that way while a divorced wizard is not.”

It was exactly the sort of thing Hermione had thought about in the past several months. A wizard did not face the same social stigma of being divorced, but a witch was certainly treated like a social pariah and a slag. It was wholly unfair and a double standard, but then again, the wizarding world was full of gender double standards, except when it came to Quidditch.

Hermione went to reach for Neville's hand to see if he'd injured it.

Looking it over, she saw that his knuckles were beginning to swell.

“It's all right,” Neville said dismissively. “Besides, it was worth it.”

It touched Hermione that Neville had stood up for her. Tapping her wand to his hand, she healed it.
Neville let her hold his hand for a bit longer when she didn't release it. With his other hand, he tipped her chin to look up at him.

When she glanced up, she saw that same look of desire in his eyes as the night before. Before Hermione could look away and drop his hand, Neville swept his arm around her and firmly kissed her upon the lips.

In shock to Neville's gesture, Hermione didn't move, but she didn't push him away either. Neville's other hand gently cradled the back of her head and he deepened the kiss, his tongue seeking entrance to her mouth, which she granted, despite the sensible part of her mind screaming at her, wondering what the hell she was doing kissing Neville back.

Her own arms reached up and grabbed greedily at Neville's shoulders.

An urgent response to his kisses spurred him on to be bolder, guiding Hermione backwards toward an empty bench in the greenhouse.

Neville's kisses were possessive and spoke of someone who wasn't timid or unsure. There was a certain confidence in his attitude that overwhelmed her, making her want to submit to his advances. It was sexy in the way that there was no hesitation or doubt in his touch, while not being overbearing.

His hand palmed her breast and Hermione gasped, wishing it was Severus and willing to imagine it was. Only God knows what possessed Hermione, but her hands began fumbling with the buckle of his belt. She had been aching for a good and solid fuck since taking the Dionysus Fever potion, remembering the feeling within the hallucination of being savaged by lust made manifest.

Understanding her intention on just how far she was willing to go, Neville grabbed hold of Hermione and Side-Along Apparated with her directly to his bedroom. Once in the seclusion of his home, Hermione yanked at Neville's shirt while he began unzipping her trousers. Neville hadn't even removed Hermione's shirt yet when she was relieved of all clothing below the waist.

In the back of Hermione's mind flitted the silent prayer of thanks she was still on contraceptive potions, more out of necessity to regulate her cycle than to prevent pregnancy.

Neville kneeled before Hermione and kissed her stomach, inching her top off. Once her top was
removed, he began hungrily kissing and suckling at her breasts while Hermione closed her eyes and ran her fingers through his hair, moaning in response to his touch. It was different than Severus' touch, but she didn't care. She ached with need.

His broad shoulders were tanned from working shirtless in his own garden at home. He definitely had the build of someone who worked the land.

Guiding her down onto the bed, Neville's eyes met Hermione's and he asked silently for permission as his mouth trailed lower from her breasts down her stomach. Hermione sighed, laying her head back. She spread her legs, letting Neville go down further.

He was gentle and patient, licking and nibbling, probing and suckling at various parts of her. A part of her was feeling guilty as if she was cheating on Severus. In a way she was cheating, even though there were no promises between her and Severus even with the plan to move to Hawaii in the future, but if she stopped herself now, she felt she would surely cry. Shoving any feelings of guilt aside, she begged Neville to take her, unable to wait any longer. He hadn't brought her to orgasm yet, but she didn't care. She just wanted to be shagged senseless. She would deal with the guilt later.

Neville stood up and finished disrobing before settling himself between Hermione's legs.

After rubbing the tip of his cock around to ease penetration, he slid into Hermione.

Hermione's back arched and she let loose a scream, finally feeling the sensation of something other than a magical dildo in her for the first time in months.

The feeling of Neville's body between her legs, the sensation of skin against skin, the musky scent emanating from him, the sound of his breathing and grunts, the weight of his body above her – this was so much more satisfying than masturbating in solitude in her flat or in a Pensieve.

Neville, guided by Hermione's cries, thrust into her, trying to satisfy the consuming need. He was making her hysterical as she thrashed and clawed at his back, growling with animalistic shrieks.

Right now Hermione didn't care if she came or not. She needed this more than some masturbation-induced orgasm which left her feeling in want of more. It took a great amount of control not to shout out Severus' name as she kept pretending it was her lover.
Neville reached down and stroked her clit, trying to bring her to completion, but he couldn't hold out much longer.

His hips stilled as he came.

“Oh, Luna,” he breathed.

Hermione's eyes flew open. She was not the only person in this bed who was pretending it was someone else.

Neville lifted his head and looked Hermione in the eye. His face spoke of great remorse and embarrassment.

Climbing off Hermione, he sat on the edge of the bed, his head hanging down in shame.

“I'm sorry,” he breathed. “I've been missing her so much. And in a moment when you were so close to me, I...”

Hermione felt great empathy for Neville. She had been missing Severus and had been willing to bed Neville in hope of bringing back the memory of him once more.

“I hope you can forgive me, Hermione.”

Sitting up, Hermione sat next to him, her knees bent and her feet tucked up onto the bed. She placed a tender hand on his shoulder, finally noticing the large bruise on his back where he'd slammed against the tree the night before when he tried to prevent her from falling.

“Don't be ashamed, Neville. You're not the only one pretending it was someone else,” she admitted, unable to look him in the face. She felt a little sore, having engaged in sex without the addition of lubrication.

A perplexed look stole over Neville's face as he scrutinized the witch he'd just bedded. “If you miss Ron so much, how can you work for Lavender then?” he asked, confused by their arrangement, especially now that Lavender was having Ron's child.
Hermione closed her eyes and spun around to face away from Neville. “Ron wasn't the only one who fell in love with someone else while married,” she admitted with some shame, the tears silently falling.

“I thought Ron was the only one who was unfaithful. Who is it, and does Ron know?” Neville thought he knew the story behind their divorce, but evidently there was more to it that Hermione had first admitted.

“Ron doesn't know, and he can't.”

“Why, so you can make him look like the bad guy?” he confronted her hotly, his tone accusatory.

“It's far more complicated than you can imagine, Neville,” Hermione responded with anger. “One day I will tell Ron, but I assure you, this divorce was mutual and I was the one who demanded it to end.”

“What difference would it make if you told Ron now versus a year from now?” He spun around to look at Hermione, regarding her as she sat there nude, her knees drawn up to her chest.

“There are some things I need to do first before the truth can be known. And even then, I think you'd be shocked.”

Hermione could only imagine the look of horror on Neville's face with the news that she'd fallen in love with and helped with the escape of the same Death Eater professor who had made Neville a nervous wreck for so many years.

“Lavender knows the truth,” she confessed. “And this goes beyond just Ron and me. Like I said, it's very complicated.” Hermione stared at her top and brassiere that were laying in a rumpled heap in front of her.

Not wanting to get a bladder infection, Hermione got up and walked off to the bathroom to take care of her needs, leaving Neville to ponder her cryptic words.

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Upon reaching the address on the scrap of parchment Rainbow gave him, Severus opened the door.
“Just a moment?” a witch’s voice rang out from behind an open door. She had a Spanish accent.

Maria emerged from the back and smiled at Severus. It was the same witch whose son had asked if he was an albino at the Christmas luau.

“Rainbow told me you hurt your back. Care to tell me how?” She tilted her head and gave him a curious look.

Severus knew Maria had a decent grasp of English from their previous brief encounters. She sold mangoes from her garden at the Saturday farmers’ market that he periodically visited when he wasn’t busy with morning appointments at his shop; she also was one of the few single witches who wasn’t blatantly pursuing him. For the purpose of avoiding any confusion, though, Severus began speaking in Spanish with her.

“I was flying on my broom and trying to collect some eggs from a nest when I hurt my back.” Severus stood up straighter in order to reduce the tension and pain.

“Collecting eggs? Which hand were you using?” she asked in order to better understand how he wrenched his back.

“My right.”

“And were you reaching up, across, or down,” she said, positioning her body and arm in such a way as to give Severus an understanding of what she meant.

“Across and a little down. There was a crosswind.”

“Using your hands like a clock, what position were your arms in when you reached? Twelve o’clock?” she asked putting her arms right in front of her, before putting them out to the side. “Three o’clock? Or somewhere in between?”

Severus closed his eyes and remembered to how he reached out. “Two o’clock.”
Maria nodded. “Come, I have a table ready for you.”

Severus didn’t know Maria was a masseuse and chiropractor, since most witches and wizards tended to be fully-practicing Healers specializing in magical accidents and illnesses. But given that touch could be healing as well, he supposed it was only natural. He had given many massages as a gigolo. There were witches and wizards who were massage specialists, but the acupuncture and chiropractic disciplines were unique. It was sort of a Muggle profession, but given the propensity on this island to embrace Muggle ways – as he had discovered, there were some witch/wizard and Muggle mixed marriages locally – he shouldn’t have been surprised.

“Are you a Muggle-born? If you don’t mind me asking? Most witches and wizards I know back in England in the healing arts don’t specialize in these areas.” Severus asked, explaining the nature behind his question.

“Yes, I am Muggle-born. My father was a chiropractor, who also studied Chinese acupuncture. My grandfather was an acupuncturist from China. And when I found out I was a witch, I still wanted to incorporate what I learned from my father and grandfather into my field. I was fully trained as a Healer, but find this much more rewarding. Sometimes I help at the clinic when Rainbow is short staffed.”

Severus remembered Ginny’s wish to become a Healer. Between Rainbow and Maria being Healers, he wondered if the young witch might finish her work to become a fully-trained Healer some day. He would have to bring the subject up when Draco and Ginny came over for their ritual Sunday-night dinner the next night.

In the private room, Maria told Severus to undress and gave him the option to keep his underpants on or not. Once she left the room and closed the door, Severus struggled to undress himself, still in his Quidditch flying gear, his regular clothes already thrown over a chair to change into after his treatment. He undressed completely, knowing she would have to massage portions of his hips to work on his back, since everything was interconnected.

There was a knock on the door, and Severus bid her to enter. He was face down on the table with the sheet pulled up to his hips, just as he used to do it when he was massaging clients who visited him as a gigolo.

Maria didn’t talk much except to place her hands on certain areas and ask it something hurt or was tender, or if the pain referred elsewhere.

There was a potion she gave him which numbed most of his trunk region, while she rubbed other
potions on his back and hip areas. While face down and numb, he couldn't tell that Maria was inserting thin acupuncture needles into his back and hips, but he occasionally felt some pressure applied with her hands.

At one point, she instructed him to take a deep breath and not to flinch, but to remain relaxed. She had placed her wand at certain points along Severus' spine and set the charm to pull; this straightened out his back and helped pop the disc that slipped back into place. Even with the potion to numb him, Severus felt instant relief once he was realigned, but she still had some work to do.

It took two hours to fix Severus, an operation on par with piecing Humpty Dumpty back together again. Reversing charms that morphed one's head into a tea kettle or restoring body parts splashed with Swelling Solution – those were easy enough to heal, but fixing the soft connective tissue and muscles when one did not injure oneself by magic was another thing. Injuring oneself in the same way a Muggle did sometimes required a bit more skill to fix than a quick charm or simple potion.

Once she was done, she gave Severus a potion to end the numbing effects of the one she had given him earlier.

With feeling returned to his body, Severus felt as good as new. Even that nagging knot in the upper back from hunching over his cauldrons was gone.

Maria was done, but she didn't tell Severus to get up from the table yet. Dragging the tips of her fingers lightly along his spine, she was rewarded with a shuddering sigh from Severus.

He had been missing the feeling of a woman's touch.

Still, ignoring Maria's attempts to seduce him, he asked while still face down on the table, "How soon before I can go back to swimming, gardening, and flying?" He had finished weeding a patch in his garden, and was hoping to get some seedlings planted tomorrow after the Quidditch game that he would no longer be refereeing.

"I'd say if you avoided strenuous activities for a week, you should be fine. But some activities are not as strenuous than others, wouldn't you say?" she asked as her hand slipped under the sheet and slid up the back of Severus' thigh, grazing the inside of it.

Severus' breath hitched, suddenly feeling an erection coming on. He was laying down on top of it as it demanded to spring free from being suddenly bent the wrong way. It was certainly
professional enough of her to wait to seduce him until he was better, but given how he was still
undressed, except for a thin white sheet, it was not the best professional behavior. Then again, he
hadn't been exactly on his best behavior when he was massaging Hermione when he was still
pretending to be Calleo. Karma was being an ironic cunt today.

Wincing, he lifted himself up off the table, while trying to remain covered. Sitting up, his legs
dangling over the edge, he kept the sheet clutched across his hips and legs, his chest and back
exposed.

Maria took the opportunity to approach Severus, standing in front of him between his legs.

“We haven’t had much of a chance to talk, but we can do things other than talking to get to know
one another,” she purred, her Peruvian Coast accent indicating she came from an upper-class
family.

Severus knew she was married, having heard through the usual island chatter channels that she'd
left a physically and emotionally abusive husband and fled for sanctuary while her son was still an
infant. The husband was back in Peru. Maria, being Muggle-born, had also been unaware of the
magical bonds of marriage regarding children until after she became pregnant and her husband's
true colors emerged.

Mustering restraint, Severus closed his eyes and grasped at the edge of the massage table as Maria
began to slide her hands up his thighs towards his erection, which was tenting the sheet that
concealed him.

“Señora,” he said sternly, trying to find the strength to not give in to her advances, and to impart
his disinterest despite what his body was otherwise indicating.

“Maria,” she breathed and leaned forward and kissed Severus.

A part of Severus wanted this. He’d had sex with other clients while he was sleeping with
Hermione, but that was his old life. He was no longer a gigolo, and a part of him felt as if he was
being unfaithful to her. But he needed this as badly as he needed Hermione. In the Pensieve
memory he’d left for Hermione, he had given her permission to lead a new life without him. Who
was to say if she had not already done that? Severus wanted to wait for her, but he no longer had
the strength to deny his baser needs that would be willingly satisfied by this witch who wanted him
now.
His hands grasped her firmly, crushing her to him. Strong arms pulled her to his chest and he kissed her back ferociously, devouring her like prey.

Maria nearly yelped in surprise in this sudden turn in Severus' disposition. She thought he would be the quiet and deliberately slow lover like she imagined, based on how he very carefully selected the mangoes from her table at the farmer's market. There, his hands would delicately slide over the ripe fruit, purposefully picking out the best one with graceful movements of his hands, but here he was now, as if he was possessed by some demon.

"Are you on contraceptives?" he asked breathlessly.

"Si!"

Maria had made sure of it, as she had planned to seduce Severus once she got Rainbow's owl. Rainbow had dropped a hint in her missive about this being an "opportunity," but Maria was already ahead of her friend. She had taken a vial of contraceptive before Severus arrived.

"Bueno," he growled into her ear right before he bit her neck a bit harder than he intended.

Maria's hands finally reached Severus' erection as they continued kissing. "Ai! La Sachamama!" she cried out, feeling his length and thickness. She was making a comparison of Severus to the magical boa constrictor of the Peruvian Amazon rainforest, an animal that could grow to enormous size.

She moaned as Severus kissed her like she imagined a "real man" would. Maria had only been with one other man, her husband, and he was very small by any comparison. Even Ron Weasley would have been considered well-endowed when compared to Maria's husband. Needless to say, Maria's husband had some issues when it came to the bedroom, often compensating with his abusive behavior.

The noises this witch was making were nettlesome to Severus. He was pretending she was Hermione, but this yammering in Spanish was completely ruining it.

Severus' hands roughly yanked up Maria's dress and unceremoniously pulled down her panties. Without preamble, Severus rose from the table, letting the sheet fall away from him. Pushing Maria up against the wall, hitching one of her legs over his arm, Severus positioned himself before entering her with little consideration for her pleasure.
She had wanted a fuck; Severus was going to give her a fuck, but for his pleasure, not hers.

Maria winced, never having had a man so large inside of her. The only thing that kept this experience from being painful was for the fact she had already given birth, and she wasn't as snug as she had been before the birth of Miguel. She thrilled at the sensation and screamed with pleasure.

She began chanting with each thrust from Severus as he had her pinned up against the wall. “Hoy! Hoy! Hoy!”

Gritting his teeth, Severus refrained from clamping a hand over her mouth. Shutting his eyes tighter, he focused on fucking her, feeling something warm and tight around his length.

In his mind, he imagined Hermione laying on his bed, her head thrashing back and forth, screaming his name.

He came, and without even caring if Maria had reached completion or not, he breathed Hermione's name as he finished emptying himself.

It wasn't that satisfying of an orgasm; it merely took the edge off.

Setting Maria’s leg down, he withdrew from her and went to sit back on the massage table. He grabbed the sheet to cover himself once more, not wanting to be under any more scrutiny from this witch. If Severus had picked up the Muggle habit of smoking, he would have pulled out a cigarette and smoked one without even offering one to Maria. He hoped her curiosity was satisfied and she wouldn’t taunt him any further in the future.

“That's it?” Maria asked with disappointment, going back to English.

“What did you expect?” Severus said with little care that she was left unsatisfied.

Severus had prided himself on what a wonderful and considerate lover he was, giving pleasure to witches when other wizards could not, but he no longer cared. It was an empty act that only left him feeling hollow inside.
“Who is Hermione?” she asked, anger growing in her eyes.

“None of your business,” he said casually, as if he couldn't be bothered to tell her, even if he wanted to.

Maria was incensed. Picking up his clothes, she began throwing them at Severus. “I'll be sure to send you the bill,” she snarled at him.

“And how much should I add for tip? Or was my performance to satisfy your curiosity enough to compensate for any extra gratuity?” he threw back at her with a self-satisfied smirk.

Her look of disgust at the sheer gall of Severus' remark confirmed his suspicion that the island's other witches who were still in pursuit of him would soon lose interest, since gossip from Maria's lips would surely spread like wildfire. He had prided himself for years on being a sarcastic bastard, but rarely had to employ this side of himself since coming to Malu Palekaiko. However, it did give him some secret thrill to know he hadn't completely lost his touch, that he was not going too soft in order to be left alone where his heart and his cock were involved.

Maria stormed out of the small treatment office, slamming the door behind her. The one down side to this whole scene was Maria would no longer sell her mangoes to Severus anymore, which was a pity, because she had such nice mangoes.

Chapter End Notes

As always, a huge round of applause to my hard working betas who clean up my punctuation and grammatical mess. For this chapter, please give some love for JuneW and Cygnuz.

Yes, "The Ballad of Eòin and Maighread" is an original ballad composition of mine, I tried to incorporate a little bit of the Scottish language into it without making it too indecipherable. Here is a key to a few of the words:

gowden = golden
waefu’ = woeful
gaed = went
If you wish to hear it read by a Scot with a heavy northern Scottish accent, then pop on over to the video I put together quickly and posted to YouTube: https://youtu.be/Qf74x2YptVs

This is read by Alastair Stephens, podcaster from StoryWonk, including the wonderful writing podcast, The Journeyman Writer: http://storywonk.com/podcasts/the-journeyman-writer/

You can also hear Alastair, who is Scottish, read Robert Burns' “To A Mouse”, the reading beginning at the 7:23 mark: http://storywonk.com/the-scot-and-the-sassenach-52-to-a-mouse/

The first seven minutes gives a biographical background of Burns,

I know, I know. “How could Hermione or Severus fuck anyone else but each other? Wah!” But look at this logically. No formal proclamations or marriage proposals have been made. Severus said to join him, but he didn't exactly say he would wait for her like a monk. Plus, he gave her permission to move on with her life without him. Nor did she say she would remain chaste until her apprenticeship was done. Each is feeling very vulnerable, and temptation came along. Even Neville fucked Hermione because he was missing Luna so much. And is he supposed to be waiting for Luna to sort out her head while he waits indefinitely after she broke off their engagement? No one is perfect in this fic. Everyone is flawed, just like in real life.

The inspiration for using squonks in this chapter comes from Genesis' “A Trick of the Tale” album and the song "Squonk." The song is based on the Pennsylvania legend of an animal so ugly, it is ashamed of its appearance. Once caught, the animal will cry until it dissolves into a pool of bubbles and tears.

Songwriters: RUTHERFORD, MICHAEL/BANKS, ANTHONY

Parapluie is French for umbrella.

I must acknowledge I ripped off the phrase “disco behemoth” from the show Ally McBeal when referencing Barry White. That phrase will forever be stuck in my brain when thinking about Barry White because of that show.

And if you haven't guessed yet, the movie Draco and Ginny saw in early August 1999 was Notting Hill, which came out in late May in the U.K. I figure they were watching a showing at the end of the run at the movie theater, going to a movie in hopes of few people attending and spotting them. “Ain't No Sunshine” plays during the movie, which is why Draco sang that song.

“Ain't No Sunshine” was written by Bill Withers.
White-tailed tropicbirds, *Phaethon lepturus*, are native to Hawaii and the South Pacific islands.

The legend of La Sachamama is as follows:

“The Sachamama is a boa constrictor of enormous size. Legend tells that as the snake grows and grows and grows it can no longer move through the jungle, so it searches for a swampy area to make its permanent home. As time passes, jungle trees, ferns, and flowers grow around and over the boa. It becomes completely camouflaged from view by people or jungle animals. At this point the Sachamama is said to be imbued with a magical, magnetic power to attract prey. As the poor, unsuspecting animal or native passes by, he is pulled into the boa’s enormous mouth and devoured.”

http://www.peruvianamazon.com/folklore.htm
"For Whom the Wedding Bells Toll"

Chapter Summary

An inadvertent discovery will lead Severus to a new business venture. Hermione attends Viktor and Anne's wedding, which doesn't feature green pond scum punch, fortunately.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Eighty-Six
"For Whom the Wedding Bells Toll"

Disclaimer: Oh, for Merlin's sake. Rowling owns Harry Potter and I don't. I just play with her characters. How many times must I repeat myself?

Severus felt unkempt. The community's beard-growing competition started two days ago, and so far all he had was two days of growth that made him look old and haggard. He wasn't a vain wizard, but he always liked to present a neat appearance. He had even kept up with occasional teeth-whitening treatments, and exfoliated periodically to keep his skin looking fresh instead of dull from dead-skin build-up. There was even the use of a new shampoo he made to bring back the luster of his hair, since he now had his head stuck over cauldrons most of the day, just like when he was back at Hogwarts.

It was a shallow world, but he was forced to live in it, and figured he might as well at least make an effort to make the best of it. Severus had a business to run. Good grooming required him to keep up appearances, since perceptions colored the public's view about a person, even though his reputation was solidly established on the island. But the beard-growing competition was a big event on the island, and no one made mention of his facial hair, except to wish Severus luck.

Draco also sported two days of growth, but his was a pale golden halo about his face, highlighted against his tanned skin.

Going over some paperwork regarding a recent shipment, Severus heard a knock upon his office door.
Bailey, one of his students who collected ingredients to help pay for lessons, came into his office. He was holding several different bags of various flora and fauna he had collected during the week.

“Do you have time to see me now, sir?”

Severus nodded and they went to Severus' work lab in the back, once he let Draco know he'd be busy for a bit.

The first item Bailey pulled out was a large puddle of banana slugs in an over-sized glass jar with very tiny air holes in the lid that would allow them to breathe, yet not escape. The large yellow gastropods were congregating together in some bizarre mating mass.

“I used one and put it on my sister's plate this morning next to her papaya. She almost ate it. You should have heard her scream,” the young wizard snickered.

Severus should not have found humor in the boy's confession, but he had to admit it was a pretty harmless and amusing prank. It was far less terrible than the pranks he had pulled on him by Potter and Black.

Pulling out his set of scales from a bookcase on the far side of the room, Severus weighed them after taring the weight of the jar.

“Almost a full pound. Impressive.” Severus pulled out his price list from the local apothecary and calculated a fair price. “How does one Galleon, two Sickles sound?”

Bailey agreed to the price, since it was better than what he would have gotten at the apothecary for the slugs.

There were other items, like ginger roots, the broken shells of hatched nene geese from an old nest, dried protea and pincushion flowers and their seeds, some dragon droppings Bailey found from the latest migration, and various other leaves and flowers still fresh from a recent rain shower.

While examining a bag of delicate fungi that Bailey had collected from high up the side of the volcano where the clouds often shrouded the top with fog and mist, Severus picked up something
that didn't belong with the fungi.

“What is this?” Severus asked with great interest.

Bailey took the furrow in Severus' brow as disappointment that he'd left something that didn't belong with the fungi fall into the bag.

“Oh, I'm sorry, sir. That's a weed next to where that mushroom grows. I must have accidentally picked one when I was collecting and thrown it in the bag. It won't happen again,” he said a little nervously as Severus was fixated on the small pod.

“It's just a weed, sir,” Bailey went on. “And a nasty one. The flowers tend to bite. One took off a corner of my nail, sir.”

Severus couldn't believe it. He gazed with amazement, wondering if it was really what he suspected it was. There were a lot of plants that had been brought to the Hawaiian Islands from all over the world, but he wondered if this one plant had somehow made its way on purpose with the intent of luring someone to grow it here, or by accident by hitching a ride in a crate of goods like some other plants had that had come to the island chain.

“Let me see your finger,” Severus demanded.

Looking at the nick in the boy's fingernail, it looked like it might be the right size.

Grabbing the boy firmly by the shoulder, he said, “Show me where you collected this.” He was nearly giddy.

“In my back yard. It's an hour and a half hike there, sir,” replied Bailey. He was a little worried, given the odd excitement the Potions master showed regarding this obnoxious little weed.

“I don't care. Do you have a Floo connection?” he asked with growing enthusiasm.

The confused boy shook his head.
“Then we can Apparate there.”

Severus told Draco that he might be late for drinks with Ginny and the Finaus, and to lock up if he wasn't back by closing time. Draco gave his friend a puzzled look as Severus practically bolted out the door with the boy in tow.

As they stood out in the middle of the main street, which afforded the best view of the volcano that towered above the town, Severus said, “Show me where your house is, since you said it was in your back yard.”

Bailey pointed towards an area near the top of the volcano. It was just at the edge of where there was dry and barren lava and the forest began. He trekked a long way to come to Severus' shop for lessons on foot a couple times a week.

'Of course that's where it would be,' Severus thought, noting the cooler climate due to elevation of the constant source of moisture, with the flow of clouds providing a cool misty environment.

“Hold on,” Severus told the boy, and held him while they Side-Along Apparated to a spot that was a two-minute walk from that particular patch of forest.

Where they wound up was almost in Bailey's back yard. The spot Bailey had collected from was within the property lines, since Severus warned him and others he paid about collecting on other people's property.

The trail was narrow and a bit perilous. Severus had to shuffle along a narrow ledge, holding on to vines in front and above his head that kept him from falling down a 300-foot sheer cliff. The whole trail was only barely wide enough for one to carefully walk single-file. The place where Severus Apparated to was the closest spot for two people to stand together and not fall over the edge.

Once they reached the place, Severus was nearly hysterical with joy. It was sheltered by trees above whose branches gathered the mist that swirled around the volcano mountaintop and dripped with dew.

“Bailey, how would you feel if I said you and your family would never have money troubles ever again?” Severus said with reverence.
Before Severus was a large swath of Miniature Man-Eating Masdevallias. Each pod was worth fifty Galleons – more if they were freshly-picked and plump.

Miniature Man-Eating Masdevallias were an orchid native to the high-cloud forests of the Andes in Ecuador, Columbia, Peru, and Bolivia. Since they were very valuable and prized as a Potions ingredient, they were over-harvested and only a few wild stands were left in South America. Those stands were closely guarded, most often under a Fidelius Charm to keep poachers away, given the high price of the plant and its pods. The magical version of the orchid was an exceptionally hard orchid to grow in a pot, and all attempts to commercially grow them had failed so far. The only solution was to leave the orchid to grow wild wherever it found a patch of ground to flourish, and harvest from there. There was easily over 100,000 Galleons worth of pods in this patch alone.

Bailey picked a pod from a plant near his foot and said, “What? This?” He dropped the pod and crushed it beneath his shoe, unaware of its worth.

“Bailey, do not destroy another single pod,” Severus commanded the boy.

Bailey looked at Severus as he began to understand the value of this little weed he had often picked and chucked over the cliff out of boredom over the years.

Severus asked to speak with his parents, since this patch was on their land.

“My mom's still working at the taro farm on the east side of the island. She'll be back from work in a couple hours. My dad is off somewhere, probably drinking,” Bailey confessed, shame and embarrassment reflected in his tone.

Severus could empathize. When he was growing up, he was exposed to his own father's penchant for the bottle and the violent episodes that would follow.

“Then we'll speak only with your mother.” He placed a hand upon the boy's shoulder, seeing a bit of himself in this lad.

Bailey was a bright student with great potential. The only reason he was able to continue on with lessons with Severus was due to all the ingredients the boy brought Severus weekly, which barely covered the cost of the lessons and materials. This boy would never have to collect ingredients again, unless he wanted to. Severus hoped the young wizard would continue, since he usually
brought Severus some of the nicest and freshest ingredients of all his students he paid for their collecting.

Bailey invited Severus into his meager home, that was nothing more than a large shack perched precariously on the hillside, held up on stilts. The boy offered to make him a cup of coffee while they waited for his mother to return home from her long day at the taro farm. Bailey's sister was over at a neighbor's house down the mountain, since she was still too young to be left home alone.

Lady Anne Battenberg was a vision in virginal white with a long veil and a blusher, the choice of a blusher being pretty ironic considering all the depraved things she had begged and paid Severus to do to her. The witch hadn't blushed in a very long time. Only Lavender knew of the bride's former activities, among the many high-society and famous guests in attendance, since she was the one who had arranged her meetings with “Bob,” her gigolo. Lavender normally wouldn't have been invited, despite their acquaintance – and especially since she knew of Anne's secret trysts with Severus, having fielded her requests for certain activities. However, she was now Ron Weasley's wife, and Ron was a good friend to Viktor Krum, the groom and her husband-to-be.

Hermione had no idea of Lady Anne's relationship to Severus. Lavender would never tell her, due to client confidentiality, but she also knew Hermione wouldn't want to know about Severus' former clients, even if she could ask him.

The former Mrs. Weasley had gone to Madam Mandel's and, with the help of the haute couture fashion designer, found a dress suitable for the occasion that was neither too strong in color nor too flashy, as it was never good manners to take the spotlight away from the bride on her day.

A simple floor-length dress with short capped sleeves in royal purple flattered Hermione. Emerald and forest green, and ruby red, were also flattering colors for her, but entirely inappropriate to wear to a wedding that included a Muggle-born bride, since those colors were inappropriate for Muggle weddings.

Hermione sat next to Lavender and Ron, which garnered a few odd stares. She didn't know anyone else at the wedding, given the social circles Viktor and the bride ran in. Lavender was on a first-name basis with many in the crowd, but it was most often through business contacts and networking. Hermione was going to have to learn their names, since she would be filling in for Lavender in a few months.

The new Mrs. Weasley was wearing a dress that fit her expanding midsection yet didn't look like it was made by Omar the tent-maker, as many maternity designs often did. Ron looked quite dashing, still sporting his muscular physique and nicely-cut robes, no doubt picked out by his wife, who had good taste.
The bride's parents were Muggles related to royalty. They were second- or third-cousins, once- or maybe twice-removed from Prince Phillip, husband and consort to the Queen of England; Hermione couldn't remember the exact lineage. They seemed at a bit of a loss, given their daughter's association with so many witches and wizards. The bride's parents were disappointed that it was not being held in a proper church, but given that the Church of England still held a certain viewpoint about witches, in addition to the I.S.W.S. of 1692, they accepted a ceremony officiated by a Ministry of Magic official. The parents invited very few of their Muggle friends.

Officially, in the Muggle world, Lady Anne Battenberg didn't even exist, as she'd been conveniently wiped from ancestral records upon discovery she was a witch. The Ministry of Magic had helped with the erasure of many items of Muggle documentation and artifacts to help cover this up, upon the request of the Muggle Ministry and the Crown.

Upon her marriage, Anne would be giving up her title and, in a way, severing the last ties to her Muggle life. She would still be in contact with her parents and her one sister, a Muggle as well, but most probably would drift farther away from her roots. This is what Hermione had done over the years, drifting from her own parents, whom she had not been visiting as often as she had promised she would since her divorce.

The outdoor ceremony was not too lengthy, which was nice considering that Lavender had to fan herself, feeling a bit overly warm out in the sun where the guests were seated, watching the ceremony take place in front of them in a wooden pavilion. No cooling charms were permitted, since there were Muggles present. Fortunately, Lavender didn't have to get up to excuse herself, her pregnancy making her hot and uncomfortable. There was a tent set up for the reception afterwards, and it would be more cool in there than the shaded area they were currently sitting in.

Hermione's invitation allowed her to bring a guest. She had almost considered asking Neville to be her date, but given their falling into each other's arms and Neville's bed, she was glad she didn't. It would have been more awkward had Neville been there; she never would have rescinded her offer.

She had already asked Albert for that Saturday off for the wedding. That was good, considering she felt like she needed a little breathing room from Neville, what with how awkward they reacted towards one another after Hermione got dressed. She even bowed out of dinner that particular night, going home to her flat and feeling guilty over what had happened.

The ghostly visions of Remus and Hagrid had made it no easier for her to deal with what she had done that night. The spectres of her consciousness asked some very pointed and uncomfortable questions. They had reminded her that they were manifestations from her own mind, but it didn't make their grilling any less uncomfortable, bringing up subjects she didn't want to address that night.
The wedding ceremony finally ended. The bride and groom kissed, and everyone clapped decorously before the newlyweds walked down the aisle to take photos elsewhere, since they had not seen each other before the ceremony.

Everyone adjourned to the reception tent and nibbled on hors d'oeuvres that were pretty tasty and probably cost a small fortune, considering that each one looked like a miniature piece of art. Hermione sipped champagne while Lavender had her choice of water with or without carbonation and a slice of lemon, since the choices for teetotalers was rather limited. Ron was very attentive to his wife, helping her to a chair when her feet got tired or she felt out of breath. He fetched her water and took away whatever canapes suddenly offended her olfactory senses, since she was still a bit sensitive to some smells.

Ron went to chat with some of the other Quidditch players who were invited to the event, while Lavender and Hermione chatted about work and the upcoming India launch. Harry and his wife, Zhubanys, were supposed to have been seated with them at their table, but for some reason, the Potters never arrived. Their absence was marked by the two empty seats. Ron had been hoping to catch up with Harry since they had recently patched their friendship.

The bride and groom finally made their grand appearance. A reception line was formed in which everyone would have a chance to congratulate the couple and meet everyone in the bridal party. The bride's parents seemed to find some of the wizarding world's fashion choices rather questionable, but seemed to find less offense with their stares at what Hermione and Lavender wore than Ron's robes.

Food was served and eaten, and polite conversation made with the others who sat at the same table with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and the former Mrs. Weasley. Everyone had the good manners to not bring up the divorce nor make mention of the fact that Lavender and Hermione were so chummy, considering the scandalous nature of a husband moving from the one witch to the other.

Hermione and Lavender were becoming friends, as Lavender was the only person with whom she could openly and frankly discuss some matters. Even Lavender had taken to openly grousing about some annoying habits Ron engaged in and asked for Hermione's advice on an occasion or two. Hermione still visited Harry and his new wife, Zhubanysh, about once a month for dinner, but even she could not talk about Severus much with her oldest friend.

The bride and groom danced, and most people found their way to the dance floor as the live band played on. Lavender was up for only one slow dance with Ron, and then decided that was enough for her.
Ron was begged away for a dance from the wife of one of his teammates, with Lavender waving him away, telling him not to worry since Hermione was keeping her company. Hermione was not feeling like dancing much and preferred to sit. Perhaps if Severus had been there, she would not have been adverse to going out on the dance floor.

As Hermione and Lavender discussed some more ideas for products targeted specifically for infants, Dagmar Nettleton came over and sat herself down at their table without invitation.

“Dagmar, it has been a while since we last spoke,” Lavender said cordially.

Hermione could tell there was little joy in Lavender seeing this particular witch, as she had that certain smile plastered across her face that was a mask for indifference or loathing.

Hermione had come to recognize it after watching her at the Ministry's Halloween ball, even with an actual mask on.

“Well, I just had to come over and give you an update,” Dagmar simpered with great self-satisfaction. “It seems that present you helped me procure for Bascom's birthday was far better than I had hoped. He was quite thrilled with it, I should say. Not what I expected at all, though we are now better for it, if I do say so myself. It is a pity about that unfortunate incident in February, though I had already expanded my circle of ‘friends', so it was not too great of a disruption.”

Lavender nodded her head politely. “I am so glad that it seems to have all worked out for the best. How fortuitous.”

Dagmar suddenly looked at Hermione, recognition making her eyes widen and alight. “I remember you from the ball. Mrs. Weasley.” Her eyes then turned to Lavender. “And the new Mrs. Weasley. My, what a cozy arrangement. Do you share?”

Hermione may have missed the entire context of what Mrs. Nettleton was discussing with Lavender before, but she certainly caught the meaning of her question regarding Lavender, Ron, Hermione, and their relationship.

Before Hermione could respond to such a suggestion, Lavender discreetly placed a calming hand on Hermione's arm under the table to silently indicate she would deal with the matter.
“Dagmar! Honestly. You shock me, which isn't easy to do,” Lavender confessed with the hint of a blush, even fooling Hermione at being stunned by such a proposal. “Not everyone is so open minded to such possibilities, nor is everyone suited to such arrangements. We're just conventional witches. Whatever arrangement you have with Bascom now seems to suit you both.”

“Perhaps with age comes wisdom to explore new possibilities. But I shan't shock you any longer,” Dagmar said, fanning herself dramatically, as if the topic of conversation was too hot for present company. “I just wanted to thank you.”

Dagmar rose and sauntered off, her eyes scanning the reception for fresh meat of either sex.

Once the older witch was gone, Lavender's face fell, becoming equally somber and disgusted. “My God, what have I done? I've created a monster.”

“That witch pinched my arse at the Halloween ball,” Hermione added, still repulsed by the concept.

“Why I am suddenly not surprised,” Lavender growled. “And here I was hoping Bascom would have keeled over from a heart attack, but alas no. Figures he'd like it.”

Hermione was about to ask what Lavender was talking about, but Lavender dismissed it with a wave of her hand and said it was a topic for another time in another place.

Before Hermione could mediate on the matter, Viktor came over while circulating among the guests. He greeted the pair of witches.

“Her-my-knee. Lavender. It is so good to see you both. And might I add congratulations on the news,” Viktor said, his eyes glancing down at Lavender's swollen abdomen, obviously into her second trimester.

“Thank you, Viktor. You and Anne seem very happy. May you have many wonderful years together,” the blonde witch said warmly. It did not escape her attention that the bride was not socializing at this table.

“Thank you so much. And if I may steal Hermione away for a dance?” Viktor asked, his hand outstretched.
Hermione looked to Lavender, who gave her a stern glare, out of view from Viktor, that she had better get up and accept, or Lavender was going to use her wand and dump her out of her chair that instant.

“Of course. You'll be fine, won't you Lavender?” she asked, looking at her boss.

Waving her hand dismissively, without a care, she casually sighed with a song-song voice, “I'll be fine. Go have a dance or two.”

Viktor tucked Hermione's hand into the crook of his arm and escorted her to the dance floor. They began dancing to a waltz, moving to and fro before they began to spin about with the other couples, moving like multi-hued floating petals swirling above a lazy whirlpool.

“I am sorry to hear about your divorce with Ron. I had no idea that things were so bad,” Viktor said, beginning their conversation on a serious note.

They had owled each other periodically, but both had avoided the topic before in their correspondence. Hermione had assured him that she was fine, and left it at that. How could one discuss such a topic through letters?

“It was mutual, and we're both happier for it,” she assured him.

“I don't wish to be im-pert-tent-tent...” he stumbled over the word.

“Impertinent?”

“Yes, that word. But you do not look as if you are faring for the better.” Viktor tried looking in her face to gauge her reaction.

“I'm working on a Potions apprenticeship. I'm just very tired from working and completing my apprenticeship at the same time. After a long day at work, I have to crack the books.”
Hermione sighed; it was more than her work load that had taken some of the sparkle from her eyes since Viktor saw her last at the Ministry Halloween ball. Severus was gone, and with him, that glow that he brought forth within her.

“It surprised me to discover that you are working for the witch that Ron is now married to. A bit unconventional. But you and her seem to be friends,” her old friend noticed, a slightly perplexed look on his face regarding their arrangement.

“Yes, actually, she and I have put the unpleasantness regarding Ron behind us. This apprenticeship means the world to me, and Lavender has been a very fair and equitable employer, more so than the last job I had.” Hermione smiled a bit upon reflecting that Lavender was giving her opportunities to expand her knowledge base through practical experience, things she could never learn in a classroom or a book.

The wizarding world didn’t exactly have a flourishing trade in books on how to be a better business witch or wizard, and Hermione wasn’t about to start reading the Muggle business management books unless it was absolutely necessary. It was bad enough when her aunt droned on about such matters.

The waltz ended. Viktor and Hermione changed to dancing a simple foxtrot, moving their feet, but concentrating more on their conversation.

“Perhaps you can come over for lunch some time. It will give us a chance to talk more and for you to better acquaint yourself with my bride,” Viktor offered.

“It will have to be a dinner, since my weekends are full with my apprenticeship working in my Potions master's garden or in his laboratory. Sundays are most convenient.”

Hermione sighed, trying to not dread the monthly booze-up that was happening next weekend, now that she remembered what was on her calendar ahead.

Viktor agreed to the arrangement and promised to owl her once they were back from their honeymoon.

As Severus walked to Tina and Manny's wedding, he was nearly broadsided by a young wizard on a skateboard who rounded the corner on the sidewalk.
“Watch it!” he snarled at the youth.

The skateboarder went on his merry way with a brief apology shouted back as he continued coasting, intoning he was still getting the hang of the device. The young wizard was followed by a bicycling witch, who could barely steer her way down the street.

The summer Muggle Studies program had begun last night.

On a large white sheet erected in the community park the night before, they had shown the western movie “Shane,” which Severus had missed. Someone who had ties to the witches and wizards in Los Angeles was able to get the magically adapted projector during summers to show movies every Friday night. Supposedly next week they were going to show a musical, but it was unknown which one they would screen. They had to wait until the film was Portkeyed over before anyone would know.

Severus had discovered that in addition to the Muggle Studies program, which was funded by the community, a large number of students who had taken their SAT’s wound up scoring top marks in the subject. Because of the large Muggle influence on the island, which included mixed marriages, and the Muggle Studies program every summer, a large number of kids from Malu Palekaiko went on to work for not only the United States Department of Magic, but many other foreign governments as liaisons and consultants between the wizarding and Muggle world, or jobs that dealt with Muggle devices. The ones who had the marks to become an Auror were often placed in divisions that required pursuing cases that allowed them to blend in with Muggles in deep undercover assignments.

While flying about the island, Severus had seen the Muggle campus that also operated as one of those Muggle camps for adult witches and wizards he'd read about in that sales fodder while waiting to Portkey from San Francisco. The streets mimicked the real Muggle world with streetlights, concrete sidewalks, and traffic signs. They had a livery of nearly a dozen automobiles of all types, and the children who were at least sixteen would be able to learn to drive. Some had actually gone on to get their driver's license in hopes of getting a job that would make use of their knowledge of the Muggle world in a magical job capacity, after finishing their schooling. It wasn't like there was a lot of job opportunities on the island. Being exceptionally well-versed in the Muggle world was often a ticket out, and onto bigger and better things.

Severus watched another witch flail her arms about like a windmill as she tried to master roller skates, her feet laced into ankle-high boots. The gravity of the sloped street was pulling her faster towards the bottom of the hill that led towards the beach.

Not wanting to get knocked off his feet, since who knows who else would come barreling down the street or boardwalk, Severus cast a cushioning and deflection protection charm about his
person. He was carrying a wedding present; he didn't need to get himself bowled over or for the present to be knocked out of his hands on the way to the wedding.

Arriving at the church, it didn't surprise him that the whole place looked like unicorns and Pygmy Puffs had vomited all over the church interior, as it was decorated with an ungodly amount of pink and lavender. The flowers, bunting, wall color... everything except the pews, altar, and crucifix was suddenly the color of a cheap love potion. Severus felt mildly nauseous from the color saturating his field of vision.

After placing his gift – some tasteful glassware wrapped with silver and white gift paper – on the table to the side so he didn't have to hold it during the ceremony, Severus took a seat next to Draco and Ginny, who had saved a seat for him.

“Where were you last night?” Draco asked in a hushed whisper, understanding the Muggle protocol to speak quietly in a house of worship. “You missed the movie. It was actually good, I was surprised.”

“I had some very pressing matters regarding a student of mine. Which reminds me I need to speak with Mounga after the wedding.” Severus wasn’t going to say much more on the matter and was thankful that the organist had started playing music indicating the procession of bridesmaids and ushers.

The bride came in on her father's arm, looking like one of those crocheted toilet paper roll covers he was forced to learn about in Muggle Studies when they covered the modern arts and crafts back in the 1970's at Hogwarts.

Tina was a Muggle-born and was raised a Southern Baptist. She had found a wizard who was also a Southern Baptist pastor to perform the wedding ceremony. Manny was rather ambivalent about religion, as many witches and wizards were, but agreed to having a Christian pastor for the wedding since it seemed quite important to her.

There was a whole lot of speaking by the officiant, and prayers during which Severus noted he was expected to bow his head. He observed with a sort of detachment. Not soon enough, the bride and groom were pronounced husband and wife, and the wedding moved over two blocks to the community center that Tina and Manny had rented.

When Ginny and Draco had their reception, it was a community-inspired event to give the young couple a proper wedding feast. The town had become enamored with the couple's romantic story, unaware of Draco's financial ability to fully afford to throw a grand reception even after buying a
house. In contrast, Tina and Manny were known to the community, and everyone knew the two could afford to pay for their own reception.

The community center was decorated with more of that vomitous sugary pink hue and sickly lavender color. At least the lavender that Lavender picked for herself did not have a undertone that was comparable to bad-tasting medicine, unlike Tina's choice for colors.

Much to Severus' dismay, he learned that it is common for Southern Baptist weddings to have no liquor at the reception. The upside was they also tended to refrain from dancing, though some weddings of that particular denomination did have dancing. Severus was certainly not up for any dancing, even though his back was all better. At least there was a live band playing music in the background, though it was rather bland and innocuous.

Severus congratulated the bride and groom in the receiving line, then joined Ginny and Draco, who had taken a spot near the back. Many of Tina's Muggle relations had come. The event was a rather raucously noisy and boring affair, especially with the lack of alcohol.

Heading over to the punch bowl to get himself a drink, Severus offered to get drinks for Ginny and Draco, which they politely declined. When he got there, he finally understood why they had refused. The punch was a bright lime-green murky sludge, with what looked like pond scum floating atop of it.

One of Tina's Muggle relations had come over with the same idea and asked Severus for a cup of the “refreshment.”

“What exactly is this?” he asked, trying not to recoil in horror of the festering pus-like color in the bowl before him.

“It's 7-Up and lime sherbet, silly!” huffed a large Muggle woman with a Southern accent thicker than Tina's. The Muggle's hair had a distinct chemical-orange color and was piled up in a large bouffant atop her head.

Severus stuck with water.

For all the lack of refreshment options, at least the food was the most pleasantly memorable part of the entire event. Tina's Muggle relations had decided to cater the event themselves. Severus knew that Muggles could cook, but even he was impressed with the quality of the food. There were ribs
and brisket that had been smoked for several hours and was near falling-apart tenderness. Because Tina was originally from South Carolina, they served the pork barbecue with a mustard sauce, and the beef with a sweeter Memphis-style tomato-based sauce. Both were excellent in Severus' opinion, and he finally found a reason not to regret accepting the invitation to the wedding and reception. While Severus had an aversion to barbecue sauce after his run-in with Frank, the slovenly Portkey officer in San Francisco, he was willing to set his prejudice aside for the day, much to his palate's delight.

Light and airy cornbread, savory and smoked beans, coleslaw with a nice vinegar bite, potato salad laced with bacon, corn on the cob grilled within its own husk, a variety of pickled summer vegetables (including okra, carrots, cauliflower, watermelon rind and cucumbers), grits served with shrimp, fresh slices of onion and tomatoes, and succotash were some of the many side dishes.

There may have been only about seventy or eighty guests for the whole event, but there was enough food to feed at least twice that many. Given how much Tina's relations ate, it was no wonder there was so much food. Even Ginny was aghast at the amount of food some of those Muggles piled away.

The tossing of the garter was an embarrassing affair, as Tina's male Muggle relations kept egging Manny to inch the bride's dress higher and higher. Given that these were the bride's male relations made it a bit uncomfortable and creepy. Tina tossed her bouquet and the single Muggle women there seemed to take the fact that a witch caught it, fair and square, as some offense, thinking she has used magic to catch it instead of good old-fashioned hand-eye coordination and sharp elbows to the other rivals.

Thoroughly stuffed, Severus excused himself from the event, giving the bride and groom a cursory farewell and slightly snarky, innuendo-laced “good luck.” He was not bothering to wait for cake, since there wouldn't be any champagne served with it.

He had more pressing matters to address as well. Severus needed to speak with Mouna regarding the property owned by Bailey's parents, given that it was now worth a small fortune due to the secret crop of Miniature Man-Eating Masdevallia orchids that had been growing there freely for some time.

Last night, Bailey's mother, Blanche Condre, met with Severus. After the Potions master discussed with her the value of the rare crop growing freely in her backyard, and reasons behind why it was a rare and valuable Potions ingredient, she agreed to meet with Severus at Mouna's house. There, they would draft up a contract in which Severus would help manage the resource, since over-harvesting and initial poor management in South America had made the ingredient an even rarer commodity. They would discuss a Fidelius spell for the part of the property where the orchids grew.
Also, upon some personal disclosure, Blanche confessed this was her opportunity to set her husband up with a stipend and living quarters so he could live far and away from her and their children. It was clear to everyone what a poor father and husband he had proven himself to be over the years.

As for Blanche and how she came to own the most valuable piece of property on the island based on its resource alone, her great-grandparents came seeking sanctuary many decades prior, and she inherited the property after they passed away. She stayed in Malu Palekaiko because she had a place to live, especially after she married her husband who was from an equally impoverished background. Blanche, having grown up locally and not obtaining good enough SAT scores to go on and have some career to get her off the island, wound up working in the fields, like so many others.

When Severus rounded the corner, after leaving the reception, he saw Blanche sitting on the front porch with Mounga. Severus had suggested that Mounga set up the legal paperwork and contract for this partnership.

The property was to remain in Blanche's name, handed down to her children, with Severus as manager of the field of orchids. He would receive fifteen percent of all profits for the first ten years; the fee would be renegotiated later depending on how much he was needed to help continue managing the business and field. He knew through his extensive knowledge the best harvesting practices, as well as being far more versed in Herbology than Blanche, Bailey, or his little sister, Bernadette. It would take years to learn and possibly one of the children taking an Herbology apprenticeship in order to become competent enough to manage the reserve without Severus' supervision. Severus was to also be in charge of supervising the harvesting, packaging, and shipping of the valuable pods until he could teach Blanche how to run the office side of the business. The children would help when not busy with their schoolwork.

Walking up the steps, Blanche rose from her seat and greeted Severus with a handshake, a hopeful smile upon her face since she could see an end to backbreaking work in the taro fields and the start of her husband living far away. “Ready to go into business together?” she asked Severus.

“I'm always ready when there is money to be made in a venture,” he freely admitted.

Growing up poor could certainly give one a sense of drive to never be in that position ever again.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to be glorious betas, JuneW and thegreyladies.
A group of slugs is called “a puddle of slugs.”

Banana slugs are native to northern California up through Alaska, along the coastal region. They are not a problem in Hawaii – I don't even know if they even have them in Hawaii, but they are so cool and unique (and the mascot of University of California Santa Cruz) that I had to incorporate them somewhere into the story.

Nenes (pronounced NAY-nays) are the state bird of Hawaii.
Chapter Summary

Hermione and Severus both wallow in the guilt of their actions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Eighty-Seven

“Nemo Malus Felix” (Peace Visits Not the Guilty Mind/No Rest for the Wicked)

Disclaimer:
In a dark Scottish castle, cool wind in my hair
Warm smell of pumpkin pasties, rising up through the air
Up ahead in the distance, I saw a shimmering wand
My fic grew lengthy and my plot grew thin
I had to stop, I could tell
There he stood on the blank page;
I grabbed my mouse and I clicked
And I was thinking to myself,
"This could be decent or this could be shit."
Then he spoke in my fanfic and he showed me the way
There were lawyers down the corridor,
I thought I heard them say...
JK Rowling owns all of Harry Potter.

A/N: Disclaimer a parody of “Hotel California.”

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At the June Potions master social gathering, everyone made their first toast in congratulations to Hermione for passing her Latin test with flying colors, and so quickly.

“Two down, three to go,” Royston said cheerily before downing his drink in one large swallow.

“What language is next on the agenda?” Reginald Chuff asked as he was refilling his glass with
more strong spirits that would be gone long before the ice melted.

Nursing her drink to pace herself, Hermione replied, “Well, since I just finished Latin, I was thinking Spanish next and get that out of the way quickly, because I still have Chinese and Japanese to master as well.”

Gesticulating with his arms, as he was prone to do, Chuff said with his booming voice he used when the alcohol was beginning to hit him, “One apprentice of mine already knew Spanish when he started with me. I thought it was a shortcut and he shouldn't be given the privilege of having to learn only four new languages, so I didn't allow him to count that one.”

Hermione recalled Severus telling her that detail. 'Yep, still a right bastard.'

“Besides,” Chuff rambled on, “if you were my apprentice, I wouldn't let you count Spanish since it's so close to Latin. I would have made you learn German or Arabic.”

“Given where my career might lead me once my apprenticeship is complete, Spanish will serve me far better,” Hermione let accidentally slip.

Everyone's ears at the party perked up.

“Really? Already have something lined up? Do tell. Do tell!” Braxton coaxed her.

Hermione wasn't supposed to say anything, given that some of the very same Potions masters in the room with her periodically consulted with Lavender's competition. The blonde witch didn't want to tip off her competition as to her future moves in order to beat her to new markets. Lavender's main competition was already scrambling to launch in India, hoping to have their own product launches there within a few months after The Lovely Lavender Company had their big launch in October, a mere four months away.

“Actually, I've said too much. But things are in the works.” Hermione put her drink up to her lips to avoid accidentally spilling any more news that was still secret. She hated how alcohol would sometimes make her mouth work faster than her brain at these booze-ups.

“Hmmm, learning Spanish,” Niles mused a bit over-dramatically. “Don't tell me that dago lothario Delgado asked you to come join him in Spain, now that you're a 'free witch' and available.”
Where Niles got that notion, Hermione couldn't fathom, but he was close to the mark. Change the names and locations, and that was exactly what it was.

“Ooh, she's blushing,” Royston jibed. “I think you got it, Niles.”

“It's the drink,” Hermione deflected, sounding very petulant. She had to stop herself from crossing her arms, a tell-tale non-verbal cue, but her lower lip was already beginning to jut out.

There was a chorus of more oohs and ahhs from her drinking companions. Chuff was the worst, giving her a leer that was quite uncomfortable.

“If you boys will excuse me, I've got to go take a piss, if you're done taking the piss out of me.” Hermione rose, her drink still in hand, and went to the loo to collect her thought and get a grip on her emotions.

Niles' comment certainly hit a nerve, as Hermione had become more fretful as of late, wondering about the steadfastness of Severus' feelings towards her after her own momentary lapse. It took a few moments, but Hermione was able to calm herself down to the point where she wasn't about to burst into tears once again.

She had been battling with the crushing guilt of sleeping with Neville, and her thoughts had been plagued with wondering if Severus had begun sleeping around with other witches in Malu Palekaiko. If she faltered, what was the likelihood that Severus was now welcoming another witch in his bed?

Hermione pulled out a vial of Sobering Solution, downing it quickly and rinsing her mouth out so the other Potions masters wouldn't detect that she had “cheated.” Of course, when she emerged from the loo, she would pretend to be just as drunk as when she had sauntered in, but at least if she was accidentally prodded in that particular sensitive spot where Severus was concerned, she wouldn't burst into tears like a “silly little girl.” It was easier to control her emotions when she was sober. The Potions masters may have been grown men, but they still behaved like inconsiderate boys at times, with the exception of Albert, who was protective of her in a fatherly fashion.

Steeling herself, Hermione emerged, keeping her eyes a little heavy to fool the others. She was alert, trying to keep on her toes should any more random questions be too close for comfort.
“Who is ready to play 'Identify the Ingredient?'” she prompted, knowing she would win that game easily yet again and avoid drinking more for a bit longer.

The American spring lamb was superb. Ginny raved on about how this was his best leg of lamb ever. The latest batch of mango chutney was sublime, and the roasted new potatoes – sprinkled with fresh rosemary and parsley from Severus' kitchen garden and coarse sea salt – were fantastic. Draco added to the list of compliments with his own praises of the wine and sautéed vegetables, as they dined inside the Malfoys' home since there was a brief rainstorm passing through.

As much as he should have reveled in their compliments during their ritual Sunday dinner together, Severus' mind was elsewhere.

He hated to admit it, but that brief tryst with Maria was weighing more and more heavily on his mind and heart. It didn't bother him so much that it was one less witch chasing him – actually, it was four less witches chasing him since Maria shared her own opinion of their encounter with the other admirers of Severus – but that he wondered how Hermione would react if she ever found out.

Draco and Ginny had heard of what happened from Rainbow's insinuations, as the matron herself had been briefed afterwards by Maria. Draco had informed his mentor the rumor mill was in full swing, and to be prepared. If Rainbow knew, so did most of the island, as Maria was giving her opinion of their encounter to more than one person, for sure.

If Hermione ever did come to Malu Palekaiko, how would she react to hearing the rumors, even if it was just one encounter? Rainbow was surely to open her mouth at some point.

It was ironic that when he was being paid to service countless witches over the years, there was no question about discretion. Now he fucked one witch for no money and it was blabbed about for salacious fodder to entertain the locals in this quiet town.

Severus had to be physically prodded with a soft touch of Ginny's hand upon his upper arm to have his attention brought back to the present.

“I said, how is that new business with Blanche working out? I understand you have already made two shipments so far and orders are starting to pour in from abroad?” Ginny asked, looking a bit concerned, since Severus was usually very attentive.

“Fine, fine,” Severus replied noncommittally without expanding any further on the details. He
pushed a piece of lamb about his plate absentmindedly.

“And did Blanche's husband, Mark, agree to the new arrangements, moving back to the mainland and accepting a monthly stipend?” she asked, seeking further details.

“Yes,” Severus said, not really feeling much like conversation, though he normally enjoyed these weekly dinners with his friends immensely.

Draco and Ginny briefly exchanged worried glances, before Severus excused himself from the table and went outside to get some fresh air.

Ginny nodded her head towards Severus, indicating Draco should follow and speak with him of what they suspected was weighing heavily on their friend's mind as of late.

Draco knew to wait a bit to let Severus collect his thoughts first before approaching him.

Pushing the sliding glass door aside, he joined the older wizard sitting on the engawa that overlooked the Japanese garden.

Both sat there in meditative silence. The babbling of the small stream running through the garden joined the subtle chorus of rain falling on broad-leaf foliage, and birds beyond the house nesting in nearby trees.

“Have you had any contact with her? Did you ever send her that letter?”

Draco wondered if his friend heard the question when he didn't reply. He was met with only silence, until Severus finally spoke.

“I tried. I can't put to paper all that I wish to say. And it's not like I wrote to her much before.” Severus gave a heavy sigh, his heart gone mute.

“Was there any other way you communicated your feelings?” Draco knew there had to be something besides physicality between them to express deeper sentiments.
“Flowers.”

Draco almost gave a short laugh. That was a terribly romantic notion, and Draco didn't think the older wizard sitting next to him as prone to such sentimental gestures.

“That was a terribly romantic notion, and Draco didn't think the older wizard sitting next to him as prone to such sentimental gestures."

“Then send her some flowers,” Draco suggested.

It wasn't like Severus hadn't thought of that solution before. However, flowers, even with charms and spells, would not likely survive the 7,300 miles via albatross.

Scratching his fingers through the thick growth of black whiskers now sprouting upon his face, Severus was struck with inspiration. He could kill two birds with one stone, taking care of another matter he had been thinking about for some months while also having some flowers delivered to Hermione in one fell swoop. It might cost a pretty Knut, but it would be well worth it.

Seeing the gears in Severus' mind grind furiously, Draco rose to leave his friend alone. As he stood and opened the sliding glass door, he suddenly remembered something.

Stopping, he turned his head over his shoulder to regard Severus' back. “Remember that movie we saw in the park last night?”

“That musical, My Fair Lady?” Severus swiveled his head and glanced up at Draco, given the amused tone in his voice.

“Yes. Well, I finally remembered where I'd heard one of the songs before.” Draco stopped explaining for a moment and laughed to himself, internally remarking on some of the ironic similarities. “When you began giving Hermione dance lessons, that first night I saw her waltzing down the staircase singing to herself about how she could have danced all night and begged for more.”

Draco gave one more muted chuckle and shook his head before going back inside.

Severus let a smile cross his lips upon remembering that night when they'd first danced. From Draco's description, he could very clearly imagine her singing that song and gliding down the
staircase during those heady days when they were first falling in love. It had been a while since he'd smiled and his heart didn't feel quite so heavy.

It was then Severus realized that the day before was the one-year anniversary of when she'd stepped into his flat and his life changed forever. How much his life had changed since then, and mostly for the better.

His appetite returned, Severus rose and went back to join his friends for dinner. It would be such a waste not to enjoy a good leg of lamb, especially since it came out so well and the compliments were flowing so freely.

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In the kitchen at The Lovely Lavender Company, Hermione was cutting up the ginger root, but her mind was elsewhere. The task wasn't anything difficult, since it was just some ginger and lemon tea she was brewing for Lavender and her Aunt Christine, who were both in need of something to settle their stomachs during their pregnancies. Even Harry's wife, Zhubanysh, had taken to drinking that tea, since she was pregnant as well. Harry was more than happy to brew the simple tea, according to directions Hermione had written down for him. It had been a bad case of morning sickness that went well into the night that prevented the couple from attending Viktor and Anne's wedding.

Her knife rocking up and down, she kept cutting up more root so she could brew some Wit-Sharpening Potion for herself. She could brew that one in her sleep, as – considering how hard she had been pushing herself lately – she had a few times.

Eager to finish mastering Spanish so she could go on to attack learning Japanese and Chinese – which involved whole new sets of characters, and neither language were part of the Indo-European language families – the Potions apprentice had begun taking the mind-honing elixir in hopes that she could absorb the material that much faster. It wasn't anything that Albert encouraged or even knew about, but Hermione was desperate to finish her apprenticeship and join Severus as soon as possible. She was miserable without him, even though she was currently getting everything she'd ever wanted before he came into her life.

She was working on her apprenticeship, she was earning more money in a far more fulfilling job, and she was even free from a marriage she wasn't particularly happy in. Hermione had everything she dreamed of, but without Severus, it seemed that there was something missing that made all the effort worthwhile.

Tipping back the vial of Wit-Sharpening Potion, she ignored the bitter taste of the armadillo bile, glad she had access to the necessary ingredients. She was allowed carte blanche access to use inventory in the Lovely Lavender warehouse for her own personal brewing, as a perk to her job and apprenticeship.
She had also begun brewing some Invigoration Draughts for the days when she lacked energy – such as when she could barely drag her arse out of bed the day after working all morning in Albert's garden, followed by an awkward afternoon at Neville's nursery. Even though Hermione and Neville had both agreed to put the incident behind them, both silently admitting it was a mistake, it had strained the easy camaraderie they had once shared.

She hoped that now she had something to help clear her mind of the constant fatigue that plagued her from pushing herself, and from silently punishing herself for sleeping with Neville, she could come up with an idea for her apprenticeship. One of the things Hermione had to do to become fully accredited as a Potions mistress was to come up with a new potion of her own design.

Given the work she did on the Sequoia and Irresistible potions might have counted, but Severus had already developed the Sequoia potion on his own before she came along. Even the Irresistible potion was developed more in partnership than on her own, thus Albert could not count it. Besides, he was supposed to supervise the development in order to judge if the new potion was original or plagiarized, and he could not verify the work, even though he trusted Hermione.

She considered creating a menstrual relief potion to supplant A Little Witch's Best Friend, but after some research, it seemed that many menstrual cramp-relief potions had to be tailored to each witch, since symptoms varied in intensity and number of them as well. A Little Witch's Best Friend worked so well because it was an all-purpose muscle-relaxant and analgesic, though Hermione thought she could improve upon it based on that one discussion she had with Severus in which he aroused her while trying to discuss Potions theory.

Hermione had already created a custom potion for herself, which upon first attempt resulted in Albert having to brew a quick antidote. Hermione had vastly underestimated the potency of a few ingredients when used in combination and had nearly caused her heart to stop. A few more adjustments under Albert's tutelage, and she finally had a new formula for herself.

She still needed to come up with a new potion of her own design and her own research for general use by the population. She found that it was getting harder to come up with something that had not been created already over the 3,000+ years of recorded Potions work.

As the Wit-Sharpening Potion began to awaken her mind, she hoped inspiration would soon strike, as she was desperate for an idea.

Trying to look more alive than she felt, Hermione picked up the tray and brought the pitcher of ginger and lemon tea into the weekly Friday meeting. Lavender and Aunt Christine would surely be glad to have a tall cool glass of that before addressing that week's business, including the latest
on the India launch.

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At first a bit reluctant, Severus eventually relented and agreed to grant an interview to the reporter from the Canadian publication, All About Apothecaries.

Word of Miniature Man-Eating Masdevallia orchid pods being shipped from the Hawaiian Islands spread like wildfire throughout the Americas, East Asia, and Australia. While the South American exporters viewed this as competition that impinged on their sole monopoly, everyone else was thrilled there would be another source for the rare ingredient. Prices were still holding steady at fifty Galleons for a fresh seed pod, but given that there would be more stock on hand for purchase, prices remained high and demand rose.

The Canadian wizard was wearing a pointed fur-trimmed toque in the tropical heat, charmed with the equivalent of Muggle air conditioning on the inside of the crown to keep the wearer cool. He asked, “And just how did you discover this previously unknown stand of orchids?”

Severus gave a brief synopsis on how one of his tutoring students had brought it in initially by mistake, and the ensuing events afterwards that had led to the forming of a partnership with the property owner.

Just then, Blanche Condre entered Severus' store and apologized for being late, but said that there were some personal and legal matters she had to settle first.

The reporter asked some questions regarding the property, to which Severus signaled to Blanche to remain as vague as possible. The location was a secret under the Fidelius Charm with Blanche as the Secret-Keeper, but that wouldn't stop people reading the article from coming to Malu Palekaiko trying to find the locations themselves, or tearing up the island in hopes of finding another undiscovered stand of the rare orchid and its highly valuable seed pods. Blanche's answer, as coached by Severus, would give others the impression that the stand of orchids was found on one of the more populated Hawaiian Islands, without outright explicitly saying so.

Once the interview was done, the reporter asked if he could take a picture of Severus and Blanche together, posed in front of a bench with cauldrons lined up for a brewing class Severus was going to begin once the interview was over. The reporter kept waving his hands for them to stand closer and closer until they finally gently bumped into each other, just as the flash went off.

The reporter thanked Severus and Blanche for their time. He promised to owl a copy of the magazine to each of them when the story published in the July issue, coming out in about a week.
Blanche shook Severus' hand and left the store, needing to go out and purchase more boxes for shipping later that week, as Severus suggested. She was learning to do many of the simpler tasks first to run the business, including processing the orders. Now that she no longer had to work at the taro farm, as the Galleons had started rolling in, she could take over more duties. Severus was glad to help her learn, since his own business was still taking up most of his time.

Just as Blanche left, Naomi entered, sauntering in after having received an owl from Severus about a special run he needed her to do on his behalf.

“Let me guess, you need me to go to the mainland for something. I have to warn you that it'll cost more, since time and Portkey costs are both more,” she began, not even letting Severus explain his request before she tried to guess what the errand would entail.

“Oh, I have the Galleons,” he assured her, flushed with more money from his fifteen-percent cut of the profits from the sale of the orchid pods, and from his thriving business. “But this is farther than the mainland. I need you to Portkey to London for a couple errands that cannot be done via albatross, but must be done in person.”

“London, England?” Naomi asked, her jaw dropping in an ungainly fashion. Her eyes popped open wide with surprise, having only ever gone as far as Tokyo, Seattle, and Mexico City for the rare odd run for something that wasn't available within the Hawaiian Islands.

“No, London, Kiribati, located 2,000 miles due south in the middle of the South Pacific,” he dryly said with a straight face. When Naomi didn't pick up on his sarcastic tone, he clarified, “Of course, I mean London, England.”

Naomi blinked and beamed brightly. “Cool! I've always wanted an excuse to visit Limeyland, and now I'll have my Portkey paid for. Sweet.”

Severus didn't miss her not-so-subtle dig in response to his snark.

Silently, Severus decided that if he ever began using words such as “sweet,” “cool,” and “wicked” as interjections instead of using them appropriately as adjectives, he would ask Draco to immediately put him out of his misery.

“First is to hunt down a set of silverware. I need your discretion, as this is a surprise present to the
Malfoys for their first wedding anniversary. Hopefully, it won't take you until Christmas to locate Draco's mother's silver that was seized by the British Ministry of Magic and most probably sold off to a shop in Knockturn Alley.”

Severus pulled out two pieces of parchment, his finger indicating the design on one of the sheaves. “This here shows what the silver pattern looked like. There should be a full set of 24 place settings. It's charmed – or should I say hexed – not to be broken apart, so it should have all the pieces listed on this sheet, from salad forks all the way through to dessert forks.” He had eaten enough dinners at Malfoy Manor over the years to know all the pieces that were in the set, including the grapefruit fork and knife, fish fork and knife, snail tong and fork, and lobster pick settings.

“And the other errand?”

“Just as, if not more important. I need you to order a bouquet with very specific flowers to be delivered. No substitutions allowed.” His voice dropped in order to impart the importance of that last direction. If Severus was going to send a message of his love for Hermione, he didn't want it to get botched up with miscommunication, given how they had misunderstood each other in the past.

Naomi gave Severus a sidelong glance with a sly smirk.

For good measure, he added, “And no telling Rainbow, or anyone else, as this is none of her business, nor anyone else's on the island. I'll even tip you handsomely for your discretion, since that seems to be a commodity in short supply here at times.”

It was bad enough Naomi had probably heard through the grapevine about his interlude with Maria and how it was not exactly mutually enjoyable.

Looking over the second piece of parchment, Naomi's eyes trailed down the specific list of flowers, noting their symbolism. She let out a low whistle.

“Wow, a bouquet like that and the rumors of you pining for someone back in England must be true. No wonder Maria didn't exactly inspire you if you're sending these flowers to this... Hermione,” she surmised, reading the name and address at the bottom.

“Discretion,” he reminded her, his tone warning her to keep her mouth shut and her opinions to herself.
Severus reached into his pocket and pulled out a small note sealed with wax. “And make sure to have this small note included with the delivery of the flowers as well.”

Naomi took the folded and sealed note with his initials on it and put it away for safekeeping, nodding her head to signal that she understood this was indeed a very personal matter. It wouldn't do to get a reputation for violating people's privacy by informing others of what she fetched on some of her runs. Discretion was always required, just like in Severus' business.

“I'll leave on the Monday before the Pele Festival begins. She'll probably have her 'package' by Friday, the day the Festival begins. Does that work for you?” Naomi asked, noting that some of Severus' students were trickling in for their lesson, so she said "package" in order to remain discreet.

Severus nodded that would be adequate, before Naomi told him she would get back to him on her Portkey and travel costs for this particular errand.

Now that he had taken some action toward contacting Hermione since they parted all those months ago, the pining Potions master was feeling a bit more relaxed and was much more patient with his students, as he began class.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to my wonderful betas for this chapter, JuneW and Hope.

_The "engawa" is in front of the garden. It is like a balcony or wooden floor, and you can step out from a room. This is the place from where we can see the garden in a relaxed mood and take the air._


“Hotel California”: Written by Don Henley, Glenn Frey, and Don Felder.

There was a request for it, so here is the recipe for Hermione's ginger and lemon tea, which helps settle upset stomachs. When my sister was pregnant (years before Harry Potter came out) and could keep nothing down for months, I made her a special tea to brew and drink half an hour before eating. It consisted of ginger, blessed thistle, lemon, and raspberry, and it did help, but I think it was mostly the ginger and lemon that did it since lemon and ginger are the two recommended ingredients for pregnant women to consume to help with morning sickness. My brother-in-law, in snarky tones,
referred to me as a “witch,” but was thankful I came up with that tea brew for his wife. Also, ginger is a good analgesic, I've heard (I'm not a doctor or pharmacist), so when I have bad headaches, I drink this as well.

Hermione's Ginger-Lemon Iced Tea  
Prep time: 10 minutes  
Brew time: 4 hours minimum, 12 hours preferred

Ingredients:

1 large (3- to 4-inch) piece of ginger  
1 quart water for boiling  
1/4 to 1/2+ cup honey (orange honey is the best, flavor-wise)  
1/2 of a lemon

Directions:

1) Peel the piece of ginger, and slice thinly.

2) In a plastic or glass 1-quart container, place the sliced ginger and up to half a cup of honey (orange honey preferred), depending on how sweet you like it.

3) In a teapot or pan, boil a quart of water.

4) Pour most of the boiling water into the ginger-and-honey container, leaving room for a half-cup at the top of the container.

5) Stir until honey is dissolved. Cover the container loosely, or put a lid on loosely, to allow steam to escape. Place in the refrigerator overnight to brew, or at least four hours.

6) After brewing it and letting it cool down, ream half of a lemon into the quart container and add the reamed lemon rind half. Stir.
7) Fill a glass with ice, and place a strainer/sieve over the glass to catch ginger slices and lemon seeds. Pour the cold ginger-lemon-honey tea over ice, filling the glass halfway.

8) Take a sip. If too strong, then add water the rest of the way, or just add some water to water down the spicy bite of the ginger. If not too strong and just right for your personal taste, continue filling glass and don't add water.

NOTE: Remember, the longer it brews in the fridge, the stronger the ginger flavor and the spicy bite become. To help counter the spicy bite, you can add more honey and/or add a greater proportion of water.
With one unsteady hand, Hermione tipped the vial of Invigoration Draught back, while holding the Auror's locket Harry had given her in her other hand, rubbing it distractedly like a worry stone. Closing her eyes, she could feel the threads of magic in the potion restore her energy once more.

Now that she was awake, she tipped back the vial of Wit-Sharpening Potion so she could have the focus of mind to get in some studying before she would have to go to the Victory Day ceremony. She was only attending because Harry said he wanted her there.

She only had a couple hours of sleep the night before, staying up late as she was looking through various tomes to see if one idea she had for her apprenticeship final potions project had been attempted before, only to discover someone had already created a potion for that very solution 50 or 500 years ago.

Her hand shook momentarily as her body fought the magic forcing her body and mind to alertness, but the potion won out and she was fully awake and calm once more.

Marf had expressed his concern over the condition of his mistress, since he did give his promise to Master Severus that he would take care of Hermione. However, she assured the house-elf that she
was fine and had pushed herself this hard during her Hogwarts days, especially during that year when she had a Time Turner.

Nodding his head with a look of worry still etched on his wrinkled forehead, Marf made Hermione breakfast to ensure she would eat something. She was becoming thin once again, nearly as thin – possibly more so – as when she'd first turned up on Severus' doorstep a year ago.

Entering Bongo's bar for his usual Friday night drinks, Draco by his side, Severus and his friend were hailed by the usual “Aloha” greeting, which Severus returned a bit more cheerfully than as of late.

The American flags along with the stars-and-stripes bunting strung about the bar added to the festive mood, since it was the Fourth of July weekend. The holiday celebrating independence from British rule was observed by American Muggles and wizards alike. At least there weren't any leprechauns and shamrocks decorating the place like during St. Patrick's Day. To Severus, it seemed like there was some sort of holiday to celebrate every month in America.

Ginny was there sitting in her usual spot, as well as Mounga and Rainbow, with the addition of Halulu and Greg.

“Halulu, what brings you to join us for drinks this Friday night?” Severus asked, knowing that the pair were especially busy, as the Pele Festival was starting in a week.

Rainbow was also curious to know why the pair was there, since they had broad smiles on their faces and refused to divulge the good news until Draco and Severus had arrived.

“Yes, please. Now that Severus is here, can you please tell us what has got you as giddy as a schoolgirl on Euphoria Elixir,” Rainbow said with some exasperation, dying to finally know what was going on.

“It's an Elixir to Induce Euphoria,” Severus corrected her smugly, his nose a bit in the air.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” she said, waving her hands flippantly at him, hoping he would shut up and let Halulu spill the beans.

“Well...” Halulu began. “I'm pregnant.'
There was a chorus of female screams from that corner of the bar that made three of the four males wince and flinch. Greg was too elated to be bothered by the sudden noise, joining in the excitement as well.

“And it's all thanks to your advice, Severus,” Halulu said, shaking his hand gratefully.

“That vacation was exactly what we needed to relax and let nature take its course,” Greg added, shaking Severus’ hand as well, grateful that he and his wife were finally going to be parents.

Severus noticed the odd tight smile about Rainbow's lips and the fleeting moment of somberness in Mounga's face, but decided to say nothing.

Once word spread to the rest of the bar, there were random shouts of congratulations from other patrons.

Severus offered to buy the next round for their group in celebration of the good news, feeling generous due to his improved mood. Naomi would be leaving in a few days to Portkey to England to run a few errands for him, and he received the July issue of *All About Apothecaries*, which featured a cover photo of him and Blanche. It was the main featured story, giving a rather glowing, and still accurate, account of how he'd discovered the previously unknown stand of Miniature Man-Eating Masdevallias. It also included a bit of background about his thriving Potions business on Malu Palekaiko and his work tutoring the youth on the island. It was a rather positive article, and not at all like the biased hack journalism he was used to in the *Daily Prophet*.

Once the excitement over Halulu and Greg's news settled down, Severus shared the copy of the magazine featuring him for everyone in the group to see. Draco had already read it and was proud of his mentor. This was the sort of recognition the Potions master should have received back home for his talents, but was finally receiving in their new home on the other side of the world.

Everyone in the group remarked about what a wonderful photo it was and that his beard looked nice and thick in the photos, with added comments that Severus might win first place.

Draco scratched at his beard a bit meekly knowing that he would probably lose the bet, even if Severus didn't win first place and he'd be forced to make cassoulet the way Severus preferred it. His beard was coming in nicely and it was a more golden blond than his platinum locks, but he could tell that he wasn't going to win, between the two of them.
Mounga read the article aloud to the group of friends gathered around, and a few other bar patrons who knew Severus ambled over to listen in. Mounga's voice carried so it wasn't hard for anyone else in the bar to listen in, even with the dueling piano and harpsichord tinkling away in the corner.

Once done, Severus was clapped on the back and his hand was shaken by many in the bar.

The next round, Severus was treated by one of the other bar patrons, in congratulations of the article. It was a wizard who had commissioned Severus for a Potion that had helped him with a rather personal matter, the same potion Severus once brewed for Remus Lupin years ago for his problem. Many in the town were grateful there was a Potions master in town that was discreet and didn't turn his nose up at tutoring or certain commissions.

There was talk about the upcoming Independence Day celebrations Sunday night, including fireworks with a band playing music during the pyromagic display. Normally for this type of holiday there might have been a parade or community luau, but given that the Pele Festival fell within a week after the Fourth of July, everyone was going to be busy with last-minute preparations.

Even Ginny was helping Halulu, and was too busy to have dinner ready on the table by the time Draco came home from work. For the past week, Draco had been joining Severus for dinner at the various restaurants around town after work. It was during one dinner that Draco convinced Severus to hire a part-time house-elf to clean and cook for him. Severus had been grousing about the drudgery of housework as of late, and having to cook for himself once he got home. As much as Severus didn't mind putting the work into keeping his Potions lab spit-spot clean, he was empathizing with Hermione and the way she used to complain about the copious amount of chores required to keep house in addition to working full-time.

As the Finaus were getting ready to leave, Halulu drained the last of her non-alcoholic drink and asked, “So, off to the hot springs now?”

That is when Severus saw the grim look pass fleetingly between Rainbow and Mounga, who then plastered on plastic smiles, saying they had some matters to deal with at home for some task they had to attend to the next day.

Severus could tell something was amiss. When he'd greeted Akela and Iakona on the street a few days prior, he found Mounga's oldest daughter distraught, her eyes red and face drawn. The pair passed him by with barely an acknowledgment to the adopted family member, the young wizard's arm around his older sister in a supportive fashion.
He wasn't about to pry, as it seemed it was a confidential matter that they did not want to share, but he was concerned. The Finau family had become his family, but he would respect their privacy. Surely this was not a matter they wanted to include him in.

Before they left, Severus put a hand on Mounga's shoulder and said quietly, as an aside, “I know you have people coming to you to unburden themselves, but you can come to me if you need the same.”

Mounga nodded his head, thanking his friend before he took Rainbow's arm to escort her out the door and home.

Though Severus was tired of having people unloading their problems on him over the years as a gigolo, Severus did find in retrospect that unburdening his own secrets to Mounga when he first came to Malu Palekaiko had been a great help towards him emotionally coming to terms with some aspects of his life. Severus wanted to return the favor for his friend this one time.

It was not a panacea for all the emotional and mental scars Severus had suffered over the decades, but with his confession at the time, he was able to recognize some aspects of his life that he had intentionally forgotten or put aside. Finally acknowledging them, he was able to put some of those aspects behind him.

In Malu Palekaiko, Severus found the peace that Hermione had hoped he would find. And with the knowledge that Naomi would be delivering a special bouquet to his love within the week, he felt more at ease and more at peace with himself than ever before.

Naomi was having a grand time. She got to see the crown jewels in the Tower of London, where she laughed that the Star of Africa was “supposedly” the largest flawless cut diamond in the world – well, at least according to these Muggles protecting it with glass boxes and other Muggle security contraptions. Granted, the British Ministry of Magic also had wards around them to add to the Muggle ones, but it amused Naomi that the Muggles thought their security measures were quite stringent. But as for being the largest cut diamond, she had seen larger as a child when she'd accompanied her grandfather to his Gringotts vault in Singapore.

She wished she could have stuck around England long enough to catch a Quidditch game, since they all seemed to be played on the weekend, but she needed to be back in time for the Pele Festival. There were the rumors back home about Ginny's brother being a famous Quidditch player, and she wanted to go see him for herself. But she had her itinerary full, visiting all the great magical and Muggle sites around the country. She even took the Knight Bus, ignoring the strange look from Stan Shunpike when she asked him to take a photograph of herself in front of the bus.
Diagon Alley was really cute and quaint, by her standards. Everything was so tiny and charming and cramped, compared to the broad main street and wide covered wooden board sidewalks of Malu Palekaiko, lined with palm trees and tiki torches. In addition, everything was askew in Diagon Alley, having its foundations settled for hundreds of years until they looked like teetering boxes about to fall over.

Naomi had to buy herself a real woolen cloak, since the cotton one she brought that was suitable for the tropics was not doing the job of keeping her warm enough. Granted this was “supposed” to be summer, but this felt like the dead of winter in Hawaii by comparison. And when it rained, she finally understood why the English could drink hot tea in the summertime. Now she wished she had brought her heavy woolen cloak she had for when she made trips to the top of Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea when there was snow atop the Big Island.

Her witch’s hat, woven from palm fronds, garnered a few stares, as everyone else wore more formal hats made of velvets, tweeds, and heavy felt. Naomi’s clothing – featuring bright colors and bold Hawaiian tropical prints – also added to the odd stares she received now and again. Her sandals added to the disdainful look she received from one wizard in Flourish and Blotts. She distinctly recalled hearing that wizard she bumped into mutter, “Americans,” under his breath disparagingly even after she sincerely apologized.

Severus, Draco, and Ginny, despite their fancy accents, were a whole lot nicer than some of the people she met in Diagon Alley. Based on her impression from Severus and the Malfoys, she was led to believe that most English witches and wizards were as nice as them. It was a disappointment to be met with such chilly hospitality by the general population. At least the witch she came across in the bookstore was really sweet.

Naomi was looking for a tourist guidebook of wizarding Britain. She found the thin witch with the bushy brown hair pulled into a braid to be extremely helpful. The guidebook section was right next to the language section, where the slightly frazzled-looking witch was looking for more books on the Spanish language, muttering to herself about making a Potion in which to literally absorb languages faster while rubbing her thumb on some pendant that hung from a long necklace.

Naomi thanked the helpful witch with dark circles under her eyes for her recommendation on a guidebook and a good place to get some authentic English pub food, besides the Leaky Cauldron, before she went to the front to pay for her purchase. After a nice meal of fish and chips or bangers and mash, she’d go to the florist to order those flowers, then head on over to Knockturn Alley to start looking for that silverware.

'Knockturn Alley. Hmm, wonder if it’s as darling as the rest of Diagon Alley. Hope there is a cute shop I can find something to bring back for my mom. Maybe that Borgin and Burkes place will
have Draco's silver, like Severus suggested, and a cute little miniature version of the Knight Bus for a souvenir. And maybe they sell some postcards, too...’ Naomi thought to herself as she ambled towards the Leaky Cauldron and out into Muggle London for some good Muggle pub grub.

Hermione was finding it hard to focus. The Invigoration Draught and Wit-Sharpening Potions she had taken earlier that morning were starting to wear off. She was so muddled that by the time she realized she wanted to ask the American she'd helped if she was from Hawaii – since her florescent orange muumuu and hat were very tropical, and she had an American accent – the Yank was gone.

“I could have sworn she was just here,” Hermione mumbled to herself, her thoughts scattered like a broken strand of beads rolling across the floor.

“I have got to get back to work,” she continued muttering to herself, knowing that her lunch break was nearly over.

First order of business was another dose of those two elixirs that were allowing her to push on, letting her study and work twenty hours a day.

So lost in thought, Hermione almost walked out of Flourish and Blotts before paying for the book still grasped in her hand. Fortunately, she caught herself and walked to the end of the queue to pay.

With her belly filled with yummy shepherd's pie and a pint of ale that was too warm and flat for her liking, but she'd drank it anyway, Naomi went back to Diagon Alley and straight to the florist.

Entering the shop, she looked about, gazing at the large variety of flowers. She was thankful that they would probably have everything Severus had on his list.

An old witch with a beak-like nose, bulging eyes that looked like they went in opposite directions, a drooping, sagging neck that looked a little scaly, and a mop of wiry and curly white hair greeted Naomi. She looked like a chicken, and when she spoke, she sort of squawked like a chicken too.
Naomi wondered if she was a failed Animagus who didn't entirely get returned back to her original human form.

“Can I help you, miss?” The witch cocked her head to the side a bit suddenly, much like when a chicken would determine if it was going to peck at something or not.

“Yes. I'd like to order a bouquet of flowers to be delivered tomorrow.” The Hawaiian witch glanced over the shoulder of the counter clerk, noticing the old witch in the back who was setting flowers into the vase. It was a beautiful composition, and now she understood why Severus insisted she go to this particular shop.

“Excellent. Tomorrow, July 9th, I see will be the date. Anything specific in mind?” she clucked.

“Yes, I have a list right here as to what will be included.” Reaching inside her cloak, she pulled out the small note Severus had given to her with his initials on it. “And this is to be included in the delivery.”

Looking over the list, the witch made a sound as if she was pleased. “Yes, yes, that will make quite a lovely bouquet indeed. So much feeling in this selection.”

The sales clerk drew up a receipt, copying the list of flowers down in addition to the specific direction of no substitutions.

After paying, Naomi asked the sales clerk for directions to Knockturn Alley and couldn't understand why the older witch had a look of horror on her face, before raising a hand and – with a shaking finger – pointing her in the right direction.

As Naomi left the florist, she was nearly bowled over by a very angry-looking young wizard with hellfire in his eyes. He barely apologized to Naomi before walking up to the counter, requiring assistance immediately.

Stephen Stronder was in a snit. He had discovered his fiancée in bed with his best friend, and he
was livid. He was going to send her a bouquet in order to break up with her, calling her out on her infidelity.

The witch took down the list of flowers the young man wanted, noting their symbolism aloud.

“Abatina for fickleness, laurel cherry for perfidy, bilberry for treachery, fish geranium for disappointed expectation, and michaelmas daisy for farewell,” Stephen ticked off on his fingers.

“What about yellow roses for infidelity?” the old witch suggested.

“She might misinterpret them as friendship, since it can mean that as well. And she might think that we would be parting on good terms, which we're not.” He crossed his arms before adding, “Some St. John's Wort for animosity would not be amiss. Yes, add that too, please.”

After paying for the bouquet with directions to be delivered the next day, that included a note with his initials on it, Stephen Stronder left the shop and headed off towards the Leaky Cauldron, intending to get right pissed in order to drown his considerable sorrows. No doubt, the *Daily Prophet* would be posting the breakup of their engagement under the obituary section after his soon-to-be ex-fiancée received her flowers.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Sleeping peacefully and without a care, Severus was jolted awake by an earthquake. Leaping up out of bed, wearing only his underpants, his heart hammering like a Taiko drum, he felt the whole house shift beneath his feet with a rumble and a brief shudder.

Pele had announced to the whole island she had come back to her other home to observe and bask in the celebration. The island goddess had returned to be present for the festival named in her honor.

The chorus of startled birds died down, but Severus' heart had yet to recover. He had never been in an earthquake before. Granted, he was warned by the natives and long-time residents that Pele always made this sort of little announcement to the island upon her yearly return for the festival, and on a few days in between during the year, but this was far more thrilling than he had expected.

As the shaking in his hands subsided, Severus opened the floor-to-ceiling teak plantation shutters, noting that the sun was just peeking up above the horizon.
“Merlin, I need a cup of tea for my nerves,” he muttered aloud.

It was time Severus got up anyway, as nearly the whole town was going to make the trek up the side of the volcano that morning. There, by the edge of the caldera, Mounga would lead the ceremony thanking Pele for all that she had provided, from the island built from her lava to the magic imbued into the soil that protected all that sought sanctuary.

There was one more mild aftershock, causing Severus to grip the edge of the counter in hopes it wouldn’t become more violent while he was waiting for the kettle to boil. Thankfully, he had taken the builder’s advice and installed specially-built shelving that would prevent jars from sliding off of shelves in mild to moderate earthquakes. He had even upgraded his own shelves at his shop, being warned how a good jolt would cost him possibly hundreds or thousands of Galleons in lost ingredients, if his ingredients weren’t stored properly in preparation of the local geologic activity.

‘*Thank Merlin I paid the builder for the self-plumbing upgrade.*’ He wondered how askew his house would become if this was a yearly occurrence. The charm would correct any listing or settling that would occur because of the seismic activity.

There wouldn’t be any time for a morning swim, but the hike up the side of the volcano would still ensure he had his morning exercise.

As much as he wanted to eat his breakfast of toast and a heaping pile of fresh tropical fruit, he found he didn’t quite have the stomach for it, as if it was twisted in a knot. He figured it was an adrenaline rush from the quakes that had depressed his appetite. Then he went to dress for the morning.

In honor of the goddess and the opening ceremony by the edge of the caldera, the custom was for everyone to dress in their finest clothes, or ceremonial native dress if they had such wear.

English witches and wizards did not have a national costume, nor did the Muggles from that country. Instead Severus would wear his formal wardrobe – starched high-neck collar, buttoned-up frock coat, and boots – but ditching the long black cloak for the long hike. Putting them on, Severus noticed that the trousers’ waist was loose, but the coat’s shoulder and arms were a bit snugger than he remembered. It still fit, but it should have been taken to the tailor for adjustments before the festival. It would do for now, but next year, he would be prepared to have a better-fitting outfit for the festival.

To keep cool while wearing his full woolen outfit during the hike uphill, Severus had made a potion to keep his body cool. He also added a few charms he’d been taught by the locals, who had
Standing in front of a non-magical full-length mirror that he'd recently purchased for the house, he gazed at his reflection. It was the same clothes, but it was a different man staring back from the one who used to wear these clothes a mere year ago.

Walking out his front door and down the path, he joined the procession that began in the middle of the main street. Mounga was at the front leading the way, with his family beside him, and most of the island's residents trailing behind. There would be a small contingency of folks who would Apparate or Portkey up to the top of the volcano, but it was only the very old, sick, or pregnant, or mothers with small children who could not make the hike up themselves.

Higher up on the volcano, pathways were shored up, temporarily paved over or broadened with temporary board sidewalks to accommodate the mass of people heading up to pay their respects to Pele. All that could walk were expected to make the trek on foot without magic, a symbolic gesture that the ultimate magical being on the island was Pele herself.

Severus fell in with the crowd, walking beside Ginny and Draco who also were in their full formal wizarding wear they had brought with them from England. Draco was in his long gray cloak and formal suit with cravat, and Ginny in her dark forest-green cloak and a formal day dress that went down to her laced-up boots. Others in the procession wore ethnic costumes, most often indicating their country of origin, or ancestry.

Some, like the Finau family, were dressed in formal Hawaiian ceremonial garb. Mounga was wearing a plumed headdress of bright yellow and red feathers. He was bare-chested, except for the various leis he wore that had been handed down through the generations – leis made with shells, feathers, and kukui nuts, and one that included human teeth. His sarong consisted of hand-dyed fabric and ti leaves. He wore a cloak covered with the same bright yellow and vibrant red feathers as the headdress.

There were people wearing beaded buckskin, indicating some ancestral heritage of one of the Native American Plains tribes. Others wore an Amália dress, showing their Greek heritage. Some wore sarongs woven with threads of gold and elaborate tiered headdresses, some wore full-length kaftans with a kufi cap. Arnold was wearing a formal black kimono that he'd brought from his home country of Japan when he fled for sanctuary. Ranjit wore a richly hued silk sherwani. Halulu wore a multi-hued chiapas dress, reminding Severus of the story she'd told him about how her grandmother was a witch who had participated in the Mexican Revolution that began in 1910, resulting in her seeking sanctuary nearly a century ago in Malu Palekaiko.

There were some Muggles and Squibs in the group who made the trek, also dressed in their finest clothes or national costume. Severus had come to learn there were more non-magical humans on
the island than he'd originally suspected, since there were still a few countries that persecuted or harassed witches and wizards who married Muggles or Squibs. The Muggles blended so well in with the magical society on the island, not reacting so violently or with fear or awe as he was used to back in England, that he'd had to learn to not assume everyone he dealt with socially or in business in Malu Palekaiko was magical. Some of the Muggles and a few Squibs worked on the other end of the island at the Muggle Camp, that was shut down for the week between the Fourth of July and the Pele Festival. Some worked in the restaurants and businesses in town, or on the various farms around the island.

Even the goblins, hags, a few centaurs, and the free house-elves on the island joined in the procession, dressed in their finest clothing, letting Severus finally see just how many non-humans truly inhabited Malu Palekaiko. The few vampires on the island, who had sought sanctuary over the years or retired there by choice, would make the trek to pay their respects to Pele once the sun had set.

During the procession, some had brought guitars and ukuleles and strummed them. People joining in, singing in Hawaiian to pass the time during the long walk up.

Once at the top, not everyone could fit on the flat plateau next to the caldera, but did their best to listen in along the path near the very top. The crowd was over 5,000 in number, as some had come from abroad to witness the opening ceremony for the Pele Festival. Some had grown up on the island and moved away as adults, returning for the yearly festival. Many were from the American mainland, Japan, China, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines, along with a few from various South American countries. There were no visitors from any European countries that Severus could spot, only those who had sought sanctuary.

Standing near the edge of the caldera, Mounga used a Sonorous Charm in order for everyone at the top and down the trail to hear him.

He began with a greeting of “Aloha” to which the thousands replied in unison. He welcomed everyone, and gave a brief explanation for the purpose of the ceremony for those who were new to the island or came from abroad.

Once done with the introduction, Mounga ended the Sonorous Charm and sang his prayer in his voice without magic, just as they all had journeyed to the top without magic. Even those down the trail could hear Mounga's voice as it boomed and echoed through the clear morning air.

As Mounga sang, Severus looked about. Ulrich and his new bride, Kiki, Akela's former best friend, stood side-by-side, uncomfortable in each other's presence. Severus had discovered earlier that week that Ulrich had impregnated Kiki, the witch Ulrich had dumped Akela for. At wandpoint, Kiki's father insisted that Ulrich make an honest witch of her so his first grandchild was not born a
The strained look on the Finaus' faces the night at Bongo's bar had been due to the fact that the next day they would be present at the wedding, with Mounga as officiant. Kiki had asked Akela to be her maid of honor, and despite their falling out, Akela had reluctantly agreed. As much as Severus wished to impart some words of wisdom to the young distraught witch, he knew that their earlier encounter – that had led to much shouting and anger – would be cause enough alone to not broach the subject.

He did bet Akela, with great schadenfreude at the time, that if she refused to have sex with Ulrich, the boy would quickly direct his affections towards another young and more foolish witch whom he would bed without a care for her. Unfortunately, Severus had hit the mark.

'Better her than you, Akela,' Severus thought to himself when he saw Akela glance morosely at the newlywed teenagers. 

As Severus turned his attentions from Ulrich and Kiki back to Mounga who was still singing prayers in praise, his eye caught sight of an old woman with long flowing white hair. His heart stopped for a moment. It was Pele, and he knew it. It was the woman who had delayed him and Mounga on their journey down the mountainside that one time, long enough for them to avoid being caught in a rock slide.

She had her head tipped up and eyes closed, her face absorbing the sun's rays on her weathered skin, as she drank in the sounds of Mounga's songs of prayer.

Severus turned to get Draco's attention to point out the old woman, but when he turned back, she was gone. The people in the crowd seemed unaware of her disappearance, if they’d even noticed her at all.

“What?” Draco said, noting the slightly agitated quality to Severus tugging on his cloak sleeve.

Shaking his head, Severus indicated it was nothing. He had not told Draco, nor Ginny, about his suspected encounter with Pele. Now, after spotting the same old woman amongst the crowd of people – a woman who had just disappeared – there was no point but to drop the subject.

When the prayer ended, offerings were brought forth and laid near the edge of the volcano. Ohelo berries, lehua flowers, red fish, a variety of produce brought from people's gardens, bottles of home-brewed beers and spirits made from the produce harvested on the Hawaiian island chain, and long strands of leis were set forth. Then Mounga called an end to the ceremony, announcing his hope that their respect and gifts for the goddess would cause her to continue to grant those who lived on the island sanctuary, and grant the town protection from her fiery lava.
People began meandering back down the mountainside to go back home in order to change out of their clothes and get ready for the festivities later that day.

Not only did the Pele Festival serve as an event to honor the goddess with song and dance, but it was also an excuse for the magical community throughout the Hawaiian Islands to hold a sort of state fair. There were to be contests judged, including cooking, arts and crafts, magical talent competitions and gardening, including the beard-growing contest Severus was hoping to win.

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It was his parents' fault he had to get a job for the summer. Vradian Bumbershoot wanted the new 2005 Mercury broom, that would be available in August 2004 in time for the new Hogwarts school year. The broom had been modeled by Ronald Weasley in the 2004 Mercury calendar.

Vradian had wanted it so he could have it for Slytherin Quidditch team tryouts that autumn, but since he had the 2004 model, his parents said if he wanted yet another new broom, he could get a job in order to earn the money and buy it himself. They surmised that maybe then he would appreciate the things he had if he purchased them himself. Perhaps, they thought, he wouldn't have chucked his 2004 Mercury broom in the fireplace in a temper tantrum fit if he had spent his own money. Vradian had tried to give his parents a good reason why they should purchase another one for him; burning his old one seemed like reason enough, but it didn't seem to sway his parents to his argument.

Now he was stuck all summer working for these two old witches at the florist shop. Vradian had delayed looking for a job until he realized his parents wouldn't buy him a new broom, and he'd have to work to buy his own. Since coming home on the Hogwarts Express in June, all the other good jobs were nabbed, and this was one of the few left that paid anything above a pittance.

It was Friday afternoon. He couldn't wait to have the day be done and over with, but he had two last deliveries to make before he could collect his weekly paycheck and go home to his “stupid and wholly unfair” parents.

“Please deliver this vase of flowers to Hermione Weasley at The Lovely Lavender Company over on Dorian Loop with this note,” the avian-like witch instructed the delivery boy. “And this vase goes to an Esmeralda Gravenstein in room six at The Leaky Cauldron. And don't forget the note that goes with that one either.”

Vradian took both notes and shoved them carelessly in his pocket. With both vases of flowers in a box charmed to float behind him as he made his way through the magical neighborhood, he went on his way.
Reaching The Lovely Lavender headquarters, Vradian handed the elf at the front desk the correct note to go with the order, but when it came time to hand over the bouquet of flowers carefully arranged in the vase, he couldn't remember which one went with which order. They both looked the same. They both had yellow and blue flowers, geraniums, branches with white flowers, and stems adorned with red flowers and fruits.

“I guess it doesn't matter who gets which one, since they both look the same,” Vradian reasoned to himself as he left the vase meant for Miss Gravenstein at the front desk for Hermione.

Looking over the article in *Obscure Oozes & Fabulous Fluids* for the umpteenth time that day, Hermione read the story originally featured in the Canadian publication, *All About Apothecaries*.

It had been waiting on her desk when she arrived at work that morning.

The magazine aggregated potions and apothecary stories from publications all over the world, including this particular one from Canada.

Her hand passed reverently over the photo of Severus, who was standing right next to some blonde in a tank top and shorts. Severus had a beard in the photo, and he looked nearly identical to the version of Severus she hallucinated during her time under the Dionysus Fever potion. His clothing was far different from what she was used to seeing him in. Severus was wearing what looked like cotton robes. They were black, since black hid potion stains, but the way they hung and the weight of the fabric indicated they were meant for warmer climes. He was wearing full-length trousers, but they looked like they were of a much more casual cut and of a lightweight breathable fabric, cotton or linen most likely. And they were beige. His hair was a bit longer, his face much more tanned, and his eyes just as piercing, but the Hawaiian shirt – dark navy blue with green palm fronds and cream-colored ginger flowers – seemed incongruent to the more formal wizard who had left England seven months prior. He looked positively relaxed, even with his upright posture.

In the photo, Severus and the blonde, a witch he was in business together with, were scooting closer towards each other until the flash went off.

Hermione knew first-hand how photos could capture something at the most inopportune moment and be interpreted wrongly, as she remembered the photo of her and Harry embracing during the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Rita Skeeter had spun a tale of romance when it was nothing of the sort.
Hermione was sure that the closeness of Severus to this leggy blonde in the revealing top was nothing more than a business arrangement, but that didn't stop the thread of jealousy and doubt take root in the pit of her being, making her stomach clench and her chest burn. The awkward smile Severus gave the blonde in the photograph, after bumping into her, didn't quell Hermione's fears, fed by her guilty conscience, that Severus had moved on and was somehow romantically linked to this witch he was in business with.

Reading the article, Hermione noticed immediately that any time the word “Malu Palekaiko” or “Hawaii” should have appeared in the article, the ink was smudged and letters were scrambled, making the words indecipherable.

Following a hunch, Hermione pulled out a scrap of parchment and tried to scratch out the word “Hawaii”. As soon as she was done writing the word, the ink smeared and letters rearranged themselves so it was unreadable. She then wrote down a list of other islands in the Pacific Ocean. “Pitcairn,” “Tahiti,” “Samoa,” and “Kiribati” remained clear upon the parchment, but when she wrote the words “Oahu,” “Maui,” or “Hawaii,” the ink would instantly smudge and letters scramble as if spelled with an anagram charm once her quill left the parchment.

Hermione was in awe for the fact that Dumbledore had set a charm so powerful it would remain in effect even after his passing. What Dumbledore couldn't erase was all reference to Hawaii from Muggle books in Great Britain. That explained Moody's suspicious behavior upon seeing her pile of travel books to the remote tropical location in her flat where the words would not scramble themselves or smudge.

Before she could talk with Lavender about this publication of the article, which might clue Moody to Severus and possibly Draco's whereabouts, there was a knock on her door.

An elf notified Hermione that a vase of flowers had arrived for her at the front desk, and asked if he should bring them up to her office now.

Wondering who in the world sent her flowers, since she didn’t have the slightest clue who might, Hermione ask for them to be brought up immediately.

As the elf brought the large vase of flowers in, Hermione spotted the note attached to the bouquet, recognizing the initials on the letter.

Before she even looked at the flowers, she pulled the note free and urgently tore open the letter, desperate for whatever news Severus had to impart.
I hope this bouquet can adequately convey my feelings for you.

Severus

Hermione felt her heart swell, elation infusing her body with a sense that she could fly.

Looking at the bouquet, her heart began to sink.

Hermione scrutinized each stem and the message Severus sent to her personally: Fickleness, treachery, disappointed expectation, animosity, and farewell.

She wondered if Severus knew or somehow found out about her regretful encounter with Neville, but she and Neville were the only two people who knew. It was nigh on impossible for Severus to know, especially on the other side of the world.

Glancing at the photo in the magazine once more, Hermione could see just how cozy Severus and his new business partner were, and she felt her heart break into irreparable shards. Collapsing onto the floor, Hermione began to wail. Her hand clutched weakly to her mouth as the tears fell and her cries morphed into a hysterical sob.

Albert burst into Hermione's office, drawn by her bawling, to find the crumpled note still clutched in her hand and the bouquet on her desk.

Seeing the choice of flowers and the state of his apprentice, all Albert could say was, “Oh, dear.”

Albert ran off to fetch Lavender, who waddled as fast as she could, given her rapidly expanding midsection.
Helping her off the floor, Albert guided the shell-shocked witch over to the couch in her office while Lavender ordered tea, and lots of it.

Hermione was inconsolable.

Lavender looked at the note and looked over the bouquet, as she swore under her breath and made plans to personally hex the balls off the bastard. How dare he dump Hermione in such a fashion.

With tea, and the help of a quickly prepared Calming Draught by Albert's hand, Hermione was able to confess that she and Neville had fallen into bed once – and that somehow Severus must have found out about it, given his inclusion of such flowers.

“Maybe this is a bouquet from him saying that he is sorry for his deceitfulness and that he was unfaithful,” Lavender surmised, after seeing the photo of Severus next to the blonde in the article Hermione showed them.

This didn't seem to help at all as Hermione broke into fresh waves of crying and sobbing. The message was clear in the end. It was over.

Noting Albert's calm demeanor, considering that a known Death Eater who had escaped England was in an article and sending a bouquet of flowers to Hermione announcing their break-up, Lavender asked him, “How did you know?”

There was little to explain the highly contextual meaning of that simple question. He knew exactly what his boss meant.

“I began my correspondence with 'Sebastian Delgado' for some time before the end of the war. I also had a correspondence with Severus Snape for many years. Despite charms to hide his true identity, there were things that gave it away. Preferences for certain ingredients and techniques, a turn of the phrase on parchment. Severus may have fooled the Ministry that he and Delgado were not the same person, but not me. I continued to let him believe that I was fooled, out of my respect for a fellow Potions master in need to practice his art, despite politics.”

There was a brief pause before he added, “Besides, I could tell Hermione was heart-sick, and it wasn't her ex-husband that she was mourning for. The timing and everything. I knew. I just didn't think it was my place to pry where it was none of my business.”
Hermione devolved into more sobs, despite the Calming Draught coursing through her veins. It surprised Albert that his draught wasn't as effective as he expected it to be.

Lavender could have waited, but she decided to ask anyway to relieve Hermione of the burden she may have felt out of obligation. “If you don't want to go to Hawaii when your apprenticeship is done and have our Asia Pacific headquarters there, we can always pick another location.”

“No, no!” Hermione shouted bitterly, wanting to show up in Hawaii looking fabulous with her title of Potions Mistress in hand, reminding Severus every day what a mistake it was to dump her so casually and live to regret it. But then again, he was a sarcastic bastard who had hid his heart away so easily for so long, it probably wouldn't matter. Maybe he wouldn't care, since he didn't seem to think much of her feelings to break it off in such a manner. “Yes. I don't know.”

She would need to think about it. It was too soon, but knowing that Lavender wouldn't force her to work in Malu Palekaiko, where she might cross paths with him, eased Hermione's mind. If she wanted to work in a different country and never set her eyes on Severus ever again, she could. She had seen Severus in the Pensieve, which fulfilled the old fortuneteller's prediction she would see him again. There was no prediction that Severus would see her again.

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Esmeralda was over the moon. Despite fearing Stephen would break off their engagement based on a lapse in judgment and a whole lot of alcohol on her part, his note had said, “I think from this bouquet you can surmise where our relationship stands.” She deduced that he was still deeply in love her and that he couldn't wait to be reunited with her, based on the flowers he sent with the note. She was thrilled that the wedding was still on. She would assure Stephen of how she was very sorry to have shagged his best friend, even though secretly she wasn't sorry since the wizard was hung like a centaur and stellar in the sack.

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Changed out of his woolen formal clothes and into some cool cotton shorts and a casual short-sleeved button-front shirt, Severus went to the community center where the beard judging was about to commence. Before he left, he went to his lab and brewed up something to settle his stomach. Ever since being woken up by the earthquake, he hadn't felt quite right, as if there was something amiss. He had discounted the morning's adrenaline rush since that was over and he still felt off.

Walking down the street from his house, he made a mental note to seek out Naomi and ask her if everything went according to plan. Perhaps it was nerves that something had gone wrong, and he was worried. He hadn't seen her and wasn't sure if she had returned yet, but she assured him before she took a Portkey directly to London that she would be back in time for the festival.

Reaching the community center, where the tables were laid out with various items for judging, Severus spotted Naomi who was setting her Hawaiian quilt down for judging just in time. Upon
catching her eye, she gave him a thumbs-up and a nod that indeed everything went well.

For some reason, Severus' stomach didn't seem to feel any better, so he chalked it up to possibly some summer flu that had been running around. Even with his tutoring shut down for the week between Independence Day and the festival, he still must have caught something from one of his adult clients coming into his business. A bit of Pepperup Potion might help him get over whatever was ailing him, after the beard-judging competition.

Stepping up upon the dais, along with Draco and all the other men, including a few who were Muggles, Severus waited as the five judges walked by each man and looked about their faces to see how full they had come in for the one month of growth they were allowed. A wand oath from wizards that they hadn't used magic to make their beards grow unnaturally fast resulted in a few disqualifications. The Muggle men took a diluted sip of Veritaserum in order to truthfully answer that they did not knowingly take any potions or have any charms performed on them.

“Can I stay over at your place tonight?” Draco asked in a sotto voce voice.

“Trouble in paradise?” Severus gently ribbed.

“Let's just say I can't wait for this damned festival to be over so I can go back to having my loving wife who has dinner on the table when I come from work, is reasonable and pleasant, and doesn't go off the rails screaming at me for no reason, harried, crying, bone–tired, and working herself into a fretful state over this festival and her dancing debut as Pele,” Draco growled under his breath.

“I don't have the guest room outfitted, but I do have a hammock on the front porch.”

“I can bring over a bed from one of my guest bedrooms, but let's say I don't think I could stand another night of her breaking into tears over the slightest provocation, then slamming the door in my face when I ask her what's wrong.” The younger wizard let a great sigh of exasperation escape as he waited for the judges to approach him and his mentor.

Severus had no idea that things had been difficult between the two, but it explained why Draco had asked to join him for dinners after work recently.

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Staring at the dusty tome with the cracked leather binding, Hermione didn't even know why she was bothering to study at two in the morning. It's not like she was in a rush to finish her apprenticeship and rush off to Hawaii to join Severus anymore.
Lavender had given her the rest of the day off and Albert insisted she recuperate, but she could do anything other than what she was ordered. As she had done at Hogwarts, when she was stressed or seeking to temporarily forget her troubles, Hermione shoved her nose in a book to escape. She had tried to sleep, but found it was elusive. Not even a nice relaxing cup of herbal tea from Marf could settle her mind. If she was awake, the least she could do is do something productive instead of mope and cry and waste her tears over Severus, who obviously did not care for her any longer, despite the memory he had left her asking her to join him in Malu Palekaiko.

Her mind grasped onto a thread momentarily, hoping this was some sort of mistake and that Severus didn't send her those flowers, or it was some great cosmic mix-up. The only thing she could think of was that her moment of weakness with Neville had cost her happiness with Severus, though in the photo of the magazine, it looked like Severus had wasted no time in finding a new witch to keep him company in bed.

Glancing over at the bed, she could only think of all the times she’d had sex with him and thought back on those moments with bitterness. Maybe that was why she couldn't sleep. Her history with Severus and that bed made it impossible to sleep in without remembering the feel of his body lying next to her as they slept, exhausted after making love, drifting off to sleep in contentment.

And how could he cast her aside so easily? That's what gnawed at Hermione as well. He had been faithful to Dumbledore for all those years and spent decades mourning his wife, whom he wasn't even in love with. For him to cast his own love for her so easily did not seem like the Severus she knew, yet those flowers said it as plainly as if the words had come from his own lips.

There was another potions master booze-up the next night. She had assured Albert she would be all right enough to go – in order to keep pretending that she could easily move beyond this. She needed to be alert for the booze-up tomorrow, so she took a vial of something to help her sleep.

She would show Severus. And how dare he send her fish geranium for disappointed expectation. Wasn't he the one who gave up years ago of ever proving his own innocence? And to throw it back in her face that she had not found some way to clear his name yet? Hermione would show him, if anything to gloat in his face and prove that she was above his petty bitterness, and that she kept her promises.

Waking to another mild aftershock Saturday morning, Severus still didn't feel any better. Something was wrong, almost like the pit of dread he'd felt in his stomach just days before the Death Eater Decree was announced.

As the kettle whistled, Draco ambled into the kitchen, still rubbing at his freshly-shaved face.
Severus had won third prize in the beard competition, while Draco didn't even place. It was a Muggle from Russia who won first prize. Severus decided to keep the beard for a while. He had the good grace not to remind Draco that he was expected to make cassoulet as Severus preferred it, since things were currently strained on the Malfoys' domestic front.

The third place yellow ribbon wasn't the only ribbon Severus had won. He also won first prize for his mango chutney in the mixed-fruit canning competition. And if he was feeling better, he might have placed higher than fourth in the dueling competition.

Draco also walked away with a first-place blue ribbon for his Hawaiian quilt pot holder, Novice Division, surprising Severus as the older wizard did not know his friend had taken up the fiber arts as a hobby. Draco admitted he found it relaxing and was thinking of maybe attempting a quilt within the next year, though that did seem a huge leap from a small potholder.

Tea served, all that Severus could stomach was some unbuttered toast to go with it. Even at the community luau the night before, Severus had little appetite, despite all the wonderful foods that were laid out to enjoy. Draco brought in some oranges to squeeze for fresh juice and a cantaloupe from Severus' kitchen garden.

Severus declined some freshly cut-up melon and forced the toast down.

Even though Draco was looking a bit miserable himself, feeling a bit guilty for spending the night away from Ginny, the distracted quality about Severus did not escape his attention.

“Are you feeling all right? You hardly ate last night, and I know how you enjoy those luaus.” Draco's forehead knit and a small crease marred his brow. He hadn't slept any better last night than his host did, even with bringing a comfortable bed over to sleep in.

“Yeah, probably something going around. I'll be fine.” Severus did the best he could to choke down his tea, hoping to feel a bit better as the day progressed. Maybe it was heartburn, he would brew a quick antacid before they went to watch the hula program.

“Ginny is dancing at noon. I suppose I should be there. This dance has been putting her into a tizzy. And I should be there for support if anything,” Draco admitted reluctantly. “She has been quite the bundle of nerves. Maybe I should have been a bit more understanding to all the pressure she's been under.” Draco looked a bit forlorn. He did promise with his marriage vows to love her through better or worse, and this was a walk in the park compared to the danger and pressures they were under while still living in England.
Severus wasn't about to impart any advice. He would let Draco reach his own conclusions as to how to make amends or patch things up with his wife. He couldn't judge how irrational Ginny had or hadn't been as of late, since he hadn't seen much of her, with her running around with preparations and last-minute late night practice sessions. Draco was known to be a bit dramatic with the hyperbole, but Ginny was known to sport quite the temper at times.

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Even after taking an Invigoration Draught, a Wit-Sharpening Potion, and a Calming Draught in order to keep her wits about her, the alcohol was countering everything those potions were supposed to do. She was finding herself tired and nearly falling asleep while in the middle of a conversation with Braxton and another Potions master's wife on best ways to store dried herbs while still attached to the stem. It was all so fascinating, but her eyes felt so heavy.

It didn't help that Royston was still harassing her about Delgado and asked how her Spanish was coming along, with a soft elbow to the ribs. Hermione nearly turned around and hexed the assaulting body part off, then ran off to the loo for a good cry.

Tipping back some Sobering Solution, she felt it take effect. Hermione held on to Harry's Auror's locket, which had become like a talisman for her, rubbing it with her thumb as a meditative exercise and a way to expend nervous energy when her mind was unsettled. Now clear-headed, she took another dose of Calming Draught and Invigoration Draught so she could at least get through the drinking competition games she felt obligated to participate in, to be chummy with these men who were grating on her abraded nerves. She was finding all company a great burden to bear as of late, male or female. There was a brief moment when Hermione wondered if becoming a drunken misanthrope was part and parcel of becoming a Potions master or mistress, which would explain a lot about Severus, she reasoned.

As she reached for the doorknob, Hermione's hands shook uncontrollably. Her body fighting the potions she had taken, but by force of will, she would make her body obey. Since everything in her life seemed to have fallen out of control, this was the one thing she felt she could control.

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Draco and Severus entered the community center, which had been enlarged inside to accommodate the thousands that had come to watch the dancing, with the hula dedicated to Pele the highlight of the day. Normally the community center accommodated up to 500 persons, but the pavilion was expanded once a year to hold the many that came to see the two days of dance and music.

Currently, the keiki group was dancing. Small children were doing the hula in ti-leaf skirts and hot-pink halter tops, with crowns of flowers in their hair. The band played while the children did a form of hula that was more contemporary, versus the more traditional hula the older students and adults would soon perform. The songs that accompanied the children often included sing-song lyrics in English about girls in grass skirts, eating fish and poi, playing in the waves on the beach and
sunshine. The more serious hula dancing was accompanied by songs only sung in Hawaiian and with great solemnity.

Then some of the youth groups would perform before Ginny and the other adults took the stage at noon.

Around the periphery of the pavilion were booths and tables set up to sell food and crafts. Some food booths were set up where all the proceeds were donated to various charities on the island. One booth Tina and Manny were working at helped fund the Sanctuary-Seekers Fund, a charity that helped those who came to the island seeking sanctuary without any money. Tina had needed the help of that fund herself when she first came to Malu Palekaiko without a single Sickle on her person. Other booths donated all their monies toward Muggle Camp for those children whose parents couldn't afford the week-long program during summer. There were many charities and all were worthy. As much as Severus wanted to try all the different food available, he just couldn't stomach the idea of eating anything, especially if it was fried.

Some of the tables were set up to take orders for the holidays, taking orders for tins of home-baked goods that would be Portkeyed, with sign-ups dated for delivery between Thanksgiving and December 18th. Some sold tins filled with manju, mochi, and other Japanese sweets, while some sold pineapple right-side-up cakes. One table sold rum balls, macadamia nut shortbread, and Russian tea cakes, and another specialized in macadamia nut brittle and pumpkin rugelach. Severus ordered a tin of the brittle for himself for delivery sometime in December. Many of them offered their goods in decorative tins featuring snowmen with sunglasses under swaying palms, little wooden stick arms waving cheerfully. He saw some tins that featured a hula-dancing girl in a ti-leaf shirt, bikini top, lei, and a Santa hat, dancing with her skirt swaying gently to and fro. Those first few weeks they lived in Malu Palekaiko, Severus had wondered why he would see a train of boxes floating by Justina's hotel, on their way to the Portkey office. All the pre-ordered tins of baked holiday goods were the reason.

One Muggle woman was weaving palm frond hats, pointed witch-style and regular Muggle-style, for the tourists, while her husband, a wizard, exchanged coin and helped split the fronds with his wand for his wife. They were doing a brisk business.

Severus and Draco found a spot near the front shortly before Ginny was about to take the stage. Seated and watching the mid-teen girls do a more advanced hula, Draco said quietly aside to Severus, “Rainbow just explained to me why Ginny is so stressed. This is not only a dance performance, but a religious one as well. One misstep, no matter how small, and the whole ceremony will be invalidated. Bad luck and sometimes catastrophes have happened after a ceremonial dance that had has even a small mistake. Ginny's afraid if she messes this up, she'll curse the whole island.”

Draco shook his head and wanted to say more, but the light dimmed as the last of the teenaged hula
dancers left the stage to make way for the main performance.

Severus could certainly understand why Ginny had recently turned into a basket case, by Draco's description. He wouldn't want the welfare of the whole island resting upon his shoulders either.

As the light rose, two lines of hula dancers, all adult women, flanked Ginny on either side as the music began to play. The spotlight shone brightly on Ginny in the center in a voluminous and flowing skirt and fitted top costume in red and orange, the crowd making subtle and soft noises of appreciation of this year's choice to dance as Pele. Ginny stood with her arms raised, her hair charmed to fly upwards in soft undulating waves. With her red mane, it looked like her hair was made of flames. She truly looked like fire made into human form.

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Hermione felt her eyes roll up in her head as she stood in the kitchen, but she grasped the edge of the counter, willing herself not to pass out. Able to stay conscious, she took deep breaths and felt the world right itself once more.

“Are you all right?” Albert said discreetly, noticing his apprentice looking unwell.

“It's nothing. Just been pushing myself a bit lately. Nothing I can't handle,” she assured her mentor and master.

“You've been here long enough.” Albert put a hand on her shoulder, partly to make sure she wouldn't nearly fall over again. “It's just past eleven, so why don't you say your farewells and go home and rest. You don't have to show up until noon tomorrow, so you can sleep in.”

She wanted to say there was little point in that, since she planned on getting up before dawn to study some more, but said nothing.

“Can you Apparate home by yourself all right?” Albert asked.

Nodding her head, she assured Albert she would make it home fine, and would owl him when she got home if he was that worried she was going to splinch herself. Albert said that wasn't necessary and wished her a good night.

Making the rounds, Hermione said farewell and tried to keep up a bright and chipper smile in order to avoid any questions. The Lovely Lavender Puffy Poof Eye Creme and the Circle of Darkness
Begone Miracle Eye Make-up did wonders to hide the tired look about her eyes that night.

Apparating to Le Soleil Levant Mews, Hermione began walking toward the Red Ginseng, eager to take another dose of Invigoration Draught and Wit-Sharpening Potion once she got home. Grasping the Auror's pendant that hung from her neck, her thumb rubbing at it again, her mind was muddled so she didn't hear the footsteps behind her.

“I was wondering how soon it would be before I saw you again,” a voice called out into the night, echoing off the stone and brickwork walls.

Before she reached the threshold of the newly-rebuilt atrium of the Red Ginseng, she stopped and turned around. There was something familiar about that voice, but she couldn't place it.

Looking into the mist that had settled into the narrow turns and nooks of Diagon Alley and its many side streets, a cloaked figure emerged.

“Albert?” 'No, that's not it. That's the name of my Potions master. God, I can't think. I need more potion.' “Alan?”

“I was wondering if you were going to call me something else, but you finally got it.” Alan sauntered towards Hermione at a leisurely pace.

Ginny was magnificent. Severus looked over at Draco's face and saw that it beamed brightly, smiling as the blond watched his wife dance upon the stage. Though Severus was no expert in hula, it seemed to him that there were no mistakes, though if there were, he wouldn't know.

As she moved her hands, hips, and feet following a specific pattern of steps as required with precision of movement and timing, the audience held its breath. Faster and faster she danced, the chorus of dancers moving alongside Ginny in her dance symbolizing Pele's journey and the birth of the Hawaiian Islands.

When the rhythm of drum, percussion, and the chorus of voices ended, Ginny struck her final pose. The ceremony was complete. Severus hoped Pele was pleased.

The crowd erupted in a roar of applause, standing and clapping. Draco and Severus rose and clapped as well, both hopeful that Ginny would be able to relax now that the most stressful part
was over. Severus ignored his grumbling stomach.

Before Ginny could step off the dais and take a bow, she collapsed in a heap upon the stage.

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Hermione couldn't believe this berk from the Three Broomsticks was still bothering her, and at this time of night stalking about in front of her flat. She was feeling as if she had hit her own personal nadir: unceremoniously dumped by Severus, overworked, exhausted, still feeling guilty about shagging Neville, and now Alan pestering her yet again.

“I'm really tired, Alan, and I really want to go home and rest. I wish you would get the hint I'm not interested in you that way,” Hermione said, her hand still holding the locket, more out of her growing suspicion that something wasn't right than out of habit.

“Once I'm done, you can rest all you want,” he assured her right before the stunning spell hit her and Hermione went down, face first onto the damp and grimy cobblestones.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yes, I looked it up. England has no national dress. One of the few that doesn't.

Thank you to my hard working betas, JuneW and Hope.

Keiki is Hawaiian for “children” and is often used to refer to small children.

B/N: Hula dancers often wear a skirt made of green ti leaves, which large and paddle-shaped. Once sewn together as a skirt, the leaves can be shredded finely so that the skirt looks like long grass, but there is no such thing as a grass skirt. ~ JuneW
Chapter Summary

Summary: Truths and motives are finally revealed. Hermione and Severus revisit an old nightmare.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Eighty-Nine
“Terra Incognita” (Unknown Land)

Disclaimer: As Dory from “Finding Nemo” might say, “Just keep disclaiming, just keep disclaiming...” JK Rowling owns Harry Potter and all its little bits. I merely play with the toys she created. OWWW! I just stepped on a tiny elder wand and mini-Voldemort. Worse than stepping on Legos. *Grumble*

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It was the painful throbbing in her face that woke Hermione up. Falling face-first onto the hard and unforgiving stone, Hermione had broken her nose.

Alan had done nothing to stem the blood trickling down her face and onto her clothes. Her cloak had already been removed while she was unconscious. She could have used her wand to fix her nose and remove the blood staining her blouse and skirt, but Alan was twirling her wand in his hand as a form of amusement until she regained consciousness. Hermione would have retrieved it back from him if he didn't have her restrained upright against a post with a binding spell, just like the one she and Severus used during the research and development of the potion, Irresistible.

Hermione was trying to think, which was hard to do considering she was going through withdrawal symptoms of the Invigoration Draught and Wit-Sharpening Potion. She suddenly remembered about the Auror's pendant around her neck, but her hands were bound and she could not hold it to call to Harry.

Thinking back, she wasn't sure if she had called for Harry before the spell hit her or not, but panic and fright she definitely felt while she was holding it. Maybe it was enough to bring Harry, but she wasn't sure. But if it did work, why wasn't Harry there already saving her from this creep? Now she
wished Harry had given her one of the upgraded pendants that didn't require one to hold on it to call for help.

“You know, it was sheer luck you got into the lift shortly after I set Dolohov in the correct frame of mind. A few of the right words were all that were needed to help him rediscover his higher purpose in life. It was a pity he didn't snap until after you left,” Alan said casually as if recalling something of little consequence. “I was disappointed at the time he didn't take care of the witch responsible for my godmother's traumatic experience in the Forbidden Forest, but this makes up for it. I've been hoping for years for this opportunity.”

Having trouble thinking clearly, Hermione felt a sudden burst of adrenaline, keenly aware she was not only the hostage of a stalker, but someone with a much darker, vengeful purpose. Grasping on to the implications of his statement, her stomach felt as if it had dropped out from under her. Alan was the one who had set Dolohov on the start of his killing rampage that resulted in the death of Marge, her co-worker.

“Some of the other Death Eaters who were living in back alleys were easy to grid of. Most had already sold off their wands by the time I pretended to befriend them. Some would have hexed themselves into oblivion long before I found them. Pretending to be some compassionate soul, bringing them a little food and a blanket before eventually offering them sweet and painless release...” Alan's eyes drifted towards the ceiling before he closed them, smiling serenely as he recalled the memory with fondness. “The exquisite look of torture on their faces, the long slow process, along with immediate paralysis of their vocal cords and legs, made it much easier to watch without people coming to the aid of a screaming witch or wizard, or having to follow them. Sometimes I would just pull up an old crate and watch. Better than that play we both saw the night we first met, wouldn't you say?”

Hermione recalled the play, 'Merlin and Morgana: The Lost Years’, and first seeing Alan across the bar that night and regretting flirting with him, though by his implied remarks it now seemed he had set his sights on her a long time ago.

“What are you? Some Death Eater, killing those you feel have failed Voldemort? Is this what this is?” she asked, trying to keep him talking, having missed his earlier remark about his godmother. Psychotics loved to ramble on about grand plans stereotypically, by the way Harry told of his times he’d faced off with Voldemort. She just hoped she could continue to keep up the banter long enough for Harry to find her, if she had indeed called for Harry in time. The pendant was still hanging around her neck, made to look like some mediocre family heirloom and nothing more, and fortunately Alan hadn't removed it.

In her mind, she called to Harry, screaming his name repeatedly, but she wondered if she had to hold it to be effective as Harry instructed, or would merely wearing the locket suffice. The fact Harry didn't show up automatically made her hopes of surviving this lunatic dim substantially.
“Me? A Death Eater? As if,” Alan scoffed, but quickly added, “Not that I wasn't sympathetic to the cause. No, I am merely just a humble wizard helping to set the wizarding world back to rights after that awful war which was lost. Before You-Know-Who came long, it wasn't politically incorrect to use the term 'Mudblood,' but his unpopularity within some circles in the Ministry made it a term that was no longer appropriate to use in public, lest one be accused of being a sympathizer to him. Now we had to keep our 'prejudices,' as accurate and truthful as they may be, to ourselves.” He used his fingers gesturing air quotes to add to the sarcasm over the use of that specific term.

Hermione had to keep him talking longer. Any extra minute was a minute extra of hope she had. “So what purpose does killing Death Eaters serve, if you were sympathetic to their cause and shared their attitudes and opinions?”

“You silly Mudbloods don't seem to get that point, but given you're not as good at the rest of us and not really part of our culture, you wouldn't understand. Your disgusting divorce from Ron Weasley and that filth you said in that Quibbler interview merely showed how you do not belong, and your ideas are polluting my culture. So I'll use small words for your Muggle-tainted brain to grasp.”

Hermione would have had harsh words to lash out against his attitude, but given he had killed Death Eaters with no qualms, killing a Muggle-born like herself would mean even less to him. She had to keep her head level and hopefully remaining upon her shoulders.

Alan began slowly pacing back and forth in front of where he had Hermione bound up against the stout post. “See, having Death Eaters around, even in lowly jobs in the Ministry or living like rats in back alleys, is a constant reminder of the war. With those reminders constantly around, we could not move on and go back to the way things used to be; a gentler and more wholesome past without such crude and Muggle things tainting our society, and certainly not that horrid Muggle Alliance Network. With the Death Eaters gone, people would forget why we had the war that much sooner and we could go back to the way it is supposed to be.”

He paused to look at Hermione coolly, his nose held high in the air, jaw set with determination. “The Ministry's recent campaign –Mudbloods shouldn't be excluded from participating fully in our society and should be welcomed with open arms – was just a misguided idea.”

“Is that why you were so surprised that I got an apprenticeship?” Hermione asked, remembering the look of shock on his face when he guessed by accident she had one.

“I was shocked because my Aunt Calpurnia had made arrangements with most of the masters and mistresses throughout nearly all disciplines to refuse you an apprenticeship,” he said with relish.
Hermione gasped in shock. She had no idea she had been singled out by the Minister of Magic's wife to be refused an apprenticeship, knowing only one witch with that much power with that particular first name.

“Shocked, are we? Well, you should have thought of what you did before you set the Centaurs on my godmother,” he added, his face turning into a menacing scowl.

’Centaurs. Umbridge. Alan is Umbridge's godson and Calpurnia Fudge is his aunt.’ Hermione clearly remembered drawing Umbridge into the Forbidden Forest and letting the Centaurs carry her away, not caring if the sadistic bureaucratic toady died or not. Unfortunately, she lived.

“You seemed pretty shocked that I still wound up getting an apprenticeship,” she threw back. It may not have been the wisest thing to say, being confrontational with her captor, but her mind was not as sharp as it should have been, since she'd become addicted to potions which kept her working and studying longer than was prudent.

“Yes, but given that Severus Snape was Lavender Brown's...” Alan paused and made with a fake apologetic face as if his faux pas was not on purpose. “Oh, I'm sorry, Lavender Weasley's Potions master, and I did see you come and go rather frequently from that Death Eater's flat over the months. I even saw you go in that night after you left the Grand Royal Supper Club. I can only assume that you and Snape had some sort of arrangement where he got you an apprenticeship, and you got him... a Portkey to escape Great Britain, or maybe regulated Potions ingredients? Why else would a Death Eater bother to fraternize with a Mudblood like you.”

Hermione could tell that he was fishing for information. This was the reason he hadn't killed her yet.

“Severus Snape wasn't Lavender's Potions master. Sebastian Delgado was,” she corrected him.

A barking laugh of disbelief came from Alan and echoed off the stone walls. “Right, keep trying to lie to me. I had Snape for Potions. The bastard made it so I couldn't get a passing grade high enough on my OWLs. I could have gone on to be a great Auror, if it wasn't for him. I'd recognize that dungeon-dwelling git anywhere, even if he did greet all the witches he fucked for money with a mask on, and he skulked off to work through back alleys in the morning.”

Hermione now knew Alan had been stalking not just her, but Severus as well. And probably Draco, and...
“You killed Blaise Zabini.” She didn't have to ask, she knew.

“Yes, you seemed quite taken with my handiwork, watching your reaction that night. Unfortunately, it was not quite as inspired as when I took care of Pansy Parkinson. That was a true masterpiece of genius, if I say so myself,” he admitted smugly in self-adoration.

Recalling the image of Blaise Zabini suspended by his peeled skin, his organs heaped in a pile under his body, the prisoner vomited violently, the alcohol and nibbles served at the Potions master booze-up coming right back up.

Hermione knew that if someone didn't come and save her soon, she was surely going to die that night.

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Draco and Severus rushed up upon the stage. All hostility Draco felt towards his wife as of late instantly disappeared, replaced with nothing but concern and sheer terror something was wrong with her.

Before they could reach her, Rainbow was already up on the stage, crouching over Ginny. Addressing the concerned murmurs of the crowd, she announced with great calm, “Probably low blood sugar or a little dehydration.” Turning to Draco and Severus as they rushed upon the stage, she said, “Meet me at the clinic.”

Rainbow activated the Portkey for herself and Ginny. The two of them were pulled away, disappearing from the stage as Draco reached the spot where his wife had collapsed.

Drawing their wands, Draco and Severus Apparated to the clinic.

Arriving in front of the clinic's doors, they rushed in and were directed by the Healer's assistant at the front desk to go to one of the emergency treatment rooms towards the back. They passed by one wizard who'd had part of his arm Transfigured into a giant bird's head and kept pecking at the Healer who was trying to help the patient.

“In here,” Rainbow called out as she heard the thunder of their footsteps down the hallway.
Ginny was on her back on an examining table, while already regaining consciousness. Draco went directly over to his wife and held her hand, panic and worry etched upon his face. Rainbow worked around Draco, and continued to wave her wand over and about Ginny trying to discover why she had collapsed.

“And this is why I didn't want you to push yourself. You shouldn't have taken this role. You should have declined.” Draco stroked her face, shoving a strand out of her eyes in a gesture of tender affection.

Severus felt he should leave them alone, but he wanted to find out what was wrong with Ginny before letting the couple alone with their reunion.

“If I didn't push myself, it would have been a risk to the safety of the island,” Ginny protested, before she rolled over to one side and vomited into a bucket Rainbow conjured just in time.

The sight and sound of Ginny in the act was testing Severus' own resolve not to vomit. He was feeling progressively unwell as the day went on, but was feeling far worse now.

“What's wrong?” Draco asked Rainbow as she helped Ginny lay back on the examining table, her wand still moving about Ginny's form after she spelled the bucket away.

“Well, her blood sugar is a little low, but she's perfectly fine. Though I do recommend you take it easy,” Rainbow advised.

“I'll take it easy once this festival is over.” Ginny made to get back up, but Rainbow gently pushed her back down, indicating she wasn't done.

“I recommend you start taking it easy from this moment forward. When was your last cycle?”

Ginny blinked and thought for a second. “About five weeks, but I'm not due for another week or so. I've been quite irregular since going off potions since the wedding.

Rainbow smiled. “Well, you won't be having a cycle for a while.”
Draco looked between Rainbow and Ginny, missing the immediate implication of the statement, since he didn't care to be informed about the finer details about menstrual cycles. Understanding dawned upon his face as he slowly said, “You mean–,” halting before finishing his question.

Rainbow smiled, and patted Draco on the shoulder. “Congratulations.”

Draco and Ginny embraced, both breaking into tears. This was what they had been trying for since they married, Ginny going off contraceptive potions the day they married. Now they would have a child and thus be eternally bound through the magic of their children together.

Severus came over to congratulate the pair, despite the growing discomfort in his chest and abdomen. He began to offer his congratulations to the expecting couple, but a shooting pain through his stomach made him immediately double over, his vision going slightly gray before returning.

“Severus?” Draco said with some alarm, and helped his friend over to another examining table in the adjoining bay.

Rainbow ordered Ginny to stay put while she went to take care of Severus.

“Describe what you are feeling?” Rainbow ordered.

“It's nothing. Probably some flu or something going around,” Severus assured her, dismissing that it was anything, despite how he'd lost his footing and nearly passed out.

Rainbow's wand passed over Severus and her brow began crinkle, her mouth set in a grim line. “It's not flu or a cold, magical or Muggle.” Waving her wand back and forth, she cast a few charms, looking even more perplexed. “Not poisoning, not allergic reaction, no diseases I can detect...” She shook her head back and forth, thoroughly confused. “When did this start?”

Severus answered that he woke up feeling unwell the day before.

Rainbow summoned Lambert, the other Healer on staff who had just finished with the patient down the hall. She consulted with him in hushed tones to the side. The other Healer, a wizard who worked full-time at the clinic, came over and waved his own wand back and forth over Severus, the glow hovering over his trunk never wavering in color or intensity.
“Can you tell me, have you had any changes in diet as of late? Changes in routine?” asked Lambert, hoping for some clue.

“I’m not tutoring any students this week, but other than that, no. No changes at all.” Severus felt like the two Healers were hovering over him were making a great bother over nothing. It reminded him of his trips to the infirmary at Hogwarts and Poppy fussing over him when he was a spy, recalling a far less joyful time in his life.

“Have you taken possession of any new objects this week? Perhaps something you bought or was given to you was cursed?” the senior Healer asked.

Naomi did indicate non-verbally she had somehow procured or found the Malfoy family silverware, but he had not taken possession of it yet. “No,” he shook his head. “Nothing new or old, bought or received.” He wanted to keep the Malfoys' anniversary present a surprise, as Draco and Ginny were in the room watching him. Besides, Naomi was just fine, and she was the one who technically bought it and was still in possession of the silver, should there be any curses still malingering about the set.

Just then he felt a wave of nausea pass through him, and he vomited all over himself.

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“If you kill me, then you'll be the first suspect. You got off from Pansy Parkinson's murder. And anything beyond a simple Killing Curse will indicate your handiwork. You might have gotten a free pass for killing Death Eaters, but killing Harry Potter's best friend will certainly put you in his cross hairs. He's an Auror. And Kingsley Shacklebolt and Alastor Moody would certainly zero in on you should Muggle-borns start being murdered once again, since you've acquired a taste for spectacularly gruesome tableaus. You wouldn't be given a free pass this time, as you did in Parkinson's murder. How did you get off for her murder? Bribes?” Hermione asked as vomit and spittle hung from her lower lip, as she kept trying to keep him engaged and talking longer.

She avoided breathing through her nose, to reduce the likelihood she would vomit again because of the smell of it wafting up as she vomited all down her front.

“Being the nephew of the Minister of Magic helps,” Alan confessed. “Also, Dolores Umbridge still being an influential member of the Wizengamot helps too. Having blackmail material on the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot is my ace in the hole.”

“Rancelette? What do you have on him?” If the head of the wizarding council where Justice was
concerned was being blackmailed, who knows what other important matters have been twisted for Calpurnia Fudge and Dolores Umbridge's designs?

“You'd have to ask Blaise Zabini. Oh, that's right, you can't. But forcing Blaise to give up some of those memories of him being... ahem, intimate with Rancelette with the false promise I'd let him live was foolish of him. Oh, well. Too bad for him. Good for me,” he said in the same way Voldemort would talk about killing people with the same sort of detached calm.

Hermione felt a violent shudder steal through her. It could have been caused by her potions withdrawal getting worse, or revulsion over the cold-heartedness of her potential murderer and what he was capable of that frightened her.

“But how could you possibly get away with my murder, if you'd be the chief suspect?” she asked once more, continuing with her stalling tactics.

“I can just easily claim to have solved how a Death Eater escaped. The best speculative scenario would be you provided potion ingredients for Snape's escape through your work in the Department of Standards & Regulations. The timing of the events work in my favor. I have no idea if you did or not give him ingredients, but it makes for a convenient and believable story. And in the process of being a concerned citizen trying to help find out how two Death Eaters – that's right, I know about Draco Malfoy leaving as well – you were accidentally killed when your own curse was reflected off of a mirror, doing anything you could to protect your secret. A Mudblood, friend of Harry Potter, helped a Death Eater escape for her Potions apprenticeship. Maybe I could embellish it and say you were possibly even in love with him.”

Hermione pulled herself together as best as she could and started to laugh with disdain. “What mirror? And you really think anyone would buy that story? Really? You obviously haven't thought this through.”

“No?” Alan cast a quick spell and Hermione heard the crashing of glass behind her. “That mirror I placed there ahead of time. And as for you and Snape, why are you blushing?” Alan surmised, not fooled by her acting.

Leisurely walking around her as a sculptor would survey a block of marble before beginning their next masterpiece, he studied her. With casual indifference, he lazily drawled, “I wonder if Snape did steal your heart and it's gone.”

With a sudden ferocity, Alan cast a slicing hex that cut across Hermione's chest. She felt the fresh flow of blood begin seeping down her blouse, her flesh stinging brightly as if seared with a white-
hot iron. Suddenly, she felt as if she could barely breathe, despite her laborious attempt to scream.

Lambert and Rainbow were at a loss. They continued to check Severus over for any possible source of his illness. When he suddenly grabbed at his chest, they wondered if it was a heart attack, but a quick check assured them it was not.

The pain cut through him, reminding him of the feeling he had when Lucius hit him with the slicing hex that punctured his lung, which had sent him to the infirmary at Hogwarts for a while. Though not as sharp or as intense, it was similar and in a completely different spot that where his old scar remained. He gasped at the surprise of the pain that seemed to come from nowhere with no identifiable or discernible cause.

Shortly after it began, it stopped entirely. The pain began to fade away, and he was feeling quite sleepy.

As Severus began to drift off, Draco was asking frantically, “What's wrong with him? Why can’t you people do anything?”

Immediately after the slicing hex hit Hermione, a bright blue spell that seemed to originate out of thin air stunned Alan; he was out cold.

Harry removed his Invisibility Cloak and ran over to Hermione and released her from her bonds. As she slumped into his arms, Kingsley appeared, having been hidden by a Disillusionment Charm, and cast Alan with a binding spell that would prevent escape.

Pulling out a potion from a pouch that hung from his belt, Harry tipped it up to Hermione's lips. She was barely conscious enough to drink it down before she slipped into darkness.

Harry did his best to heal the slicing hex temporarily, then cast a *Mobilicorpus* spell to lift Hermione's body from the dank floor. He pulled out a Portkey that would transport them both to St. Mungo's.

“I have him. And this time we have his confession,” Kingsley said to Harry with a nod before the young Auror and Hermione disappeared.

“How long was I out?” Severus asked, his voice a rasp, his throat raw from the acid of the vomit he
had yet to rinse from his mouth. Fortunately, Rainbow knew the spells to get vomit out of hair and clothes to Severus' benefit.

“Just a few minutes,” Rainbow said, her wand waving in front of his eyes, checking for dilation and movement. “Follow the tip of my wand, please.”

Severus did as he was told without protest, for once.

Lambert had a few books out. He was flipping through them, trying to discover the cause based on the symptoms and length of Severus' ailments.

“Have you been experimenting on any new potions? Any new research? Any new ingredients? Any change in ingredients you've handled recently, such as a new source or variety?” Lambert asked, throwing out questions as fast as he could ask them, Severus answering in the negative to each.

Nothing had changed, nothing was different. It was a rather ordinary week of no consequence other than the festival. Even then, Severus had eaten the same food as everyone else at the luau the night before, and he had yet to eat any of the food being sold at the festival that day.

The Healers were stumped. By the time Severus was feeling well enough to sit up, Ginny had been discharged after being given something to help stabilize her blood sugar, and candied ginger to nibble on to ease her nausea.

“I recommend you go home and rest,” Rainbow said with the same authoritative tone Poppy used on him over the years. “If you're feeling better, you can go to the festival tomorrow, as long as you sit as much as possible. But something is wrong, and we right now have nothing to go on. Take it easy.” Turning to Ginny, she added, “That goes for both of you.”

Severus finally got up off the table.

Draco approached him and asked, “Are you well enough for me to Side-Along Apparate you?”

“No Apparating for you, witchy-poo,” Rainbow reminded Ginny with a waggle of her finger. “Not until after the baby’s born.”
Ginny turned to Draco and said, “I'll meet you back at the festival by the papusa stand after you're done getting Severus home.”

Draco nodded and gave his wife a brief kiss and a smile, placing his hand upon her abdomen with a gentle possessiveness. “See you soon.”

‘God, I really would have liked to have tried those papusas,’ Severus mused to himself as Draco wrapped an arm around him for support and the two Disapparated.

The trip was too much. When they landed, Severus fell to his knees and suffered a brief bout of the dry heaves, the brief trip too much for his system to tolerate.

Draco was glad there was nothing for him to clean up. If Ginny was going to suffer from morning sickness, who knew how much vomit he'd be spelling away for who knew how many months to come. He had no idea how long the phase lasted, but he was going to learn soon enough first-hand.

Picking Severus up off the floor once the convulsions stopped, he guided his friend over to the bed. He helped him undress and slip into some pyjama bottoms before tucking him in.

“Do you want a book? At least keep one by the bedside table, should you feel like reading?” Draco offered.

He was doing his best to take care of his mentor, given until eight months prior, he had never had to take care of anyone before. Now he felt it was time to step up and take care of those around him now. First and foremost, with his wife, and now with his friend.

Severus felt weak. He knew was perfectly capable of Summoning his own books from his library, as he had done from his bed many times, but he didn't trust his own magic at that moment. Something was wrong. He knew it now, no longer dismissing it as heartburn or a cold.

“Yes, Draco. I need *A Potions Master's Guide to Tropical Diseases*, located on the second bookshelf to the right of the door, on a shelf somewhere around the middle.”

Though Lambert and Rainbow were very competent Healers, it would soothe his own mind to do
his own research and see if there was something they had missed in their diagnosis being inconclusive.

By the time Draco had returned from the library, Severus had drifted off to sleep.

“Ginny and I will check on you later tonight after the festival,” he told the sleeping wizard. Draco wasn’t even sure if Severus heard him or not, as he said it more for himself.

Draco wished at this point that Hermione had come with them to Malu Palekaiko. He had wished it way back in February, after watching Severus mope about missing her. He just hoped Lavender was moving forward with his idea to open an Asia-Pacific regional headquarters for The Lovely Lavender Company. Not only would it be his chance to get back to doing work he enjoyed more, but now it had become more important to reunite Severus and Hermione together again.

Draco had his happily ever after with Ginny; it was time for Severus to have his own.

Hermione found herself in a long, flowing dark robe in the midst of a vast Stygian forest at night. She knew she was someplace else before, but she couldn’t recall where. She was currently surrounded by trees which stood like silent sentinels of the starless night. The treetops blended in with the expanse of the universe above.

Wand in hand, she cast a spell to light her way as she began her trek towards her destination. Why she was going there or where it was, she couldn’t exactly recall. Her mind was shrouded like the mist that hung about the forest floor, partially concealing her path and her purpose.

She had a long way to go before she could rest.

There was a general idea of where she had to go, but the reason why she was going there was not in the forefront of her mind. Dreams never really ever made sense, as while in them one usually took them at face value as the normative, though in this dream she felt more self-aware than ever before.

Walking all night, she never tired. The sky should have begun to lighten with the coming of the dawn, but no sun rose; it remained dark. Onward she trekked for what seemed like miles, yet knowing she would eventually arrive. Where was she going to arrive? She would know when she got there.
Severus was being dragged along the rough and muddy ground. It must have rained recently, and his captors didn’t seem to care that twigs, rocks, and sand abraded against him, scratching his hands and wrists which were bound behind his back, slowly shredding his black woolen trousers and coat.

How he was captured he could not exactly recall. He only knew in his current situation things were not looking so good. There were voices muffled, as the heavy bag over his head dampened the sound, which was further reduced by the wetness of the bag’s fabric. There were some derisive chuckles he knew were in reference to him, given that he was their prisoner.

“Throw him in the middle,” a familiar gruff voice called out.

Whoever was casting the lazy *Mobilicorpus*, with the intent to drag him on the ground, put the effort into it and flicked their wand. The spell caused Severus to fly up through the air and land on the chilly sodden ground with a thud on his side. He most probably cracked a rib or two in the process, when he landed on a jagged rock poking up through the flattened grassy clearing.

As disjointed as this dream was, Severus’ spy instincts kicked in. He remained silent in hopes of listening in further to discover who his captors were and their plans. He waited.

Severus knew better than to speak up in this type of situation, as that usually resulted in a boot to the head or, most probably, to his already cracked ribs.

Through the bag’s fabric, he could see no light, thus surmising it must be night. With it being night, there was only a slight chill in the air, indicating it was not winter or autumn. And the lack of snow meant that it was probably not spring either. Summer, it was summertime.

The smell of the grass and nearby flowers and trees that seeped through the damp hood, perfuming the night air with their fragrance released from the recent rains, told Severus he was somewhere in England. He knew these smells.

This was not odd, as Severus had often dreamt he was back in England, often forgetting his dream
come morning; however, he would not forget tonight's dream.

Hermione came upon the clearing, at the end of what seemed like an endless journey through the forest. This was where she was summoned to go; something or someone drew her here.

Dozens of witches and wizards in long, flowing dark robes, exactly like the one Hermione was wearing, stood in a semi-circle. Her mind instantly recognized this for what it was – it was a Dark Revel, though no one wore masks. Hermione was not a Death Eater, yet she was dressed as one.

She recognized each and every face of those standing in the semi-circle. Moody, Cornelius Fudge, many of the Aurors Harry worked with, members of the Wizengamot, Ministry officials, Rita Skeeter, the Editor-in-Chief of the Daily Prophet, even Ron. What they all had in common, standing there together, she couldn't fathom, not understanding why she was brought before them as if to stand in judgment.

Alan stepped forward from the circle and Hermione began to breathe heavily. She knew she should be afraid of him and that he was dangerous, but exactly why, she could not recall immediately. She longed for an Invigoration Draught and a dose of Wit-Sharpening Potion, suddenly feeling tired and her mind cloudier.

Sauntering over towards the center of the circle, Alan asked, “Does this belong to you?” With a flick of his wand, the bag placed over the prisoner's head disappeared.

Hermione didn't even know there was anyone in the middle of the circle, as the person was caked in mud and blended in, looking more like a mound of dirt than a human being.

She recognized the wizard immediately. “Severus,” she breathed in shock.

He was on the ground, muddied, on his side, his hand and feet bound, his hair wet and plastered against his face as he lay there, a few hanks tangled against his beard.
Sweeter to Severus than the cool air entering his lungs, no longer stifled by the damp bag over his head that was finally gone, was the sight of Hermione. God, how he missed her and she was there. But there was a foreboding growing in the pit of his stomach. There was something very familiar about where they were.

Hermione looked down at Severus, and he looked back up to her with a growing look of dread upon his face. He had to face her now, after he let her go in his memory he’d left for her. Was that a look of odium she cast down at him, that she was going to abandon him there and leave him to the mercies of his captors? There was a coldness in Hermione's eyes Severus had never seen before.

He finally recognized where he was. Hermione was looking at Severus with the same simmering loathing he'd cast upon his wife that fateful night. The night he summoned all his hatred for every grievance against her and his situation in life before he cast the Killing Curse. It was his turn to die, as he should have that night.

With resignation, Severus laid his head back down in the mud, waiting for the course of events to unfold as he had dreamt them many times before. This time, he was the one bound, lying in the mud about to meet his death.

“Well?” Alan prompted Hermione. "Does this belong to you?"

“Belong? Hardly.”

It struck at Severus' heart, having the same words he said that night spoken in regards to him now. And he recognized the wizard speaking to her as Pansy Parkinson's murderer. The wizard had the same smug grin upon his face as he'd worn during the murder trial.

“Then it shouldn't bother you then to dispatch this Death Eater,” Alan addressed Hermione before turning to speak to the rest of those gathered 'round. “His presence in this world is a reminder of the war. Of your pain, of all your hopes dashed, of all your friends dead, chances lost, regret filling your soul of that which you wish you could have done to save the ones you loved. Kill him, and the world will be set to rights.”
Hermione hated Severus for how he'd cast her aside. She thought he would have missed her, but it seemed he had happily moved on with his own life. And now he was there for her to have her revenge for the pain he caused her.

Severus' dream was departing dramatically from the one he knew. It seemed that there was a prior conversation between Hermione and Pansy Parkinson's killer which Severus was not privy to, but the message was clear: this murderer wanted Hermione to kill Severus.

Sensing her hesitation, Moody asked her, “So you feel some sort of affection for him?” It was the same question Moody asked Hermione when questioned about Dolohov the day after he went on his killing spree.

Standing straight up, she sneered, “Not anymore.”

“Then kill him,” Moody ordered. “What difference does it make if there is one less Death Eater in the world? And this one will be so easily forgotten, just like the rest.”

Hermione understood the implications of his statement. The Daily Prophet had reported a string of deaths over the years, but their coverage was masked in code words and understated phrases not meant to alarm the public. They were written up as passings due to old age or accidents. What wizard died of old age at the age of thirty-five? Or as Blaise's murder was reported, a most unfortunate accident in the atrium of his block of flats. Even Pansy Parkinson's murder trial was skewed and biased tripe with Alan's name withheld when reported in the paper. Severus' death would probably be written up and put in a tiny box under an advertisement for hemorrhoid cream on sale at the local apothecary, or some other such ignoble editing choices.

Walking towards Severus, a fierce glint in her eye and a curl upon her lip, Hermione raised her wand.

Severus closed his eyes and hoped it would be quick.

Had it been Macnair or even Dolohov, Hermione would have done it. But this was Severus. He was no Death Eater, any more than she was a Death Eater for wearing the robes currently on her back. She had meant to clear his name and had not, but Severus was innocent on those counts he was falsely accused of. Severus did not let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts; he did not kill Albus Dumbledore. Severus may have broken her heart, but Hermione was not going to kill him.
Sparks flew out of Hermione's wand and she laid Alan out on his back, gasping for breath and twitching in the mud.

A quick spell, and the bounds around Severus' wrists and ankles were gone.

Grabbing him by the collar of his jacket, Hermione helped haul him up, yelling at him to find his legs and run.

Severus couldn't believe it. She had saved him. Despite her obvious hatred of him, she had saved him. He ran towards the trees, making for somewhere other than the clearing he was trying to escape from. Hermione was right behind him, casting spell after spell, while deflecting ones directed towards her and Severus.
Running blindly, with not even the stars to light their path, Severus ran, and Hermione kept right behind him.

Had he a wand of his own to light the way, Severus would have not tripped over the root growing up through the forest floor as he ran pell-mell, and landed nose first into a tree.

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“What is wrong with her? Why won't she wake up?” Harry asked the Healer, as Ron paced at the foot of Hermione's bed.

Lavender was in a chair, trying to keep her fingers out of her mouth and not ruin her manicure. It was too late, she had already bitten off all ten nails while fretting over Hermione for the past couple days.

Zhubanysh stroked Hermione's face as she sat next to her bed. She had spent many hours there
singing to Hermione, trying to bring her back the same way she once sang to her husband when he was brought to her yurt that fateful December day, unconscious and broken, physically and emotionally.

“We don't know, Mr. Potter,” Healer Maxelbine said with a shake of his head. “We healed that hex up very quickly, before her lungs filled with blood, thanks to your quick work. Her nose is fixed, and Potions Master Dobmeir already treated her for her withdrawal symptoms for the Invigoration Draught and Wit-Sharpening Potion.”

Albert had recognized some of the symptoms of Hermione's dependence upon the potions, since he had used them a bit too much a few times throughout his own life. A potion to counter the withdrawal symptoms would speed the healing process, but it wasn't the withdrawal which was keeping Hermione in a prolonged state of slumber. It was something that perplexed even the staff at St. Mungo's.

“There is nothing we can do at this time other than monitor her. We'll be back in an hour to check her again. I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, but we're doing all that we can.”

The Healer left the room and closed the door.

Hermione stirred a little, but she had been doing that off and on over the past few days.

Walking over to Harry, Ron asked, “You don't think this was some dark magic he used in that hex to—” His questions was cut short by Hermione speaking.

“Severus? Severus?” Hermione never woke, her eyes still closed. She was talking in her sleep. Earlier, she was mumbling, but nothing that could be discerned. There was no mistaking whose name she was calling out this time.

Ron looked from the prone form of his ex-wife, then to Harry with growing confusion knitting his brow. “Why would she be saying that git's name?”

Harry and Lavender exchanged brief glances. Zhubanysh did not know who this Severus was and was about to ask, but stopped when Lavender made some noises as if clearing her throat.

“Harry, if you would lock the door, I would prefer to not have anyone interrupt us for a bit.”
Patting the chair next to her, Lavender bid her husband to sit down.

“Hermione knows Severus Snape, because actually he was my Potions master. Sebastian Delgado was merely his cover name so he could consult for me. He and Hermione worked together for some months, and during that time, I guess you could say, they became...” Lavender paused looking for the right term that would not send Ron into a screaming fit. This was a hospital after all. “Erm, good friends.”

Comprehension slowly dawned on Ron's face. “How good.”

“Very.”

Harry had the good sense to be ready to cast a *Silencio* to mute the scream of “What?” that came from Ron's mouth.

At least during her retelling of events, Lavender never disclosed to Ron about the more unsavory aspects of Hermione and Severus' original arrangement, his “legal” line of work, or her role as madam. She omitted as much about Ginny and Draco as possible, as that was still a very sore subject for Ron.

Zhubanysh felt pity for her sister, as she heard the tale and continued to hum softly, stroking Hermione’s face.

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After casting a spell to cause the branches and roots of the trees at the edge of the forest to become a barrier to slow the pursuit of the others, Hermione turned around to follow Severus, only to find that he no longer was in front of her.

Where had he gone? She was right behind him and there was nothing, no sign of him at all. Even the spell she cast to highlight his footsteps ended at a tree with a large root sticking up from the ground.

Looking about, hoping the others behind them would not hear her, she called out in her loudest voice, screaming into the night, “Severus? SEVERUS!”

Where Hermione was certain where she was going before, now she began wandering aimlessly, unsure of what direction to go.
Severus sat bolt upright in bed, gasping, reaching for his nose, still feeling the phantom sensation of his face slamming up against the trunk.

“Severus!” Ginny rose from the comfortable chair she had brought in from his library in which to keep vigil by his bedside.

Sitting up, he rubbed his face, his mouth dry as parchment. Ginny was there, handing him a glass of water, which he drank slowly, his hand shaking slightly.

Noting the slant of the morning sun coming into his bedroom through the plantation shutters, he recalled he was put to bed in the early afternoon.

“Have I been asleep for nearly twenty-four hours?” he asked, his voice cracking.

Suddenly noticing his bladder was full, Severus got up, feeling that his legs at least were working once again, and hurried off to the loo to relieve himself.

Ginny waited until he came back and sat back down on his bed before correcting him. “You've been asleep for nearly two days, Severus.”

Jumping up in a panic, he shouted, “My shop! The potions!” There were several potions he was working on for commissions that he was supposed to check on Saturday night and Sunday as well. He wondered if they had boiled dry over the weekend and his shop was ruined with smoke.

“Don't worry,” Ginny said. She put a hand on his shoulder urging him to sit down, seeing Severus' eyes become a little unfocused for a moment. “When Draco and I swung by here Saturday night, you were still asleep. Draco took your keys and extinguished the flames on all the potions that he could not finish himself, if you were still unwell. Sunday he finished up a few potions he could easily do himself, when we couldn't wake you yesterday. Today, Draco owled all your clients that their appointments were to be rescheduled at a later date, and told your students that tutoring was canceled. Everything is taken care of at the shop.”

Pulling out a playing card from her pocket, Ginny said, “Oh, I should let Draco and the others know you rose, Sleeping Beauty.” Taking her wand to the card, it set the other ones it was charmed to vibrate and flash, a trick taken from Draco's playing-card charm from Severus' first day in business.
Before Ginny even put her wand back in the loop on the side of her shorts, Rainbow Apparated directly into Severus' bedroom, ignoring the impropriety of such a rude gesture.

“You're awake!” Rainbow exclaimed with astonishment.

“Obviously,” Severus drawled.

Though he tried to play the incident off with nonchalance, it worried him he had been out for two days and with only a dream to recall. Then he remembered the dream, noting he rarely if ever remembered them, but this was fresh and not fading like most dreams did after waking. This was clear and vivid, as if it were a memory formed while he was awake.

Rainbow's wand went about hovering, flicking and swishing about Severus' person. She made a harrumphing grunt, still clueless about the cause of Severus' symptoms and extended sleep from which he could not be roused.

“How do you feel? The nausea? The stabbing pains? The dizziness?” the Healer asked as she held the tip of her wand up to Severus' eyes to check for dilation, which was hard to detect considering his eyes were black.

The unpleasantness he was feeling for the past couple days, the ones in which he was awake, had passed. He wasn't back to one hundred percent, but he was feeling much better. His appetite had even returned.

Severus heard the front door opening downstairs and the familiar sound of Draco's footsteps before he saw his friend come into his bedroom.

“Thank Merlin you're finally awake. Rainbow was about to ask for a Healer from San Francisco or Sydney to come and see what was wrong with you.” Draco went over to sit in the chair Ginny was occupying earlier. “Can you recall anything while you were passed out cold?”

Severus did not wish to share his dream, not with Ginny and Rainbow in the room. “Yes, it was nothing of consequence that made much sense,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand that the matter was to be dropped. As if the words nothing of consequence could ever describe the night he killed his wife, or this new dream version with Hermione present and roles reversed.
Draco knew there was something more, but would not press it until later when they were alone.

“Well, what did you see?” Rainbow prodded. “Dreams can be highly symbolic and give us clues as to why you were not technically sick, but certainly in what Muggles would call a coma.”

Severus evaded the question by saying he was going to have some breakfast, since it still seemed to be morning.

Ginny insisted Severus sit and she would make him breakfast, but when he asked for sausages, eggs, beans, mushrooms, bacon, and buttered toast, she balked and decided she would leave rather than become nauseous by the smells of a proper English breakfast fry-up. Draco set about to cook breakfast while Ginny gave Severus a chaste kiss upon his forehead, saying she was glad he was better, before going back to her home.

Rainbow seemed to be done with her foolish wand-waving and asked Severus to drop by the clinic later that day.

Severus gave her a very ambiguous answer that was his polite way of declining while getting the witch out of his house as soon as quietly possible.

With just the two wizards in the house now, Severus said, “Impending fatherhood and you learned to cook. I'm impressed.”

“I surprise myself sometimes,” Draco admitted dryly. He pulled out the keys to Severus' shop and tossed them back to him. “I think you'll be needing these later when you're well enough to return to work.”

“Thank you for taking care of the potions while I was indisposed.”

“Thank you for not hexing the keys. I had to turn off the Wolfsbane Potion, as that is far above my skill level. I also turned off the latest batch of Sequoia and a few other ones that are noted with acronyms in the ledger, as I couldn't figure out what they were.”

The Wolfsbane Potion could coast for a few days without a flame, not affecting the quality in the
end, but the Sequoia Potion and the other highly secretive and personal ones would have to be scrapped and started from the beginning again. The most he lost was a week on one of the potions, the rest would merely be completed a few days later than promised. He would have to owl his clients and inform them of the delay, and hope they still wanted him to fulfill his commissions.

Once breakfast was done, Severus told Draco to leave the dishes for the elf cleaning service, as he wanted to get back to the shop as soon as possible. Work was the greatest solution to avoid thinking about his dream of Hermione and the cold look in her eyes as she’d stared down at him as he lay in the mud. There was no compassion for him in her eyes. He hoped to never see that look in her eyes in real life ever, should they be reunited.

He knew Draco would question him about his dream, but the younger wizard had the good grace to not press the issue. Severus knew Draco would let him bring it up when he was at least a bit more comfortable to address it.

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Trudging through the forest, Hermione wondered if she could ever find her way out of this endless night, as she wandered aimlessly. She tried to continue her search for Severus, but periodically had trouble remembering why she was looking for him. There were times she felt she was walking in circles, but even with marking the tree with her wand, she never crossed her own trail.

'What purpose is there to continue on. I've lost Severus, twice. Why make the effort?'

Hermione felt like giving up. Why bother trying to find a way out of the forest if she had failed in so many other ways. She had lost Severus, and not even cleared his name as she'd promised him.

Slumping against a tree and sliding down onto the damp, peaty soil, she began to cry. Had Death come to cross her path in this forest, she would have surely asked him for release from her pain and this fruitless enterprise.

'Fruit. Something about fruit...'

A wind picked up and brushed against her face, pulling her hair out of her eyes. The wind whistled through the trees and sounded almost like voices. Looking up to the sky, she saw the coming of the dawn as the sky began to lighten slightly.

As Hermione cracked open her eyes, she saw Ron sitting beside her bed, brushing her hair away
from her face, a tissue in his hand, blotting away the tears that had escaped in her sleep.

He smiled down at her, circles under his eyes, his face tired. “We were worried we almost lost you.”

It took a moment for Hermione to realize that she wasn't just in a forest, but that it was only a dream. Recalling the events that proceeded her waking up in a hospital bed, Hermione bolted upright in bed. “Alan! Is he– Where...?”

Ron put his hand over her, patting it in a manner meant to assure her. “Harry got him. He's been sentenced to Azkaban, for life.”

Hermione flopped back down, her head hitting the pillow, relief flooding her that he was no longer a threat. At least for now. Others had escaped from Azkaban, so could he.

“Harry! I've got to tell him things Alan said–,” she began, bolting back upright in bed, but was stopped by Ron with a hand upon her shoulder to sit back in her bed.

“Harry got there right as you were regaining consciousness. He and Kingsley heard Alan's confessions to those murders, plus a few more he admitted to under Veritaserum later on.” Ron seemed to find this news of great comfort, but to Hermione it was anything but.

“If they were there, then why didn't they free me sooner? Why did Harry let that bastard nearly slice me in half? How long have I been out?” Hermione's mind began to fill with questions, her mind sharper than it had felt in a while, without the aid of potions.

“You were out for three days,” Ron said with great seriousness. “Albert said it might have been partly due to withdrawal from those potions you were taking, and partly making up for lost sleep, though nothing could rouse you, even once you were healed. No one could figure out why you wouldn't wake.”

Just then a Healer came into the room, staring with great disbelief that Hermione was awake. “You're up?”

There was a great flurry of activity, as the Auror, who had been guarding Hermione's room had one of the Healers send an owl to Harry that Hermione was finally awake. In addition, what seemed
like half the staff of St. Mungo's filed through her room to ask her questions, wave wands about her face and body, and perform various other procedures to try to figure out the source of her prolonged sleep. They had ruled out Draught of Living Death within the first five minutes of her arrival that first night, but countless other tests were performed while she slept. Now that she was awake, they seemed intent on performing them all over again.

Harry finally arrived and rushed into the room. “I am so sorry he let him get that first hex in, but he kept talking on, bragging about crimes he either got away with or was never caught before. And given how he escaped justice before, I needed as much damning evidence as possible,” he began, knowing Hermione was wondering why he didn't save her sooner. He knew her well enough to predict exactly what she was going to ask him, given that she had seen him emerge from his Invisibility Cloak and knew he had probably been there in the room with them for a while.

“But why did you wait until after he hexed me? Why didn't you stop it?” Hermione asked, feeling as if Harry allowed her to be hurt to settle some Auror's score.

“He was faster than I anticipated, and given his rambling on and leisurely pace, I thought I would be able to block it in time or he'd start out with something less grievous. I'm so sorry I was wrong. But you're alive, thank God, and that hex alone secured his imprisonment in Azkaban, even without Alan's confessions to those other murders being allowed as evidence at the trial. It's iron-clad, he's going away for a long time, possibly forever.” Harry held her hand in assurance that she was safe. He left a great sigh escape and rested his forehead against their clasped hands, looking as tired as Ron.

After a while, Harry left with a promise to return later on with Zhubanysh, who had been very worried as well.

Ron stayed after Harry left.

“Did you come after practice?” Hermione asked.

“No, I haven't been to practice all week, not since...” Ron trailed off, unwilling to say what it was, an attempted murder. “I can still show up tomorrow and be ready for the game this weekend. Coach understood, considering the situation. You attack was mentioned in the Daily Prophet.”

Hermione groaned at the idea of being at the center of news yet once again. It was bad enough during the other times, most recently with her divorce from Ron, but the nephew of the Minister of Magic? Hermione assumed the Daily Prophet must have had a field day with that news, even with Minister Fudge's attempts to suppress the news.
There was an uncomfortable silence between them before Ron asked, “So, do you want to tell me about Snape?”

Hermione looked at Ron in shock that he had discovered. “How...?”

“You called out his name in your sleep.” Ron paused while Hermione gave him a guilty look and buried her face in her hands, unable to look him in the eye. “Lav told me how he was pretending to be Delgado and that you two had become... erm... close. And it seems Harry knew about it as well, since he didn't look shocked at all.”

Hermione and Ron talked for a while, about her own straying from her vows during the final months of their marriage. She also omitted details about the less savory aspects of Severus' work.

“I must admit, I was initially a bit upset when I found out, but for me to be angry over it would be extremely hypocritical of me,” Ron admitted, which shocked Hermione for him to admit that in such a mature fashion. “Thinking over it, since I found out yesterday, I thought back to that time we did that interview with Luna for *The Quibbler*. I remembered how you said if it was you who had fallen in love with someone else during our marriage instead of me, someone you had shared a deep connection with, then you hoped I would understand that you never meant to hurt me.”

There was another long stretch of strained silence between them, Hermione unable to find the words to respond to her own words recalled by Ron.

Ron leaned forward and patted her hand. “I couldn't understand at the time how you could forgive me so easily, but now I do. And I can't fault you for finding love yourself.” He sat back in his chair and raised his eyebrows in disbelief. “Granted, Snape would have been the last person I ever thought would have been the one, but if he and you...” He shook his head. “At least he loves you, at least by what Lav told me.”

“Used to,” Hermione corrected him, the tears welling in her eyes.

Before Ron could ask the meaning behind that comment, Hermione caught sight of a mounded basket of lemons on the dresser across the room, next to a couple bouquets of flowers.

“You brought lemons?” she asked.
“Yeah, the ones from the cemetery. You seemed so attached to them for some silly reason, I figured a basket of them to cheer you up would not be amiss.” Ron Summoned one with his wand and tossed it up and down in the air, the fruit making a soft thumping sound when caught. “Seems weird to have a lemon tree growing up out of Dumbledore's grave for no reason whatsoever. Wouldn't it be funny if Dumbledore somehow Transfigured these lemons from something after his death. Seems like something he'd do, the mad old codger.”

Hermione's head felt a rush of adrenaline, more powerful than when under captivity by Alan.

“I am a dunce, an absolute fucking dunce,” she said to herself. Turning to her ex-husband, she said, “Ron, you are brilliant, absolutely fucking brilliant.”

Ron shrugged, a little abashed at Hermione's exclamations about his brilliance, but unsure what she was going on about.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Fan Art by Kallie LeFavre (http://kallielef.deviantart.com/), commissioned by me. Hermione and Severus fleeing together in the dreamworld: https://67.media.tumblr.com/6174330af82b3b59a0915e0263aaa4c3/tumblr_ocy30qqIvz1ugsuuho1

~o0o~ END of SEASON III ~o0o~

Thank you to my fabulous betas for this chapter, JuneW and Cygnuz. Give a round of applause for all my betas that have worked so hard during “Season 3” to make my fic spiffy enough for reading: JuneW, Cytherea, Cygnuz, Hope and thegreyladies

Lemons? Will we finally get some answers on these damn lemons finally? You bet!

Will Hermione ever come to learn of the floral mix-up that accidentally broke her heart? Will Severus figure out why he was in a coma for two days? Will Hermione and Severus ever be reunited? Will Draco make cassoulet without bread crumbs?

As Dory from “Finding Nemo” might say, “Just keep reading, just keep reading, just
keep reading..."
“The Answer to All Your Questions Can Be Found in a Lemon Drop”

Chapter Summary

The lemon conundrum is solved.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Ninety

“The Answer to All Your Questions Can Be Found in a Lemon Drop”

Disclaimer: It was a dark and stormy fanfic; the disclaimers fell in torrents, except at occasional omissions, when the author might have been nuded by a lawyer on behalf of J.K. Rowling which swept up reminded them (for Rowling owns Harry Potter), rattling along the fandom, and fiercely agitating the community to remind them that they need to disclaim any ownership of Harry Potter and its concepts.

A/N: Disclaimer a parody of Edward George Bulwer-Lytton's, *Paul Clifford* (1830)

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Hermione had been approaching the conundrum of the lemons from Dumbledore's gravesite from a Potions angle. So much for all her touting about tackling problems and solving them from a fresh Muggle-born perspective. She had fallen into the same trap other witches and wizards had when faced with a problem she had criticized in the past to Severus, solving them from the one perspective they were familiar with.

Dumbledore was first and foremost a Transfiguration master. Hermione had been working with Potions ingredients for so long, she forgot to approach this from a perspective of a different discipline. If she had taken a Transfiguration apprenticeship, she probably would have attempted this months ago, before Severus left. It was now obvious that Dumbledore Transfigured something into the lemons growing at his graveside. She just hoped it was what she suspected.

Grabbing her wand from the bedside table, she took the lemon from Ron's hand. With a great steadying breath, Hermione prayed she was right, though if she was, it meant no one at the Ministry had done any proper research into the mystery of the lemons at Dumbledore's graveside, or they had eschewed Dumbledore's propensity for simplicity and assumed it was some extremely
complex spell to crack.

“Finite Incantatum.”

The lemon began spinning in her hand, expanding and changing shape until it rested in its final form. It was a book of some sort. Hermione was sure she had seen the book before, but reading over the cover, there was no mistake as to what she discovered.

“Fucking hell, is that Dumbledore's will?” An incredulous look Ron was utterly dumbfounded was clearly painted on his face.

“Yes, go get Harry now,” Hermione said, her heart beating faster. This was the key to helping secure Severus' freedom, in addition to the memories he'd left behind for her.

Now she recalled where she had seen this book before. It was laying on the bed right next to Dumbledore, placed on the far side where she could not get a good look at it as she had scrutinized every object in Severus' memories for clues. However, in the memory, it was not titled, meaning Dumbledore was still finishing it, knowing he had not much time left.

Reading quickly through the pages, she scanned for any mention of Severus or Draco's name, smiling as she began to read that section of Dumbledore's will where they were mentioned.

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Rising with the sun, Severus had a cup of tea and some juice before going for his morning swim. It had been four weeks since his episode in the clinic and still unexplained sleeping incident. He was ordered to go one week without any flying or swimming, to make sure he didn't have a relapse.

Donning his swim trunks, a shirt, and his sandals, with a towel thrown over his shoulder, Severus walked towards the beach.

'Red dawn at morning; Flyers heed warning.'

The morning sky was lit with brilliant hues of crimson, scarlet, ruby, vibrant pinks, and cerise. The near glassy calm of the ocean foretold of the quiet before the storm. It was a sure sign a tempest was on the way, and it would be there by night.
The local paper had reported Hurricane Darby had dissipated four days ago. They'd be struck with a much milder tropical storm instead of a full-blown cyclone later that day, with some thunder, lightning, and gusts up to sixty miles per hour. Severus still had time to get a swim in before the storm even began to blow. Even the Quidditch games were still being held later that day with the impending weather until it was deemed unsafe.

Standing by the shoreline, Severus laid his towel over a log, pulled off his shirt, and kicked off his sandals. With a flick of his wand, he cast a small lighted buoy about half a mile out to sea; the buoy would guide him out, before he would turn around and head back. After the past three weeks resuming his routine, he was finally back up to swimming a mile a day out in open waters.

The warm tropical waters rose up his legs as he walked out. With his wand secured in a loop on his swim trunks, he dove into the placid waters of the ocean. It was much easier to swim, since the swells were nearly nonexistent as he swam stroke for stroke out towards the beacon.

As he reached the buoy which hovered a few feet above the waters, he turned around and began heading back towards shore. A wind began to gently blow at his back, and the sea began to rise and fall. Swimming with the swells that were starting to come, heralding the coming storm, Severus was glad he was heading back.

Toweling off, Severus saw the waters had begun to churn and turn choppy. He was lucky he got his swim in when he did, as any later it wouldn't have been prudent.

On the way home, he swung by the doughnut shop run by a Cambodian wizard, Kosal, and his Muggle wife, Chantou. The couple had escaped to Malu Palekaiko when the Khmer Rouge took over their country in the mid-1970's. The Cambodian Ministry of Magic wasn't subject to the whims of one Muggle government changing to another, but they were less than sympathetic to Kosal's pleas to save his wife from the tyranny of the Khmer Rouge, as she was subject to Muggle government rule. Malu Palekaiko had been the couple's home ever since. Though the Cambodian government had changed yet a few more times, this latest time to a monarchy ten years prior, they had no desire to return.

As Cambodia and Vietnam used to be French colonies, many French baking and cooking techniques had influenced the cuisines and Muggles of those countries. Severus found he actually preferred the Cambodian and Vietnamese style of pastries and desserts, compared to the actual French baking techniques. He found that they used less sugar, and their croissants weren't so brittle that he choked on the flakes of buttery dough when biting down on one. These were softer and had a little more chew to them than the ones back at the Twenty-Four Blackbird Bakery in Diagon Alley, which were authentically French. Draco had turned his nose up at Kosal and Chantou's croissants, but that didn't stop him from falling in love with their apple fritters and poi donuts with coconut glaze and chopped macadamia nuts.
Picking at his croissant as he walked home, unable to wait since he'd worked up an appetite with his swim, Severus wondered if he should have included his address in his note to Hermione. He was intensely curious as to how she liked her bouquet of flowers she'd received a month ago. Did he get them to her before she found another wizard to cast her affections upon? Or was she still just as in love with him as the day they parted?

This had been something which had weighed upon Severus' mind since the dream of Hermione looking at him with disdain and denying her ties to him. Granted, he was convinced it was his own mind putting him in the reverse role of a nightmare he had had off and on over the years. Still, it was disheartening to remember the look on her face, when all he could ever recall was the look of love and adoration she gave him during their brief time together.

Once he got home, Severus planned to shower and open up his shop for a few weekend appointments he had, and to check on some potions he had simmering over the weekend. It was Saturday, and later that day Severus was going over to the Malfoys' home to collect on his wager.

Draco was making cassoulet, per Severus' recipe. The Finaus were invited, since Mounga and Rainbow were quite curious about a dish which could cause the two friends to openly erupt into hostile glares and harsh words, and break out into a near duel. It was also going to be an early birthday party for Ginny, as well, since her birthday fell in the middle of next week when it would be harder for everyone to meet for dinner.

Severus already had her gift purchased and wrapped. When he was lost for ideas, Draco had given him some suggestions, and Severus bought her some fancy hair combs she had been secretly lusting after and denied buying for herself.

Yes, despite the awful weather that was to come, it was still going to be a lovely day. A supper of fine food, celebration with friends, and having Draco make good on finally fulfilling his bet they'd made in the bar over who could grow a thicker beard within a month. For good measure, Severus had kept the beard, as a subtle way to gently gloat. He went to the barber for regular trims to keep it looking well-groomed – nothing like the unainly, bushy mass Hagrid sported upon his face. Ginny even said it made his face more balanced.
Draco and Ginny had laid out their best tableware and linens. They had friends over for dinner occasionally, but those were usually casual affairs. Rarely was there an occasion – other than Christmas, Easter, and evidently Thanksgiving too, according to their American friends – for finery to be laid out and a formal dinner to be served.

Severus wore his best tropical wear – a fine pair of cream linen trousers, woven leather shoes in the same color, and a black, crisply pressed short-sleeved button-front shirt. For Hawaii, it was practically the same as wearing formal dress robes back in England.

The Finaus also wore their finest, with Rainbow in a formal floor-length floral muumuu of blue, yellow, and white. Mounga wore a multi-colored plaid sarong with golden threads woven in and a short-sleeved button-front shirt in a complimentary color with a matching plaid bow-tie, opting to leave the formal military-style jacket at home.

The first course consisted of pistachio, chevre, and baby spinach baked in a puff pastry, served with a light Gruner Veltliner. Severus appreciated the light mineral quality of the wine to counter the richness of the cheese. He was even more impressed to learn Draco was doing all the cooking that night, giving Ginny a much-needed break from the kitchen, and when asked, he admitted he wasn't using an elf service either. The one shortcut Draco took was the cake, which he'd ordered Mario to make. Draco had yet to work on his baking skills.

This was definitely a change from the Draco he used to know years ago. The head of the Malfoy family didn't seem quite so averse to cooking for himself and guests, as he now began to appreciate the glory of basking in the compliments of guests raving about one's cooking.

The second course was a soup made from roasted tomatoes. Severus knew this was Draco's silent, yet tactful, protest to the fact he was making cassoulet without tomatoes. There was a small amount of freshly chopped Thai purple basil and Italian green basil to add to the color of the course, accented with a swirl of white crème fraîche. It was paired with a Spanish Albariño, instead of a light red, as the salad course was next to cleanse the palate before the cassoulet.

As the conversation moved from the topic of Akela getting her driver's license while away at Muggle Camp that week to some of the newest island residents Severus and the Malfoys haven't had the chance to meet yet, there was a flash of lightning in the distance.
With that lightning strike, a witch appeared at the Malu Palekaiko Portkey office. She had taken a Portkey from San Francisco, since the idiots at the London Portkey office still had no clue where Hawaii or Malu Palekaiko were located, though that was a matter that would soon be rectified. Hopefully.

Marching into the tiny hut that was bigger on the inside, as fast as she could comfortably walk, the witch looked about for someone to help her.

A local witch with a long fall of brown hair and a name tag that said “Halulu” was filing away some papers when the newest arrival to the island cleared her throat.

“Excuse me, but I was wondering if you could tell me where I could find Severus Snape. He does live here on this island, right?”

Halulu put her papers down and came over to the counter. “Yes, but may I ask why you are searching for him?”

“Let’s just say he’s in big trouble,” Lavender said with great foreboding, a steely glint in her eye as she patted her swollen abdomen. It was obvious that she was close, if not already in her third trimester.

Lavender knew that gesture was highly misleading as to the nature of her visit, but she figured the gloves were off, and if this was a shortcut to get to see Severus face-to-face and give him a piece of her mind, then she was just fine with that. Besides, it was something a Slytherin would do, so he could probably eventually appreciate the resourcefulness of her tactics. Not immediately, but in time. Hopefully.

“He’s having dinner over at the Malfoys’ home.” Halulu's eyes were glued to the newcomer's abdomen, her face still slightly in a state of shock.

Mrs. Weasley knew exactly what Halulu was thinking, and the blonde didn't correct her assumptions.

“Draco and Ginny? Wonderful,” Lavender smiled sweetly, thankful this witch was willing to cooperate. “I’m sure they'll want to hear this too. I have some news for them from back home in England. If you’d be so kind as to give me directions to their house, I would greatly appreciate it.”
Lavender advanced up the street, in comfortable flat shoes and with a slight waddle. Her face had a grim scowl; the storm began to march onto the island right behind her as if she'd brought her own personal army with her. She was the harbinger of the cyclone coming to Malu Palekaiko.

“I must say, the substitution of giant granadilla instead of pear with the artichoke and shaved fennel was a delightful surprise. A wonderful marriage of European and tropical flavors,” Severus said with sincere praise.

It was a refreshing salad that hearkened to the original French salad which used pear as a sweet counterpoint to the other ingredients, and a perfect course to precede the cassoulet.

As Draco stood to clear the third-course dishes and Charm them to float into the kitchen before he served the cassoulet, there was a knock at the door.

Opening the door, Draco was stunned by the sight of Lavender standing on his front porch. He had not expected to see her, but before he could formulate any gracious salutation, he blurted the first thing that came to mind. “Merlin's bollocks, but you're very pregnant.”

Ignoring Draco's statement of the obvious, his old boss marched right in, turning her head from side to side to determine which hallway to walk down and confront the ungrateful twat who broke Hermione's heart.

Severus was swirling the last of the Cabernet Sauvignon Blanc that was served with the salad course, admiring the rosy color, when he noticed Rainbow quirking her head sideways to get a better look at the arrival of the newest guest.

Turning around in his seat, he saw Lavender standing in the door frame, a bouquet in her arms, looking very fecund.

“Miss Brown,” Severus said, just as startled as Draco at the sudden appearance of her upon the
Malfoys’ doorstep.

“Mrs. Weasley,” she corrected him.

Severus blinked in slight surprise that Hermione’s ex-husband had made good on his promise. He was about to make a snide comment, asking if her new title was out of obligation for her condition, when Lavender marched right over to Severus, stuck out her arm, and spoke before he could casually cast his insult.

“Here, these are from Hermione.” She presented him with a bouquet of palm fronds and rudbeckia. As he took the bouquet, recognizing palm fronds symbolizing victory and rudbeckia for justice, she added, “And this is from Hermione as well.”

There was a loud crack as Lavender’s palm made contact with Severus’ face.

Rainbow leaned over and said quietly to her husband while staring at Lavender’s swollen midsection, “Did Severus leave a ‘package’ back in England that he didn’t know about?”

Mounaga wanted to tell his wife to shut it, but he didn’t have time as the fight erupted between Severus and this pregnant witch.

“What was that for?!?” Severus asked as he stood up from his chair, angry and confused as to why he was being assaulted with no clue what he had supposedly done wrong.

“Really? You want me to say it in front of your guests? Fine!” she huffed with righteous indignation. “How dare you dump Hermione that way, with that horrible bouquet you sent her. You positively broke her heart.”

“Wait! WHAT?” he thundered back, now even more befuddled by her comment. He put the bouquet on the table in order to not crush them with his rising anger. “I sent her a positively lovely bouquet, dripping with all those syrupy sentiments any witch would gush over!”

Rolling her eyes in dramatic fashion, Lavender countered, “Really? Abatina, laurel cherry, bilberry, fish geranium, and – the kicker – michaelmas daisy. And let’s not forget the St. John’s Wort for animosity.”
Severus stood there for a moment, quiet and still, but the seething rage behind his eyes told that his mind and emotions were anything but.

Very slowly and quietly, Severus ground out, “I told Naomi, NO SUBSTITUTIONS!”

There was a second Draco could have sworn fire was coming out of Severus' nostrils.

Breathing heavily, in order to stop himself from having a temper tantrum of epic proportions in the middle of the Malfoys' dining room, Severus began listing, “Cochorus for 'impatience of absence,' flowering almond for 'hope,' oak-leaved geranium for 'true friendship,' spindle tree for 'your charms are engraved on my heart,' and forget-me-nots. That's what I ordered, not this... travesty you listed.”

“Yeah, right” Lavender snorted with disbelief. “And what about that photo of you and that bimbo, Blanche, that Hermione and I saw of you in Obscure Oozes & Fabulous Fluids?”

Severus had to think about how an article meant for All About Apothecaries had wound up in that publication, then remembered that publication collected and republished stories from journals all over the world. He'd had no clue it would have wound up in a magazine that might be read in England.

“What was Hermione to think? The same day we get that magazine, your bouquet shows up at the office.” Lavender was still not convinced of Severus' professed innocence.

“Did you or Hermione ever think to ask perhaps the bouquet was the wrong one?” he asked through gritted teeth, getting into Lavender's face in a confrontational manner.

“Your damn note came with it! Your initials, your handwriting!”

“Then they attached it to the wrong damn bouquet!” he insisted. Thinking about it for a moment, all those flowers Lavender listed in the bouquet Hermione received would look very, very similar to the one he'd intended her to receive.

“You want proof?” Severus asked, folding his arms across his chest.
“That would be good for starters. And you didn't deny our guess about that bleached blonde bint, Blanche,” she added.

“She's a business partner, and I would no sooner sleep with her than I would with you. Or do you forget I turned down your offer for me to shag you years ago?”

As for Rainbow's little aside about Severus being the father of Lavender's baby, Mounga gave his wife a smug smile that she shouldn't jump to conclusions.

“You offered proof? I'm waiting,” Lavender said with hostile disdain, still not convinced.

The cassoulet had to wait while there was a march of six people, Severus in the front dragging Lavender by the hand as fast as she could dodder along, down the three blocks and one block over to Naomi’s house. Mounga held his wand high above the group, casting a large Parapluie Charm to shield everyone from the rain that had begun to fall.

Pounding on the front door with his fist, Severus bellowed, “Naomi!”

The young witch ran to the front door and threw it open. “Don't bust it down. What's got your panties in a twist, Severus?”

“The bouquet that I spent considerable sums of money for you to order arrived. And I specifically said no substitutions. Instead, everything was substituted. Explain yourself.”

Naomi saw that there was a whole host of people on the large front porch, including the town judge, his wife, and the Malfoys, in addition to a witch she didn't recognize who was very pregnant. Naomi wondered if this witch by Severus' side was Hermione, considering what a romantic bouquet it was he'd sent her.

With her wand, Naomi Summoned the order slip and handed it over to Severus. “There. I did exactly as you paid me to do. Right there on the order, in big letters. 'No substitutions.' Happy now?” She crossed her arms and raised an imperious brow at Severus for banging on her front door and accusing her of screwing up her job.
Looking over the slip, it was exactly as he'd ordered, but Hermione had still received the wrong bouquet.

Turning to Lavender, with Naomi still there at the door eager to watch the exchange, Severus asked, “Did you think to go to the florist to see if there was a mistake?”

Now looking a bit more contrite, Lavender shrugged her shoulders. “What was Hermione to think? She thought you’d found out about her and Neville.”

Severus' face got very somber for a moment. “What about her and Longbottom?”

“Oh, bugger.” She hadn't meant for that to slip.

Rainbow decided to add the comment, “Well, Severus, it's not like you were any more chaste that time with Maria.”

Mounga really wanted to spell his wife's mouth shut, but continued to watch this train wreck of misunderstandings and tragic mix-ups unfold. He just hoped it was fixable.

In order to defend himself against the accusatory look growing in Lavender's eye, Severus said, “It was one time, and I instantly regretted it.”

“Well, that makes two of you, because Hermione has been wracked with guilt over that one time with Neville. So I guess you're both even.” Lavender made a great huff, now without any more ammunition to eviscerate Severus.

She had been thinking about the long tirade of anger she would unleash on him, but it now seemed that it was nothing more than a mix-up with no one but the people at the florist shop at fault, and some poorly-timed assumptions.

“Can we take this back to the house?” Draco prompted. “There is a cassoulet still waiting to be served, and I'm sure Lavender has more news from England she would like to share, other than catastrophic floral mix-ups.” Turning to his former employer – and hopefully future employer – again, he asked, “Would you care to join us for dinner?”
As much as Severus had been looking forward to this cassoulet for weeks, it had lost all flavor to him. Severus was still upset, contemplating of the pain Hermione was in thinking he had dumped her, and with a bouquet of flowers no less. Not to mention, he had feelings of jealousy imagining Hermione and Longbottom in bed, which brought up the guilt of his time with Maria. He could not savor the marriage of flavors in the dish, nor tell Draco he had made a cassoulet as fine as any Severus had ever made.

Over the main course, Lavender told everyone at the table about how Hermione had not only discovered Dumbledore's long sought-after will, but also took her case in front of the Wizengamot to grant Severus and Draco a full exoneration. Mounga offered the use of his Pensieve back in his judge's chambers when Lavender offered her memories of the trial for viewing.

Handing Severus and Draco each one of the famous lemons she'd brought along, she said, "Hermione and I both agree that Ron summarized the situation the best. 'Figures a wizard who would hide the Philosopher's Stone in a way a first-year wizard accidentally found it in his pocket would wind up giving hints about his will with a bad pun on his gravestone. Then the will would be solved with a spell covered in second year. So clever, only incredible dumb luck or incredible brilliance to stumble upon the simplicity to reveal it would be needed.'"

Though Severus thought Ronald Weasley to be rather dim, it was an astute observation.

The ex-Death Eaters both cast the spell, and their lemons turned into copies of Dumbledore's will.

Mounga was rather impressed, as that was the cleverest and most obscure way to hide one's will he'd ever had the chance to see in all his years in law.

They agreed, with the exception of Rainbow who didn't care to watch legal proceedings, to meet at the courthouse and view Lavender's memories the next day.
Dessert was served, gifts were given to the guest of honor, and the evening eventually came to an end. Mounga and Rainbow wished Ginny a happy birthday and expressed their regrets to Lavender that they didn't initially meet under a more pleasant situation. Before they left, Mounga took Lavender aside to speak privately.

Meanwhile, Draco and Severus cleared away the rest of the dishes. Ginny was suddenly overcome with a bout of fatigue and excused herself for a quick lie-down.

Draco walked the Finaus to the door and bid them goodnight, but not before they gave him another round of praise for his cooking and congratulations on being exonerated back home.

Lavender asked about local lodgings, since her plans had suddenly changed and she was staying for part of the week. Draco offered their guest bedroom, as it would give Ginny and her a chance to yammer on about pregnancy matters, and give Draco a sample as to what to expect living with a very pregnant witch.

“If you came here, but didn't expect to stay, what changed your itinerary?” Severus asked, while reclining on the couch.

Lavender, ensconced in a comfortable upright chair that was kind to her aching back, replied, “Well, I'm no longer averse to being in the same hemisphere with you, now that I know it was a mix-up and not your intent to hurt Hermione.”

Severus noted it was quite the ironic phrase for her to say, considering the history behind her involvement in her own love triangle with Hermione.

Draco noticed how Lavender phrased her answer. It had been their intent to keep their plans – for Lavender to open an Asia-Pacific office with Hermione as the head – a secret until later, when they would spring it on him as a surprise. He just hoped no other things would happen that would ruin this from moving forward.

Glancing over her shoulder down the hallway, Lavender wondered if Ginny should be present, but decided it might be best for Draco to figure out a way to break the news to her. But with Draco and Severus, she wouldn't varnish the truth.

“Hermione came upon the idea of how Dumbledore hid his will while she was recovering at St.
Mungo's,” she began, but stopped when the cup of coffee in Severus' hands fell and shattered on the teak wood floor.

Draco cleaned it up with a swish of his wand.

“St. Mungo's? What was she doing there? Did she have a Potions accident?” Severus asked with great concern, panic creeping into his voice despite trying to remain calm.

Suddenly overcome with emotions, recalling the events, her hormones making her unable to remain calm, Lavender put her forehead in her hand. With her voice thick and trying to restrain her sobs, she said, “Alan Parker abducted Hermione, but Harry and Kingsley barely got there in time to save her.”

Severus and Draco were both in shock. They knew Alan Parker's name too well, having attended the murder trial of Pansy Parkinson. They loathed how the Daily Prophet's coverage of the trial hid Parker's name, only listing him as the “alleged murderer” or “possible suspect.”

In very slow and measured tones, Severus asked, “If Potter and Kingsley got there in time, why did she need to recover in the hospital?”

“Because the psychotic murderer kept rambling on and on and on about his other crimes besides Pansy's murder, including—” Lavender stopped upon realizing that the two probably hadn't heard the news.

“Who else did he kill?” Draco prompted her.

“Blaise.” She broke down in tears.

Draco conjured a handkerchief for the near-hysterical witch.

Draco didn't want to cry, but he did, upset over the death of another old classmate of his at this murderer's hands.

“Parker confessed to poisoning many others, too,” she added, in between the hitching of her breath.
It's not that Lavender had any sympathy for those dead Death Eaters, but she was caught up in all the emotions of the moment.

Draco shook his head. “He was the one who must have poisoned Goyle then,” he assumed. He never imagined the wizard who'd mangled Pansy's body so gruesomely was the same one who had poisoned his old friend.

Severus was shattered. So many of his former students, witches and wizards once under his charge, gone by the hands of this monstrosity. And to think Hermione suffered by his malignancies as well – it nearly undid him at that moment.

“You haven't finished telling me why they allowed that butcher to put Hermione in St. Mungo's,” Severus prompted her again.

“One of the reasons why the sick bastard got off at Pansy's trial was for the fact that Moody wouldn't force him to take Veritaserum to confess. And Parker professed his innocence during her murder trial. But when he had Hermione, he kept rambling on and on about all the things he had done, gloating about them. The longer he went on, the more evidence Harry and Kingsley knew they would have to make sure he would never get out of Azkaban again, despite all the tricks he used to interfere with his first trial. What neither of them, especially Harry, counted on is Parker started out with such a lethal hex so quickly to begin with, considering how he bragged about watching the ones he poisoned die slowly, and the way that he was carefully methodical in his murder of Blaise and Pansy. Harry thought he could have stopped him before Parker cast the first hex, but at least stopped him once it was cast and then Harry saved Hermione.”

Severus recalled he promised Potter that should any harm come to Hermione, he'd strongly consider coming back to England to finish what the Dark Lord did not. But both Potter and Kingsley did what Severus would have done, gathering evidence and waiting for a moment to strike. As much as he wanted to personally kill Potter himself, he was thankful Potter had the evidence to bring this serial killer to justice. He was torn between heartfelt gratitude and seething anger at Potter. He was also feeling conflicted towards his old Order friend, Kingsley, as well.

“And the trial?” Draco asked, hoping it wasn't another farce like the one he and Severus attended for Pansy's murder.

“It was quick,” Lavender said with some bitter-sweetness in her voice. “They wanted to keep it out of the papers. And then there were other factors to rush it along that they wanted to keep quiet. Like the fact Alan Parker is Calpurnia Fudge's nephew. Harry also had a confession from Alan that he had blackmail material on the Chief Warlock, Rancelette. All that was reported was Hermione was attacked and survived. Everything else was a whitewash in the papers.”
Draco let out a groan of desperation, wondering if this could get any worse. For all the joy the pair of wizards should have felt that they were free, it seemed like such a heavy price to pay with this new news.

Lavender finished by saying, “Parker was tried and convicted to life in Azkaban without parole before Hermione even woke up three days later.”

“Three days she was out?!?” Severus screamed. “I thought you said Potter got to her right after that hex and saved her?”

“He did!” Lavender shouted back hotly. “She was healed very quickly, and she should have woken right away, but she was so strung out on Invigoration Draughts and Wit-Sharpening Potion, she went through some very heavy withdrawal. Albert was able to counter the withdrawal easily enough the first day, but we just couldn't understand why she didn't wake for three days. Not even the Healers at St. Mungo's could figure out why she couldn't wake. No poisons, no charms, no cursed items,” she listed off.

“Wait, what?” Draco asked, recognizing that listed of crossed off items. “When was Hermione kidnapped?”

Lavender had to stop and think for a moment, the past month a jumble of so many events, and the hormones from her pregnancy were affecting her normally sharp memory. “Erm... It was a Saturday night. If I remember correctly, the day right after the wrong vase of flowers was delivered on Friday the... ninth. Yes, flowers on the ninth, and kidnapped the night of the tenth. Just before midnight.”

Severus and Draco exchanged glances, wondering if it was just mere coincidence Severus was passed out for two days at the same time, with none of the Healers on the island able to discern why he couldn't wake either, or if it was something more.

Lavender missed the exchange between the two, given she was sobbing into her handkerchief, remembering the events and overcome with emotion once more.

Severus wondered if somehow Hermione and he shared some sort of dream experience, both adding their psyches to some ethereal existence. It would explain the look of cool detachment and loathing in her eyes when she stared down at him down in the mud. But despite everything, she could not kill him as bid. In the dream, she fought to save him, choosing a different course of
action from the one he'd chosen in real life years ago. If Severus had defied the Dark Lord that night long ago and tried to save his wife, fighting his way out the way Hermione did with him in the dream, he and Gabrielle would have both surely died. Even Hermione admitted as much to him when he confessed to her about his wife's murder.

The bouquet and the magazine article made Hermione think he was casting her aside so easily; it was why she looked at him the way she did, if indeed they both shared the same dream together.

“It was good that you and Draco escaped England when you did,” Lavender went on. “He admitted to knowing who you both were, and had seen Hermione come and go to your flat Severus, several times. He was targeting both of you to satisfy some twisted plan to kill Death Eaters so people could go back to hating Muggleborns without feeling guilty about it. If Death Eaters were no longer around to remind everyone else about the war, then he thought people could easily slip back into old prejudices.”

Severus could take no more. The flowers, Blaise's murder, Hermione kidnapped and injured, her heart broken, the timing of their prolonged sleep, blackmail, stalking. It was too much.

Without speaking, Severus rose and stormed out of the room. The slamming of the front door signaled he had left, unable to bear listening to any more for now.

The storm was beginning its brutal assault upon Malu Palekaiko. Leaning against the wind, he staggered up the street back to his own home in order to seek solace in solitude. Not even bothering to cast a Parapluie Charm, Severus paid no mind to how the rain soaked him to the skin on the short walk home. He was physically numb to the sensation of the weather assaulting him.

Mindlessly ambling into his house, ignoring the mud and water he tracked over his clean floors, he stood and looked about his home. This house was built in hopes Hermione would join him some day. He felt confined and restricted by a house that now seemed far too large and far too empty for him to stand living in anymore. Severus had to get out of his home.

The shock of Lavender's news began to fade and was replaced with a seething anger at the world. Climbing up the steps to the back garden that had been recently cleared of growth, he stood defiantly, his face turned upwards against the wind and rain that pelted his face. Fists clenched by his side, he looked up at the tenebrous clouds, wondering why the Fates had picked him.

“WHY?” he bellowed at the sky. “WHY?!!?”
Why did every woman Severus had ever felt any feelings towards been hurt, usually resulting in death. Lily, his first crush, killed by the Dark Lord because of the prophecy he’d overheard and relayed to his first master. Gabrielle, his wife, killed by his own hands because he’d had to choose between being a Death Eater and remaining alive, or choosing her and their child who would have still died shortly after him if he’d chosen differently. Now Hermione, the only one he had ever truly and deeply loved, abducted and nearly killed because of her association with him.

Severus fell to his knees, sinking into the sodden muck of freshly-turned soil. Falling forward, he began to beat the ground with his fists, screaming with futility at the life he had been dealt.

Sitting back upon his heels, he turned his face upwards and screamed with frantic violence, “WHY! WHY!!!” as he grabbed fistfuls of the iron-rich volcanic soil and began to beat his fists against his chest.

His screams were no longer questioning, but challenging to the pointless cruelty of the universe targeting him and him alone, like some sadistic child pulling wings from a fly.

Severus' screams were answered with a crack of lightning and roll of thunder in the distance.

In response to the universe's answer, he screamed back in anger, a formless shout for the lightning to come and take its best shot at him since he didn't care anymore.

The lightning followed the call and response with another bolt and boom, this time a bit closer.

Unable to bear the burden of knowing Hermione now hated him and he was, in his mind, the cause of her near death, a madness began to overtake Severus' normally sensible mind.

He and he alone was death to anyone he was close to.
His screams began to morph into wails, and Severus began to cry pitifully. Hands caked in muck, he palmed his face like a lunatic, smearing mud all over himself as he sobbed hysterically. It made no sense and neither did Severus anymore.

Somewhere in his grief-stricken and unhinged mind, Severus came upon the idea that maybe if he wasn't around anymore, maybe Hermione would no longer be in danger. The more his temporarily twisted mind analyzed the logic of it, the more it seemed sound at the time. He would offer himself up to the Fates, the gods, or whoever it was pulling the strings of his life in order to save Hermione. She deserved to live far more than he did. He was death made manifest, killing all those who got too close to him.

Hauling himself up out of the mud, he held his wand aloft and yelled, “Accio Peregrine!”

Severus' broom flew out of its cupboard and through the back door he'd left open. He mounted his broom, lifting off with a burst of speed fueled by his anger and determination.

Buffeted by the winds that were gusting stronger and stronger as the heart of the cyclone approached, Severus flew south and east, into the storm. He would fly into the vast Pacific until he could fly no more and let the ocean swallow him up, making himself an offering to the gods or the Fates, whoever would accept his offer. His sacrifice would hopefully be enough to appease them or it, and let Hermione live. Perhaps with his death, the ties which bound her to his cursed self would be severed, and she would be set free from future harm. Severus was bargaining for her life with his offered in her stead.

As Severus passed the three-mile marker buoys, delineating the boundaries of where the magic of the island once protected him, the intensity of the storm continued to increase.

Pele really liked Severus – not enough so that she'd take him as a consort, but he was a very respectful wizard who honored her properly. He brought her the nicest and freshest offerings, and had even been kind to her on that mountain trail. She didn't want him to go off and kill himself over a bit of a misunderstanding and bad luck. As goddess of not only volcanoes, but also wind and lightning, she used her powers to try to help Severus return to Malu Palekaiko instead of offering himself up as a sacrifice to her sister, Nāmaka, the sea goddess.
Severus was barely making headway against the winds that seemed to increase in their fierceness, as if trying to push him back home, but he soldiered on, determined to go out into the vastness of the watery desert to meet his death.

A bolt of lightning came down right in front of him, and he swerved as best he could, despite the fact that by the time he reacted the bolt was gone. Now on a new vector, another bolt of lightning struck closer to him, nearly causing him to lose his grip, but he held tight. It seemed as if the lightning was striking in a way to stop him from reaching his destination beyond.

Leaning forward, he urged his broom onward, faster, when a twin strike of lightning came down just off the tip of his broom and blinded him temporarily. Blind and off-balance, his ears echoing from the thunder's deafening crack, he barrel-rolled and splashed down into the ocean.

The swells of the churning and angry ocean tossed Severus about at its whim. He was still close enough he could barely discern the island in the far distance lit up by flashes of lightning. He floated to the top of a swell before a waved crashed over him, submerging his head under the water. As he popped back up, his head breaking the surface of the water, he barely had a chance to catch his breath before another swell rose and fell, causing another white-capped wave to crash over his head, pushing him down beneath the waves once again. His lungs fought for air as the salty water slammed against his face, forcing him to swallow and inhale the sea.

Severus realized this is what he'd flown over the ocean to do, to surrender to nature, to bring release to his suffering and protect Hermione from danger. As he stopped treading water, the ocean greedily took its offering. The current's cold claws pulled him down deeper and deeper into its inky, crushing oblivion, like some great unseen beast about to devour him in its obscurely fathomless maw.

His water-logged lungs were hurting, but he found he could not exhale and finally let go, as if there was some spiritual cord tied to the center of his being that would not let him slip away. With the increasing pressure around his ribs, his chest burned and his heart felt like it would nearly burst as it thundered with each beat in his chest.

Suddenly, Severus was overcome with an urge to live.
The ex-Death Eater had not survived two wars and years in fear of the Dark Lord to finally give up when he was finally free from his servitude. He had not given up after the Death Eater Decree took his freedom from him once more. Alan Parker had been stalking him in hopes of killing him someday before he escaped, and Severus would not die to satisfy Parker's plans. Hermione, despite her loathing of him, had not fought to clear his name only to have him kill himself in a moment of grief-stricken madness.

Severus kicked against the pull of the current that was trying to drag him still deeper into its bottomless depths. Each kick of his legs was a fight against the vast ocean pressing down from above, trying to keep him submerged. Each stroke towards the surface was his hand reaching out towards the need to see Hermione again.

Breaking the surface of the water, he expelled the air from his lungs and breathed in the sweetness of life, even if it felt like there was an iron band about his chest as he coughed and sputtered. Reaching for his wand which was still secured in the loop on the side of his pants, Severus lifted his arm above the water to summon his broom when another waved crashed over his head, knocking his wand from his hand.

Another wave crashed over him, just as he rose to the surface once more. He could not see his wand in the dark of the night, as it was masked by the choppy waters. He did see another familiar stick of wood. With all his might, he swam against the current and grasped onto his broomstick.

Once mounted upon it, the swells rose and fell about him knocking him over a few times as Severus tried to kick up out of the water. He failed the first two times, but succeeded by the third and shot up out of the water, just as Iakona, Mouna's son, had taught him. Circling about, he spotted his wand amid the flashes of lightning, being tossed about the waves. He scooped down, picking it up out of the water, securing it once more.

Now determined to live, Severus began to fly back towards the island, but the fiercest part of the storm was directly over his head.

Severus was nearly pushed from his broom twice by the gusts and torrential downpour that seemed to come at him sideways, stinging his face and skin through the fabric of his slightly torn clothes, as it pelted him.

Exhausted, he strove on towards shore that was now even harder to see through the sheets of water that obscured his view.

Unable to determine exactly where he was flying towards, he just kept heading towards the island
that jutted from the sea in front of him like an undefined black mass against more blackness of the sea.

He saw that he was flying directly towards a spot nicknamed “Chum Reef” for the sharp rocks and coral that would chop you up if you were unlucky enough to get caught in those swirling waters.

As Severus was nearing shore, a sense of relief washed over him. He had made it back, and his grip loosened. A bolt of lightning struck the tip of Severus' broomstick and the handle shattered, stunning Severus.

A limp figure fell towards the reef below, the ocean eager to welcome back the prize it had temporarily lost.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Evil cliffie! MUWAHAHAHA!

I have commissioned Perselus/Patricia Demoraes (http://perselus.deviantart.com/) to do a piece of fan art to go with this chapter, "Madness", which is embedded in the story above. You can view it here:
https://65.media.tumblr.com/6fd0f6fb80e72abb5a3cc51a15994fc4/tumblr_oczsdi4odj1ugsuuho1_1.

Big round of thanks to JuneW and Cygnus, my beautifully talented betas.

Technically, Hurricane Darby dissipated officially on August 1, 2004. Its remnants, a tropical cyclone, hit the Hawaiian Islands on Wednesday, August 4, 2004 with 2.61 inches falling in Honolulu that day, a new record, but for the purpose of this story, I fudged it by a few days. I do like to keep my astronomical and weather records as accurate as possible for my readers, though.

Yeah, Yeah, I know I said no new canon from HBP or DH, but inclusion of Severus overhearing the prophecy works too well not to include in this chapter.
"The Heart Has Reasons That Reason Does Not Understand"

Chapter Summary

Hermione finally rests. Severus recovers and has a chance to view Lavender's memories of Hermione in front of the Wizengamot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Ninety-One
"The Heart Has Reasons That Reason Does Not Understand"

Disclaimer: This is a work of fan fiction using characters from the Harry Potter world, which is trademarked by J. K. Rowling.

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With the slam of the front door, Ginny awoke from her nap to discover Severus was gone and Lavender and Draco were in tears. The next half hour was spent filling Ginny in on the news of Hermione and all that had happened.

While processing all that she had learned, still breaking into uncontrollable sobs periodically, Ginny was overcome with a moment of panic. "Draco, remember that time right after Hermione and Ron's anniversary dinner and what Severus did to his flat?"

Draco immediately understood where his wife was going with her line of questioning. Severus now had access to a fully-stocked Potions lab in his house. Who knew, in a moment of rage and despair, what he might do.

Apparating directly from the living room, Draco wound up on Severus' front porch. The front door was left open, the cyclone blowing the door back and forth, slamming it against the wall to bounce back, then get caught by another gust of wind to slam fully open once more.

"Severus? SEVERUS!"
Draco saw the muddy, wet footprints tracked through the house and to the back door. That door was also left open, opening and closing with the pressure of the winds now blowing through the house.

Running out into the pelting rain, his wand casting a bright light, he called Severus' name out into the gale several times more. His only reply was the wind howling back at him.

Back inside the house, he began rushing upstairs to Severus' Potions lab, but stopped short when he noticed the door to the broom cupboard was hanging open, the latch busted. There were a few twigs from the broom swirling about on the floor with the breeze blowing through the house.

Draco didn't have to ponder. He knew Severus must have taken his broom and flown off in the middle of a cyclone.

A pounding on the front door brought Mouna rushing to see what the urgency was about. Without words, a very sodden and shaken-looking Draco told him something was amiss.

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She was sure she was going to go mad.

Since recovering from her kidnapping, assault, and still unexplained prolonged sleep, Hermione had continued on with her work for Lavender and her apprenticeship with Albert, in addition to pulling together a case to petition the Wizengamot and Ministry of Magic for a full pardon and exoneration of Severus and Draco. It seemed that even the publishing of Dumbledore's will – explicitly stating their innocence – was not enough to grant them any clemency until Hermione brought the case before the court.

Now the flurry of activity was over, Albert ordered his apprentice to one day of full rest. Hermione was under wand-oath orders to not pick up a book, not study, not brew unless it was for urgent personal necessity, and to relax for one full day. The Potions master had seen other apprentices of his colleagues snap over the years from trying to do too much, and Hermione had nearly done the same. He even urged her to visit her parents, given that she had yet to explain to them about her ordeal. Despite having made a promise to her Aunt Christine to tell them, she had been putting it off for over three weeks.

Aunt Christine had not found out about Hermione's adventures and trip to St. Mungo's until the Friday after everything happened, still not having gotten around to getting a subscription to the Daily Prophet. Upset that she and Hermione's parents were not kept in the loop except from what
they gleaned from the paper about the attack, it didn't soothe her much either when she found out the news was kept from them at Hermione's insistence until she could discuss it with them later. Hermione's parents seemed to treat this as par for the course, given there was little about the war she had told them. Unable to share many unpleasant things, Hermione preferred to keep her parents in the dark.

The legal proceedings finished on Friday, with judgment handed down by the Wizengamot less than an hour later for all that she sought in her claim.

Now it was Sunday morning. Hermione figured Lavender was probably in Malu Palekaiko, giving Severus the bouquet she'd bought for him, along with a good slap across the face for what he did to her, in addition to the good news of his exoneration.

"Fish geranium. Disappointed expectations, my arse! That'll show him," she huffed into her mug of tea.

It wasn't just to spite Severus' particular floral choice, but she still felt an obligation to clear his and Draco's name, just as she'd promised. Justice was justice, and right was right, no matter how much she thrilled at the little fantasy of Lavender returning from Hawaii with Severus' balls in a jar. However, that little scenario didn't hold as much allure for her as it did a month ago.

In the month since her attack and recovery, Hermione had gone off the unwise regimen of potions which kept her working far harder and longer than was prudent. Now, with her mind no longer oscillating between the extremes of frantic activity and muddled dubiety, she had time to think about the flowers Severus had sent her.

The note was not laced with any vile jabs or scathing remarks. Read alone, without the bouquet, it seemed sincere and hopeful, despite the few words used. And Severus was not a man to easily switch allegiances. This was a wizard who had stayed true to Dumbledore as his spy out of honor and obligation, despite having the option to taking the easier and less dangerous path. Hermione had granted him his passage to escape, so why he would send a bouquet filled with such hostile intent was beyond her. It seemed uncharacteristic. Then again, the way he'd verbally gutted her during that misunderstanding the day after her anniversary dinner, he was a man who could feel viscerally if he thought he was betrayed. Maybe he did feel betrayed with her encounter with Neville; though how Severus learned of it, she still could not fathom.

Lavender was to return either Thursday or Friday, having gone to scout for possible locations other than Hawaii for the Asia-Pacific facilities. Hermione would know by the end of the week if all of this was as she originally thought, or if this was somehow another tragic misunderstanding between them. The former seemed like the more probable of the two.
Finishing her tea, Hermione decided that since she was banned from studying and even the pleasure of reading, except for the day’s newspaper, she might as well go visit her parents, and her aunt and uncle, bringing them up to speed on all that had happened, or at least the parts that she was willing to share. Her stomach was feeling unsettled more and more, and she chalked it up to her nervousness of confessing during her visit.

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There was a murmur of voices that sounded more like the buzzing of insects. It was bothersome enough that it woke Severus. Now awake, he could discern who was speaking.

"Is Uncle Severus going to be alright?" Akela asked, her voice filled with concern.

"Yes, but you mustn't tell anyone what happened," Rainbow cautioned her daughter. "We don't need rumors swirling about him being mad for flying off into the middle of a lightning storm."

Severus found humor in Rainbow's warning, given she was the biggest town gossip around. He began to chuckle at the absurd hypocrisy of it, but groaned when his chest seized with pain.

"He's up. Get your father and the others," Rainbow said urgently as she rushed back into the room.

Cracking an eye open, Severus saw that he was in the Finaus' guest bedroom, and missing his regular clothes. Somehow, he was in his own nightwear, sans a shirt, though he was missing the memory of how he arrived there.

"Severus? Can you hear me?" Rainbow asked.

"Yes, yes," he said peevishly as he attempted to sit up and decided that that was a bad idea.

"Good, then my spells to repair your ruptured eardrum worked. Any ringing in your ears?" she asked as her wand waved about his face and chest.

"No," he began to reply, but then the ringing began. "Wait, yes, a bit. Right now."
Rainbow swished her wand about and gave Severus a vial of something to drink, which made the ringing disappear.

Draco, Ginny, Lavender, and Mouna all tried to fit into the guest bedroom, along with Rainbow, so Ginny decided to wait out in the hallway and peer in instead.

Mouna conjured chairs for all to sit around the bed. He gave his wife a nod, which she took as her cue to leave them alone for a while. Ginny came in and closed the door.

"Care to share with us what you were thinking when you decided to go flying on one of the worst days of the year to do so?" the huge wizard asked his friend.

"I wasn't thinking." Severus closed his eyes, recalling why he was laid up in the guest bedroom at the Finaus'.

Normally, he probably would have been brought to the clinic, but Mouna probably told his wife to bring him to their home to keep things quiet while treating him, given Rainbow's previous statement.

"Draco filled me in," Mouna began, "and I can understand why you'd be upset, but – right when you have gained your freedom Hermione promised she would do, the one task that was the reason why she remained behind in England as you told me – why on God's green earth would you do something as foolish as fly off into a cyclone? Why? I know you're not a rash person, just tell me what you were thinking."

Severus looked at his friend and wanted to tell him. "Lavender, Ginny. If you could please step outside. Draco, you may stay."

Once the two witches had left and the door was shut, Mouna put up a Silencing Spell to avoid any eavesdropping.

"In a moment of madness it all made sense," Severus confessed, his eyes glassy and distant. "If I offered myself up to the universe, or whatever being out there is toying with our lives for its amusement, then maybe Hermione wouldn't die. It seems any witch I have ever felt anything for has met an untimely and grisly end. Lily, Gabrielle. Any time I've felt feelings for someone, she died. I took the news of Hermione's near-death at a sign from the Fates that she would not live if I did."
"But she didn't die, Severus," Draco reminded him. "And yes, Potter and Kingsley were too slow to stop the first hex, but remember at Pansy's murder trial, how upset Potter was that that bastard would be set free? This time, Potter let him ramble on and confess to everything so he couldn't get off again, and though Hermione got hurt, she's alive, and well enough that she won us our freedom. Now Goyle, Blaise, and Pansy's murderer has been caught and justice is finally served."

"But it was because of me Parker set his sights on her to kill her," Severus retorted.

"No," Draco corrected him. "You ran out before Lavender told me that Parker targeted Hermione long before she started seeing you. Parker is not just Calpurnia's nephew, he's Dolores Umbridge's godson. Remember how Hermione tricked her out into the Forbidden Forest and let the Centaurs carry her away? This was personal. And Parker hated Muggleborns, too. He was the one who set Dolohov off on a rampage at the Ministry. Parker even confessed he was disappointed at the time Hermione left the lift just before the carnage. It wasn't because of you, it was a matter of circumstance that Parker was stalking us as well, and that he saw Hermione come and go to your flat. Ginny as well."

Severus looked ashen. "But at the trial, if that came up during—"

Draco patted Severus' hand, trying to calm him. "Potter and Kingsley had Lavender come over, while Parker was in custody before Moody saw him. Kingsley had her remove those memories so Parker couldn't tell the Wizengamot during the trial about seeing Ginny or Hermione come and go. Though it did come out about Rancelette, which caused quite the furor, as Lavender told it."

Severus was suddenly quite thankful about Lavender's talent for Memory Charms.

Mounga shook his head. So much sorrow and tragedy in his friend's life. "I'm so sorry that all this transpired, my friend. But imagine how Hermione would have felt, having delivered you the freedom you wanted badly enough that you couldn’t stay in England even for her, only for you to kill yourself. And after she had discovered that you never stopped loving her, but that it was merely the wrong bouquet? C'mon, dude. Even Shakespeare was pushing the boundaries of poorly-timed missed messages in Romeo & Juliet. And this? You die? That would be really fucking tragic."

Now that the immediate shock of grief was no longer consuming him beyond reason, Severus could finally begin to see the logic behind Mounga's assessment.

There was a gentle knock at the door. Mounga pulled the Silencing Spell down and unlocked the
door with his wand, bidding them to enter.

Peeking her head in, Akela said with contrition, "I'm so sorry to bother you, Papa, but Kaimi keeps bugging me to ask you if she can give Uncle Severus his card." She rolled her eyes over his little sister's pestering and lack of patience.

Severus nodded his head that it was indeed all right.

Kaimi poked her head around the door frame. Mounga assured his youngest that she could enter, but told her to keep it brief.

Shuffling into the room, now feeling a bit uncertain and meek with all the adult wizards staring at her, she ducked her head down.

"You have something for me," Severus prompted her gently. She was a sweet child with a kind heart and an adventurous spirit. He was quite fond of her, as much as Severus could be fond of any child.

"I made you a card." She held it out for Severus to take. Climbing up into her father's lap, she began pointing out the artwork she had drawn, explaining the figures in the drawing beneath a sky filled with menacing black clouds and lightning. "That's you falling, and that's me swooping down saving you before you hit the water. That didn't really happen, but I wish I could have been there to save you like you caught me before."
Severus was moved by her concern. He opened the card and read the words written as carefully as possible in a multitude of colored inks, with her fanciest quillmanship.

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'Please get well, Uncle Severus. You're my favorite uncle and I don't want you sick or
hurt anymore.

Love, Kaimi'

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He could only think of Mounga and Rainbow having to tell Kaimi how he had died, if he had succeeded in his original endeavor. And then he thought of Hermione having to hear from Lavender the same news and how she would react.

Severus broke down into sobbing tears.

"I'm sorry you don't like it," Kaimi began to apologize as she slipped from her father's lap.

"No, honey," Mounga assured her. "I think he likes it very much. He's just very tired right now."

He picked up his daughter and carried her from the room, followed behind by Draco, who shut the door behind him. They left Severus alone in peace to cry, the card resting limply in his hands.

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On the wall behind Mounga's desk in his judge's chambers was an American flag from during the Revolution. It seemed even the town judge had an ancestor who had involved him or herself in a Muggle war and then had to seek sanctuary for interfering in a Muggle political conflict. Mounga's ancestor, on his mother's side, was the first American sanctuary-seeker. James Wright came to Malu Palekaiko in 1783, right after the Treaty of Paris and the founding of the United States Department of Magic, which immediately went after witches and wizards who participated in the war in ways that violated international law. The Battle of Saratoga turned the tide of the war for independence and may have ended differently if Mounga's ancestor, James Wright, hadn't used his magic to interfere.

While Severus stared at the flag and thought about his own freedom from the British Ministry of Magic's tyranny, Lavender ooh'ed and ahh'ed over the beautiful koa, monkeypod, and kiawe wood paneling that lined the judge's chambers, asking Mounga about the exotic woods.

On a round table towards one side of the room, a large Pensieve rested. It was large enough for Mounga, two lawyers, a witness, the victim, and the accused to use at once, if there was a discrepancy in testimony to an account of events. Sometimes after such use, either the witness, or plaintiff would change their testimony or plea.
Mounga, Severus, Draco, Ginny, and Lavender all stood around the Pensieve. Lavender placed her wand to her temple and pulled out a silvery thread of thought, then another. She was placing them in the Pensieve in order, showing the highlights of the trial instead of two full days of legal proceedings which included a lot of breaks for the Wizengamot to review Hermione's memories that she had provided as evidence, and rehashing the wording of Dumbledore's will ad nauseum. Hermione did include testimony from a few who did speak on Severus and Draco's behalf. The exonerated pair had already read over Dumbledore's will that morning.

The five of them were pulled into the first memory, which opened with Hermione addressing the Wizengamot. There was some formal addressing of some members of the Wizengamot and rituals involved, as Hermione had studied cases that had seemed most impossible to win that had actually won, and their keys to success. Somehow, using certain language – and following some silly and pointless procedures that had no bearing on the case – would certainly sway judgment in her favor.

Next in the Pensieve came Hermione to state her case, along with a brief outline of her points, and her promise to provide evidence for each one.

Severus watched how at the mention of his name, her lip curled slightly, just as it had in his dream of her.

"She really does hate me," Severus murmured to himself quietly enough that no one else heard him. He didn't like how thin she was becoming again, and he would speak to Lavender to ensure his beloved was eating properly.

During certain points of the memories, Lavender made some comments so that no one would miss something of interest regarding the trial.

They skipped from one memory to another, moving forward sequentially.

Severus and Draco watched intently as Hermione countered one of Moody's claims. The Senior Auror was arguing against exoneration of their names.

Hermione pointed out, "Did you or did you not deny Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy the opportunity for them to confess their innocence with the use of Veritaserum regarding the matter of the Death Eaters invading Hogwarts on the date in question? And did you also deny them the chance to take Veritaserum again when they wished to profess their innocence in regards to the claim they were somehow involved in Headmaster Albus Dumbledore's death?"
Mounga leaned over and said to Severus quietly, "She would have made a fantastic lawyer. I can see why you love her so much."

Lavender waved her hands that Mounga should be quiet as they were getting to the best part.

"I wouldn't say I denied them," Moody said evasively.

"Well, what would you call it, then? Refusal? Decline? Or just plain old rejection of an opportunity to prove their innocence?" Hermione turned to speak to not only the Wizengamot, but the crowds that packed the stands, eliciting murmurs from the observers. She seemed to sense that pandering to the crowd might sway the Wizengamot if public sentiment was on her side.

Severus noted how Moody was beginning to squirm from her line of questioning.

"There hadn't been time since the end of the war to address such matters," Moody countered.

"But time enough for surprise inspections and forcing Veritaserum down their throats in order to see if they were adhering to the Death Eater Decree? Why didn't you ask them about their innocence then, since you had used Veritaserum on them after the war?" Hermione asked, her voice slightly tinged with mock surprise, drawing the crowd around to her side.

Moody did not answer, which gave Severus great delight in watching the spotlight placed on his nemesis in such a manner.

"I have here the memory of Severus Snape speaking with Albus Dumbledore the night that the Headmaster passed away," she announced, holding a vial high in her hand.

"How did you–" Moody began, but he was cut off by Hermione.

"How I came upon this memory is inconsequential to the fact that you have refused to allow Severus Snape or Draco Malfoy to clear their names in Dumbledore's death, or in the accusation of their bringing Death Eaters into Hogwarts. In fact, you have obscured the fact of their true loyalty to Albus Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix."
"I also have here my memories of the final battle," Hermione announced, adding more vials of memories to her hand that remained aloft for the Wizengamot and audience to see. "Of one memory in which Draco Malfoy prevented Ronald Weasley from being struck by a curse from the Death Eater Branby Dollous. And another memory in which both Harry Potter and myself were prevented from being hit by potentially deadly, or at least, gravely injurious spells cast by the Death Eaters Lucius Malfoy and Rabastan Lestrange. Those counter-spells were cast by Severus Snape."

There was a blast of light and the vials that held silvery threads of thought shattered, spilling onto the center floor of the room.

Severus and Draco stood up from their seats aghast, as Pensieve-Moody kept his wand aloft. The spell came from his wand, destroying the memories Hermione had held in her hand. The crowd surrounding them in the memory roared with disapproval.

They were about to start shouting, but Lavender told them to sit down as it was going to get really good.

Memory-Hermione shook her hand, shaking off the last of the memories and shards of glass clinging to her hand.

"There will be no lies or false memories shared in these proceedings," Moody bellowed.

His statement was met with hisses from the crowd. The Chief Warlock, a new one by the name of Blunderbunt, banged her gavel and called for order.

Hermione cast a sardonic smile toward Moody. "Do you think the Wizengamot is so dim and naïve as to not spot an altered or tampered memory?" She shook her head disapprovingly, challenging his assertions. "Either you, a Senior Auror, are poorly qualified for the position you hold, or you are being disingenuous if you think so." Hermione turned around to face the Wizengamot once more. "But since I came prepared in case you might try to destroy evidence, just as you suppressed evidence in the past, those memories I held aloft were not the ones meant for the Wizengamot to view as evidence, unless you think my memory of what I had for breakfast and brushing my teeth this morning somehow pertains to these proceedings."

Hermione's éclat left Severus stunned; he was in awe of her presence, and of her cleverness. Draco laughed heartily and Ginny clapped with excited approval, even though this was just a memory.
Moody's stunt condemned his case, having proven through his actions in front of the Wizengamot, that he was determined to not let anyone prove Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy's innocence.

The memories skipped around a bit more, as the key memories were viewed by the Wizengamot. Near the end, as Hermione was making closing statements, she also insisted since Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy should have never been placed under the Death Eater Decree that all possessions seized by the Ministry should be returned in full. If that was not possible, equitable compensation should be given.

Draco held his breath.

Once Hermione was done with her closing statement, Lavender's memory skipped to the reading of the Wizengamot's decision.

Not only were Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy to be fully exonerated on the charges of Albus Dumbledore's death and any claims they had any part of the Death Eaters attacking Hogwarts, but they were no longer to be included under the Death Eater Decree. In addition, all monies and valuables seized from their Gringotts vaults were to be returned or compensated for at fair value. Residences of both wizards were returned to them as well, and a formal apology from the Ministry of Magic issued, especially regarding Alastor Moody's unprofessional behavior.

As everyone found themselves back in Mounga's chamber, Draco and Ginny kissed, ebullient at the final verdict and the news that Malfoy Manor had been restored to Draco. Severus sat down in a chair in order to soak in the whole experience of what they just witnessed. It was better than any dream he had of a pardon. Well, he did hope for the nomination of an Order of Merlin, First Class as well, but this was better as it was not some daydream – it was a fact.

"I noticed how no one made mention of the whereabouts of Draco or Severus during the trial," Ginny observed.

"Yes, I did too," Lavender agreed dryly as she took a seat and eased herself down into it. "But it seems that the Wizengamot had been apprised of how you two went missing before the trial, especially after Severus showed up on the front cover of Obscure Oozes & Fabulous Fluids. To bring it up in front of the spectators who watched the trial would merely cause more public 'scandal,' in addition to Moody's performance as an Auror in these matters."

There were so many things Severus wanted to tell Hermione, and he wished more than anything
she was there. Maybe he finally found something to commit to parchment for Lavender to take back and personally deliver to her, given how he had lacked the inspiration before.

Hermione hated to admit it, but the one day of mandatory rest recharged her batteries more than she could have guessed. It also helped that she no longer had a trial to prepare for.

Looking over the bill of lading listing the materials that had arrived that morning, and the orders for new materials that she would owl off to suppliers later that day to meet demand for the week's production schedule, Hermione calculated gross profits based on the current costs. Once that was done, there was a check of production on the warehouse floor on vats and cauldrons bubbling and brewing away. Only then could she go back upstairs and begin her work with Albert on the latest product they were developing. Hermione was trying to find a way to make sure the baby bubble bath potion would make owl-, cat-, and frog-shaped bubbles down to the last drop.

Lavender's short trip abroad was a good test run to see how Hermione was coming up to speed on running the company. She would have that task while the company's founder was gone during maternity leave beginning around Halloween, give or take a week or two. So far it was nothing that Hermione couldn't handle.

Albert was glad that his apprentice had bounced back after such a harrowing experience. He had known good wizards and witches who had broken under less strenuous circumstances, even without being assaulted. He had given her "the talk" that nearly every Potions master has with their apprentice when they use Potions as a way to keep up with some perceived grueling timeline they must keep up with. He understood why Hermione was rushing to master her languages, theories, code of ethics and all, but he knew there were limits to what even witches and wizards could reasonably do.

Hermione started taking her lunch break to actually rest and eat, instead of rushing off to cram a few more irregular verbs into her understanding of Spanish. With a brief bit of rest, she found she had better retention of what she was reading. She was also eating more by enjoying what the elves at the company served up for lunch, instead of skipping and nibbling meagerly. A month ago, she was starting to look gaunt, but now she wasn't jagged bones anymore.

Putting her mind to her regular Potions work and helping run Lavender's company kept her busy enough so she didn't have to fixate about a certain wizard on the other side of the world, and if Malu Palekaiko was chock full of leggy blondes.

Severus was back to work Monday morning with no one else in the town wiser to what had transpired. All bits of Severus' broom had been salvaged from the beach, and he was going to discreetly order a new one later that week.
Before showing up to work, though, Severus had to brew up a batch of the temporary hair dye he'd developed for his former employer. It seems that being slightly struck by lightning had left him with a small solid white streak of hair at his left temple. Rainbow and Ginny said it made him look distinguished. Akela agreed with Draco that it made him look older.

In order to avoid questions about the sudden streak of white that went from the roots to the tips, he colored it to hide it from view. Later, the Potions master could come up with a more permanent solution where he could gradually introduce the gray a few strands at a time.

Draco came in to work, booking clients for Severus and tutoring students in Charms and Transfiguration.

Since Ginny was done preparing for the Pele Festival, she had much more time during her days, as most of her belly dance students took classes in the latter half of the afternoon and early evening. Ginny was showing Lavender about the island during the day.

Severus and the Malfoys took turns hosting Lavender for dinner at their respective homes, in addition to taking her out to some of the finer dining establishments on the island. Lavender was under the impression it was all pineapples and poi, until she ate at Mario's restaurant, amazed that she was able to find good Italian cuisine so far from Italy. He also had some French, Greek, and Spanish items on the menu, but his specialty was cuisine from his home country.

While sitting around the table at Mario's Wednesday night, sipping on a glass of after-dinner port, Severus asked Lavender, "And when do you plan on returning to England?"

"I was thinking of taking a Friday morning Portkey back home." Lavender was sipping some ginger tea while watching a gecko climb the wall behind Severus' head, glad there was some creature on the island that was keeping the giant cockroach population in check. "If there is a letter or gift you'd like for me to bring back to Hermione, I will personally deliver it myself so that there are no mix-ups."

"Or I can deliver it," offered Draco.

Severus did a double-take, understanding the implications of his remark. "You're going back?"

Ginny answered, "Yes. Since watching Lavender's memories and seeing the title of Malfoy Manor
restored to Draco, we decided we'll be going back." She quickly added when she saw Severus' brow knit, "But it's only for a short trip. Draco and I both agree that Malu Palekaiko is now our home, but he wants to check on his vault—"

Draco interrupted her with a small correction. "Our vault."

"Our vault to see if all that the Ministry took has been returned. Then there are repairs to Malfoy Manor, since it has been abandoned these years since the end of the war. Plus, I'd like to see some family."

Lavender jumped into the conversation, asking with disbelief, "Wait, I thought you said—"

"I know what I said," Ginny replied, "and while I'm still angry at my mother, I do want to see my father. And the twins, if they'll still speak with me. And Bill. And from what you've told me, Ron also."

"It was bad enough when she went a little..." Lavender said, expanding upon the comment with a twist of her hand and the crossing of her eyes, adding a short whistle for effect to describe Molly's breakdown.

Severus had heard from Ginny about the Howler she'd sent her mother, and Lavender's description of its after-effects. He would have loved to have seen it upon delivery.

"She still gets a bit twitchy when she sees me," Lavender admitted. "Let's hope she doesn't go 'round the bend once more if you see her."

"Would that be such a terrible thing?" Draco asked snidely, still wanting to hex Molly Weasley and delighted by her misery. She had dished enough of it to him and his wife that payback was only fair.

Severus could only think of Arthur and what he must be going through. Though he held little sympathy for Molly, given what she had done to manipulate so many, Severus did feel pity for the patriarch of the Weasley family, having a wife go temporarily mad.

Draco turned back to Severus and quirked a brow. "So if there is a letter you'd like to finish and a new bouquet of flowers I can deliver, I would be more than happy to do that."
"How long do you think you'll be gone?" Severus asked, happy Draco was able to reclaim his property stolen from him, and a little envious he had the fortitude to return to England once more.

Severus had sworn to Hermione that even if she won him his freedom, he'd never come back. With Potter, he said that if Hermione was hurt, he'd consider coming back to put an end to him. And while Harry had mostly kept Hermione safe, Severus still could not bear the thought of stepping upon British soil ever again. It was too soon and his freedom only recently won.

"About a week. I've already canceled my tutoring sessions for while we're gone. And Ginny can't be gone long, with her first belly dance recital to be held during Oktoberfest in a little over a month."

Draco then looked to Lavender and the two exchanged an awkward glance, full of hidden meaning. Lavender jutted her chin and Draco made a face with his brow knit. The witch raised her brow, giving him a look full of knowing, and Draco gave a look of resignation back and nodded. The nonverbal conversation ended when Lavender tilted her head and lowered her eyes in a manner to suggest that Draco should go first.

Heaving a great sigh, Draco began, "Well, I was going to save this for Christmas or your birthday, when plans were farther along. However, given how you and Hermione left each other on ambiguous terms and how nearly disastrous it turned out, and considering how you're both pining for each other still, I might as well tell you.

Severus wasn't sure if this was going to be good news or bad news, but given Draco was going to tell him in a way that Severus was supposed to find pleasing, he wasn't quite so worried. He still crossed his arms in front of his chest out of habit, not caring for Draco's prologue.

"Back in February, I owled Lavender with an idea." Draco said. "Let's face it, tutoring is merely something to keep me busy, as there are other things I'd rather do for a career. So hopefully next year, Lavender will be opening an Asia-Pacific office and manufacturing branch of The Lovely Lavender Company, with me as the Vice President of Marketing and Advertising of the Asia-Pacific region, right here in Malu Palekaiko." Draco was saving the best for last, so he could see the look of surprise on his co-worker's face. "And this new regional headquarters will be run by one newly-minted Potions mistress, Hermione Weasley."

Severus recalled how Lavender had suddenly changed her travel plans after finding out the flowers were a mistake. "And that's why you stayed with your change of plans? That for the fact it was a mix-up and not my intent to hurt Hermione, you decided to go forward with opening your offices here?"
"Very astute, Severus." Lavender sipped her ginger tea, looking very self-satisfied that it all worked out in the end.

"And how do you know that Hermione will still want to come here, much less take me back, even though I never left her?" Severus was hoping Hermione would forgive him, though he was not the one who required forgiveness.

"If Hermione was able to be my bridesmaid at my wedding to Ron, I think she can easily forgive you over a simple mistake that was not of your doing," Lavender reminded him.

"Wait, What?" Ginny interjected with disbelief. "Hermione was a bridesmaid at YOUR wedding to my brother, to her ex-husband?"

"Yes, and she was the picture of grace and tact, despite the best man using her name during the toast to the bride and groom."

Draco could only laugh and shake his head. "Any other bits of perception-shredding news we should be made aware of before we Portkey back home, in order to avoid a faux pas of epic proportions?"

So much had transpired in England since the three of them left, and so much had transpired for him as well in Hawaii. For the fact that plans had already been in the works for months meant Hermione already knew that she would be returning to him for a while. Those flowers which spoke of betrayal and loathing were why they had hurt her all the more, her hopes dashed. But now it could all be set to rights. Not only would Hermione be looking forward to them reuniting, but Severus now knew that she would return to him someday soon as well.

As part of her apprenticeship, Hermione had to learn to haggle and deal with suppliers. She was getting plenty of experience in that area, helping run Lavender's company and negotiating with commercial suppliers, but Albert needed to teach her the fine aspect of dealing with small-time suppliers of rarer ingredients.

Albert and Hermione emerged from the fireplace, Flooing directly from The Lovely Lavender Company headquarters in London to the Hog's Head in Hogsmeade. After dusting the soot from their cloaks, they looked about until Albert spotted his business associate.
"Business associate" was a generous term for the wizard sitting over in the corner, hunched over his tankard of ale and a grisly haunch of mutton on a pewter platter. The tankard was dented, which seemed to match the wizard's face.

Albert sat down, followed by Hermione. Aberforth came over and gave Hermione a discreet nod, acknowledging a fellow member of the Order, and asked if they want anything.

"Two glasses of Ogden's," Albert replied.

Aberforth returned and placed their drinks in front of them before going back behind the bar. The glassware was just as dirty as Hermione remembered from the last time she was there during the war, or possibly more.

Including the owner-bartender, there were only five people in the entire establishment, which suited the seller just fine. The other patron was a very old wizard on the other side of the room; he was wearing a ragged tartan kilt, with a dirty tam-o'-shanter precariously perched upon his head that was resting upon the table.

"See you got yourself a new wife," the grizzled wizard observed.

"Apprentice," the Potions master corrected him.

"Why buy the sheep if you can get the wool for free, plus a bit of cheese," he chuckled to himself, amused over the cleverness of his own disparaging joke.

Hermione had been warned to take whatever may be said in stride and to merely observe. Learning to deal with characters of this sort were part of the experience of becoming a master or mistress, unpleasant as it may be.

Albert lifted the drink to his lips, but Hermione noted that he didn't sip, only making it appear he was partaking of the libation. This gesture by Albert was to put the other wizard at ease, since drinking and business seemed to go hand in hand with some of the older wizards. Hermione did the same, bringing the drink to her lips and pretending to drink.

This seemed to indicate that business could proceed, as the haggard, unkempt wizard got right down to it. "I've got a hefty lock of succubus hair to sell you. Are you still interested?"
Hermione had never seen succubus hair come through the Department of Standards & Regulations in all her years working there. She had since read of it used in some potions during her apprenticeship, but was unfamiliar with it. Hermione was aware of the Dark Arts aspects of the dark creatures. Whereas hags, banshees, and veelas were integrated and productive members of wizarding society, succubi had a wild and untamable streak in them which made them as dangerous as vampires and hard for men to resist their sexual advances. There were reports of brothels in Turkey run by succubi – wizards and Muggle men entered the brothels, and none left.

Albert fondled the lock of hair, which was long and black, it looked and felt as luxurious as silk.

"Mind if I test a strand for verification?"

The seller nodded his head, but asked that Albert take a small snippet versus the whole shaft of hair.

Albert pulled a vial out and placed the hair sample into it. Hermione had already prepared a testing solution according to Albert's direction before they Floo'ed to the Hog's Head. Inside the vial was a base solution which would react to the acidic nature of the succabus; it would react with a frothing of purple foam when shaken together.

The hair was indeed succubus hair. Albert discreetly slipped the old wizard, whose name Hermione still didn't know, a pouch of Galleons. She wondered if a short-haired succubus was wandering around the British Isles, as any attempt to sneak the hair into Britain would have instantly resulted in it winding up in a Ministry locker for smuggled goods. Then again, succubus hair was not a registered Potions ingredient with the Ministry, and therefore possibly not subject to the same regulation.

"Doing business with you is almost as good as the time I had while getting that hair," the wizard said with a lecherous grin. This showed Hermione his mouth full of half-rotten and chipped teeth, at least the ones that were still in his head.

To conclude business, all three of them drank, Albert and Hermione pretending, the old wizard unaware they weren't imbibing.

Before Albert and Hermione began to leave, the other old wizard in the plaid kilt rose from his seat. Now awake, he ambled over to the fireplace and raised a leg to set upon the andirons that jutted out from the hearth. He missed, and it took another try before his worn leather boot rested
Turning to look at the old Scottish wizard by the fireplace, Hermione sat there in amazement as he opened his mouth and a tenor voice that was sweet and clear came forth. Albert had heard the wizard sing a few times over the decades, and it was the same song the old Highlander sang.

"A wizard called Eòin Greumson
Of bonnie Blackbriar Dornoch
Was bid to fight the goblin horde
Rebellion rose an' duty call'd..."

Sitting there, Hermione heard the old ballad sung with heartfelt longing, bringing tears to her eyes quickly, of lovers separated, with the wizard killing himself in the end to join his witch in death. She could only think of Severus and how circumstance kept them apart. Hermione was unsure if they'd ever see each other ever again, especially now. Listening to the lyrics of how poor Maighread died, she wondered if Severus would have been equally heartbroken as Eòin had she not survived Alan's attack.

Now done, the old wizard from the Highlands ambled back over to his table and laid his head down once more, after downing his firewhisky in one go.

Wiping away the last of her tears, she noticed Albert and even the somewhat gruff wizard were also wiping away their own stray tears as well. She was not the only one affected by the song.

Albert patted her shoulder and indicated it was time to leave.

Hermione wondered how Severus had reacted to Lavender's news of her escape from a death that would have been certain if it weren't for Harry. Would he have even cared?

"Actually, I need to speak to your mother, Rainbow. And I will need your assistance, and Kaimi's as well probably." Severus watched as the young witch blinked back in surprise, wondering how she could help such an accomplished Potions master and more experienced wizard.
"Um, sure. Hang on a sec."

Akela left and came back with her mother, who sat down in the chair opposite from the couch where Severus was sitting.

"As you are aware, there was a great misunderstanding regarding the delivery of the wrong flowers to someone," he began, since Akela was unaware of the finer details of the course of events and he was filling her in. "And with Draco and Ginny going back to England, not only will Mrs. Lavender Weasley be clearing up the matter with the florist, but I wish to also send a lei back to be presented to Hermione by Draco and Ginny. Since I was presented with such a lovely lei upon my welcome, I was hoping you could help me with creating one for Hermione."

Rainbow smiled back serenely and assured him she and the girls would be happy to help him. Severus could have gone to the florist in town, but after living in Hawaii all these months, he'd observed the best flower leis were the ones made by the giver. Every single flower was picked with care from the giver's yard – or their neighbor's. The flowers were all gently strung together with thread, and the ends of the lei were usually hand-tied with a festive ribbon. A store-bought lei wasn't the same.

A lei was supposed to be presented by the giver with a respectful bow and raised to the level of the giver's heart. Draco would have to stand in his stead, since Severus was not going back to England to present a lei.

Akela asked, her mind seeking to make connections between everyone involved. "Mrs. Weasley who is visiting here. Is she married to one of the brothers of that big fat jerk Quidditch player in the calendar I burned?" She remembered how that particular wizard was mean to a "dear friend" of Uncle Severus.

"Mrs. Weasley is married to that particular Quidditch player."

Severus was amazed the girl could unhinge her jaw like a snake as it suddenly hung open. She was gaping in shock, making the connection Lavender was now married to the wizard who had hurt Uncle Severus' "dear friend."

"And I would advise you from referring to Mrs. Weasley's husband with those particular terms, at least while she is still here on the island. Once she's gone, feel free to go back to referring to him that way." Severus said with a slight smile curled upon the corner of his lip.
There was no need to remind the two witches about discretion, especially since Akela had her own history with Kiki and Ulrich, the island's latest little love triangle which ended badly. Akela didn't like being in the center of the rumor mill, and she had already promised months ago to remain quiet about Severus' contentious ties to Ronald Weasley.

They moved into the kitchen and asked Kaimi to join them, since she was particularly skilled at stringing flowers, making sure not to bruise them in the process.

Rainbow pulled out a piece of parchment, along with a quill and ink, ready to scratch out some ideas before they began. "So, what sentiments do you wish to impart in your lei to this Hermione?"

With this lei, Severus hoped whatever hurt Hermione felt could be mended. Hopefully.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Title attributed to quote by Jacques Bénigne Bossuel

Fan art by Pengu, commissioned by me. You can view Kaimi's card to Severus here: http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/post/150095394755/fan-art-by-pengu-no-link-available-commissioned

As always, thank you to be fabulous betas, JuneW and Cygnuz.
Chapter Summary

Some wrongs are righted, and plans to address other wrongs are hatched. Severus gets adopted.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Ninety-Two
"Guess Who's Coming to Dinner"

Disclaimer: O my fanfic like a pale, pale copy,
That's twisted into a new story:
O my fanfic borrows everything from Rowling,
That she owns, not me.

As fair art thou, my darling author,
So deep in awe am I;
And I will luve Harry Potter, my Jo,
Till a' the seas gang dry.

A/N: This disclaimer is a poor parody of Robert Burns' poem, “A Red, Red Rose.”

The squawking in the kitchen woke Hermione up. Rising to see what the matter was with Calleo, she found her owl in the midst of a turf war with Pigwidgeon over the sweetest spot on the perch. This spot granted the best access to the bowl of owl treats Hermione left out for her owl and any visiting ones that came to deliver messages.

"Shove over, Calleo. You get to sit there most of the day, and you'll be too fat to fly if you keep eating too many treats anyway," Hermione chastised her pet. She didn't mean to be short with the bird, but Hermione was anxious regarding news of Lavender's return.

Seeing the note still clasped in Pig's claw, she relieved the bird of its message and gave it a brief pet on the head. This resulted in Calleo taking a nip at Hermione's hand for rebuking her.
Hermione was glad it was not another Howler, as she had received quite a few for winning exoneration for Severus and Draco. One of the worst was from Padma Patil, who called her a "Death Eater-loving turncoat cunt of a traitor that [she] hope dies a tortuously painful death soon." And some of the glares Hermione received in public were just as bad as when news of her divorce initially broke, if not worse. She had taken to gliding about Diagon Alley with her hood pulled up, concealing her face, even on warm summer days and evenings. She had a great deal of empathy as to why Severus had done the same, like when she spotted him in Flourish and Blotts that one sultry evening and knew him only as Calleo at the time.

Hermione opened the letter and sighed that more information wasn’t shared.

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Dear Hermione,

Come over to the house for dinner tonight when you’re done with your work today.

Regards,

Lav & Ron

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Looking at the handwriting, she knew her boss had written this, not her ex-husband. Hermione got a sinking feeling that they wanted to butter her up with a good meal before delivering news regarding Severus, since Severus was the one who’d first warned her, and was correct, that the worse the news was, the better the nibbles.

Over at Albert’s, while working on his garden she had slightly neglected during her time preparing her legal case, she found out he had also received a note that morning from their employer, bidding him to come over to dinner as well. The more Hermione thought about it, the more she dreaded the event.

Albert kept her busy at work with some late-summer deadheading, and harvesting of herbs and fruits which were at their peak. Berries and other items needed to be laid out for drying in the shed, before they were washed, dried, then preserved in various fluids for later use in tinctures, salves, and other elixirs.
After a busy morning at Albert's, she was even busier over at Neville's nursery, getting the spring bulbs ready for planting in pots to be sold in the spring when they bloomed. There were a lot of bulbs to be potted, and the sand and peat mix was rather dusty. There seemed to be a small cloud of fine peat which rose with each trowel full of the soil mix she used to bury the bulbs and corms to the right depth, making sure to keep them pointing right way up. At the end of the day, there seemed to be a halo of dirt about her head.

Hermione didn't feel like going through the bother of cleaning up if she was going to be handed bad news. As much as she was reluctant to put in the effort, she dragged her arse through the shower and cleaned up for dinner. She picked out something that seemed presentable, but she didn't bother to dress up. Make-up was not even considered if it was only going to get smudged with crying later on.

Upon arriving at Ron and Lavender's via Floo, she was shown into the solarium. Immediately, she spotted Harry and Ron over by the lush *Rhapis excelsa*, no doubt discussing Quidditch. Albert and Lavender were sitting down in chairs close by the cluster of troll's foot ferns, a glass of some apéritif in the Potions master's hand.

"Hermione!"

She recognized that voice, but had to turn around to spy Ginny. There was her red-headed best friend, standing next to Zhubanysh Potter and Draco Malfoy.

Hermione stood there in shock, not only at the sight of Ginny and Malfoy, but everyone in the same room, and war hadn't broken out yet. Had many of the people present in the room at that very moment been in the same room a year ago, a third wizarding war would have surely erupted.

As the two old friends embraced, Hermione was overjoyed. She said with amazement, "I had no idea you came back! When?"

"Last night," Ginny replied, near giddy from the excitement of seeing Hermione again. "We came back with Lavender after learning of the good news of you winning Draco and Severus their freedom."

Upon hearing the mention of Severus' name, Hermione's mood suddenly soured. She put on a brave face, but it was easy to see she was bracing herself for more bad news.
Draco approached the pair, a gentle smile upon his lips, but his eyes cool as if hiding some simmering resentment. "I think there is someone who owes you an apology." Holding up his hand, he snapped his fingers.

Vradian Bumbershoot, the careless floral delivery boy, was unceremoniously shoved into view of the door frame to the solarium.

Hermione had spun about expecting to see Severus, but instead spotted a spotty youth with a petulant frown upon his mug. He was holding a very large vase filed with stems of corchorus, oak-leaved geranium, and forget-me-nots, with slender branches of flowering almond and spindle tree. Behind him, his employers, the Willow sisters, prodded him along as he shuffled uneasily towards Hermione.

"I'm very sorry, but it seems I delivered the wrong flowers to you. Last month." Vradian didn't look sorry at all, as if he was being forced to do this against his will. "Here." He held out the vase of flowers, while doing his best to not let a sneer curl upon his lip.

He was forced to do this with the threat of all his summer's wages being garnished should this grave oversight not be remedied, once the Willow sisters were informed of the error. The sisters told Lavender about this, as they were smart enough to want the owner of The Lovely Lavender Company on their side; they did not want potential future sales lost.

Vradian already had to dodge a rather nasty hex when Esmeralda Gravenstein was given her bouquet mean for her a month ago. At least he delivered the new bouquet earlier that day before she walked down the aisle and the champagne was uncorked, though it looked like there was going to be a lot of uneaten wedding cake that was going to go in the dustbin that night. Stephen Stronder gave the Willow sisters a big tip, actually enjoying the sight of his ex-bride-to-be receiving her flowers just before the wedding, forgiving the florist for the mix up. It seems the timing of the wedding-day delivery was better since he got a front row seat to watch her humiliated and shamed in front of all their friends and family, reminding him also why he tried dumping her the first time. Neville's grandmother heard the story from a friend of a friend of the Stronder family, a tale she would share with her grandson because it involved flowers, and Neville would later share with Hermione.

The young wizard just hoped this Hermione wasn't going to threaten his manhood, unlike that bride-turned-harpy.

"You mean..." Hermione took the flowers from the delivery boy and looked over each stem, noting the symbolism. Tears begun to brim over and she started to cry. "But I thought somehow he knew about..."
Hermione stopped herself short, not wanting to announce to the whole room that she had slept with Neville Longbottom.

The Willow sisters and their now former employee made a discreet exit.

Draco took the flowers from Hermione, the coolness in his gaze now replaced with warmth and sympathy, while Ginny turned to embrace her friend, whispering quietly into her hair so no one else could hear, "We'll talk later. Just know that he still loves you and has never stopped. Don't worry."

The tone in Ginny's voice told her that somehow Severus knew, but Hermione still didn't know how. Hermione also picked up the tone of forgiveness in Ginny's explanation, and it only made the guilt of the act burn like hot acid, churning in her gut.

Placing a hand over her mouth, to muffle her cries, she sobbed, "I thought..."

The Potters and Ron were unaware of the significance of the flowers to Hermione and what it had meant to her. Lavender knew and was moved by Hermione's emotional outburst, breaking into tears herself, which set off a cascade of more tears with Ginny and Zhubanysh joining in, all their emotions moved easily by their hormonal state.

"Bloody hell, is anyone else going to break into tears?" Ron asked, wondering it was going to get any more contagious.

Hermione laughed, thankful for Ron's tactless humor, since it seemed to give some levity to the moment. Wiping away the last of her tears, she was momentarily stunned when Draco swept her up into his arms and hugged her like an old friend.

"I never got a chance to thank you for all that you have done for Severus, Ginny, and me. Thank you," Draco said with heartfelt sincerity that seemed to push Hermione into a fresh wave of tears.

Hermione finally hugged him back, herself awash with relief that the nightmare of Severus leaving her was over. She couldn't stop crying, she was so overcome after battling with herself and her heart for the past month.
There were times she had tried to convince herself it wasn't like Severus to do this, and at other times, she had convinced herself that he had cast her aside, to easily build yet another wall around his heart. Now she knew the truth. As bruised as her heart was, it began to mend in that moment when she saw the right flowers delivered to her – finally.

Lavender asked the Potters, Albert, and her husband to adjoin to the dining room and leave the Malfoys and Hermione alone for a moment.

When the doors to the solarium closed, Hermione nearly collapsed into a chair as she sat down. "How? If the first bouquet of flowers was nothing but a mix-up, how did he find out about..."

"About you and Neville?" Ginny finished her sentence, confirming that she and Draco, and indeed Severus, knew as well.

Hermione broke into more tears, feeling quite ashamed at the memory of it.

"Lavender, in the heat of the moment, and in her slightly pregnancy hormone-addled mind, let it accidentally slip. It was when Severus quite hostilely, and justly, wondered why you and Lavender would assume that the right flowers were delivered instead of questioning the florist on a mix-up," Draco informed her.

"What?!?"

What was relief had now turned to panic about Severus knowing about her and Neville with certainty. The fact was they had never made any formal promises to one another about fidelity, and in the personal memory he'd left for her he did give her permission to move on with her life. Still, Hermione already had intentions of returning to Severus when she'd slept with Neville, which made it seem like cheating on him, though technically it wasn't. Exactly. Sort of.

"How upset was he?" Hermione asked, wondering about the damage caused to their relationship.

"Let's just say you weren't the only one missing each other terribly and who slipped in a moment of weakness," Draco assured her, making it clear that Severus had no case in which to point a finger at her without becoming a hypocrite.

While this was somewhat of a relief to Hermione that she wasn't the only one who had faltered,
strangely enough, it still stung a bit that Severus had been with someone else.

"And he has been moping around, regretting it since it happened. He seems to feel about as guilty about it as you seem to be." Ginny had sat down next to her friend and patted her back, which resulted in Hermione leaning into her for support. "So do as Draco suggested to Severus: forgive each other, put it behind you, and move forward."

There were more details behind how Severus and Maria had wound up in that situation, but Ginny and Draco felt there was no need to tell it. Besides, Hermione didn't need to get a bad impression of Rainbow who had orchestrated the whole opportunity. The healer had thought she was doing a good deed by setting Severus up with an available witch, unaware Severus' heart belonged to another. Hermione and Rainbow would be dealing with each other a lot in the future, and there was no need to cause bad blood between them before they had even met.

Draco patted Hermione on the shoulder before going over to a console table by the wall to fetch a large flat box. Ginny rose and encouraged Hermione to stand as well, knowing what her husband planned to do next.

Reaching into the box, Draco pulled out a lei of deep pink roses, symbolic of gratitude, strung with pikake jasmine flowers in between the rosebuds.

"You have Ginny's and my eternal thanks and appreciation for all that you have done to help us." Draco raised the lei above his heart in the formal ceremonial way of presenting a lei with great respect.

Hermione, having read her Hawaiian guidebooks, knew to take the lei and place it over her own head.

"And the Arabian jasmine flowers?" she asked, wondering if the flower's symbolism was the same in Hawaii as in England.

"For friendship," he replied.

Hermione could hardly believe this was the same wizard who had looked at her with loathing, while he was in Polyjuice form as Harry, the morning they fled. It was only now that Hermione finally noticed the matching wedding bands he and Ginny wore. Now she understood: the couple finally had the life they had dreamed of having together for so many years. And with Hermione
winning his freedom, they could come back to England together, no longer hiding their love for one another.

Draco reached into the box once more. "And this lei is from Severus," he announced before presenting it to Hermione.

It was stunning. Hermione wanted to break into tears once more. She pressed her palm lightly against her chest as if the sight of this had taken her breath away.

It was a double-strand lei. The first strand was white ginger flowers, strung with so many flowers that it was full and round, twisted together around a second strand of alternating white plumeria, and purple-tipped white orchids.

"In Hawaii, white ginger is symbolic of love and romance. Plumeria is for new beginnings and hope. And Severus chose orchids based on the European symbolism for beauty." Draco kept the lei held aloft until Hermione could find the strength to take it from him and place it over her head. "Severus helped pick the flowers and string this himself, because no store-bought lei could adequately convey his love for you."

Draco conjured a handkerchief for Hermione when she broke into yet another fresh wave of tears, after she finished placing the lei upon her own shoulders.

"Severus wished he could come back, but he said you would understand why he couldn't," Draco said somberly.

Hermione nodded. She understood why no prisoner would want to return to a cell they had fought so long to escape, which is why she was so surprised to see Draco and Ginny back in England.

"Thank you," Hermione whispered to them both, having lost her voice. She didn't know what she could say to convey how overwhelmed she was by the revelations of that evening.

Draco escorted his wife and Hermione to join the others in the dining room. There, the conversation turned lighter, as the Malfoys told the tale of how earlier in the day they turned up on Molly and Arthur's doorstep with a large basket full of tropical fruit and news of another grandchild on the way.
Hermione was thrilled and congratulated the Malfoys on the news of Ginny's pregnancy. It suddenly struck her that she was the only one present who wasn't expecting a child, as even Albert had another great-great-grandchild on the way. In a brief moment, she wondered if she and Severus would ever have children, as they had never discussed it.

Both Ron and Harry laughed at some of Draco's remarks regarding Molly. All three wizards were still feeling rather uncharitable towards the Weasley matriarch, who had significantly interfered in their lives, and not in a good way.

The rest of the conversation was surprisingly amicable. Hermione found out later Lavender had everyone, except her and Albert, come over earlier and air their grievances before she arrived. There were some heated and hasty words and some initial dueling, but in the end, no one could deny that they were all much happier in their current arrangement. Even Harry had to admit that before Ginny started seeing Draco secretly, their marriage was already heavily strained. Ginny and Zhubanysh got on like old friends from the start, Mrs. Malfoy thrilled Harry had found someone who loved him like he deserved and could, like Ginny could not.

More news of what had happened since the Malfoys left months ago went around the table. Hermione shared that her old boss, Madam Dushka, had finally given birth. The gossip rags had found out about the little love triangle between the Dushkas and Trevor Spawn, and published speculative rumors about the paternity of the child; Hermione had not heard from Trevor if it was his or not. However, that piece of gossip had passed out of favor for news of the upcoming election and how Cornelius Fudge and Amelia Bones were neck and neck in the polls.

The subject of politics brought about quite a ruckus, with everyone ready to give their very heated and personal views on the matter. Lavender banned the topic until after dinner, when it could be discussed when cutlery was not at hand, even though everyone still had their own wands. It was not that anyone disagreed about Fudge being a feckless twat manipulated by his Machiavellian Slytherin of a wife and her machinations, but it did cause tempers to rise that he was still in power, along with his wife who pulled his strings.

Harry shared the good news about Moody's suspension until the senior Auror's actions to suppress evidence to exonerate the two ex-Death Eaters could be reviewed by the Wizengamot at a later date. The Malfoys were quizzed on life in Hawaii, to which Draco gave a very good impersonation of some of the local accents, especially doing a spot-on imitation of Shark, the clothing store owner. Zhubanysh was asked to relay about daily life in a wizarding nomadic tribe living along the roof of the world, and how she was adjusting to life in a new country and new culture. Ginny and Draco told a few tales of their own about adjustments to island life, which amused the dinner guests. They left out the part about the giant cockroaches, since it didn't seem like an appropriate topic for the dinner table.

At one point during the meal, Draco rose from his seat, glass raised in hand as he announced, "I
propose a toast. To the one who made it possible for all of us to be together tonight enjoying this fine meal. To Hermione: protector of those unjustly persecuted, seeker of justice."

Ron rose from his seat also, a glass in his hand, and added, "Understanding and forgiving, with a solid right hook and a mean Spider-Bogey Hex." There were a few chuckles from around the table.

"To her relentless pursuit of truth, even when the truth is what no one else wishes to see," Harry said with a bit more solemnity. Those weighty words, coming from him, were not lost on a few other guests present, words filled with multiple meanings.

"To my sister, who has helped those who had – have felt at times a little lost," Zhubanysh said, rising from her seat as well, grateful for Hermione helping her adjust to life in England. Hermione coached her in the finer points of English language and grammar. She also took owls from Zhubanysh at odd hours to reply when the new bride was unsure with local customs, or how to talk to Harry about a topic she was uncomfortable with.

Lavender raised her glass as well, given the inspiration of the moment, although she chose to not get out of her seat as that would have taken far too long. "Hermione, a friend to those who needed a friend the most."

"Insightful and brilliant," Ginny said, standing next to her husband, glass in hand.

Albert rose. "And the finest apprentice any Master of any discipline could ask for. To Hermione."

There was another chorus of "To Hermione" from around the table before everyone drank.

"Will everyone please sit down before I begin blubbering on some more," Hermione jested, her eyes misting again, overcome with the warmth and sentiments of her friends. There was some light laughter as everyone continued on with the meal.

After dinner, everyone retired to the library where fine spirits – aged in oak barrels for decades – were served with fine crystal glassware, as well as herbal teas offered to the pregnant witches. With a practiced hand, Hermione swirled the fine pear brandy about the snifter before taking a sip and savoring the complexity of notes. Before starting her monthly booze-up with the local Potions masters, Hermione would have gone for a simple glass of sherry, but with her binging, she had also been exposed to some of the finer aspects of distilled spirits. Whereas Severus had expanded her knowledge and palate for champagne and wine, her once-a-month drinking companions broadened
her horizons regarding harder libations.

Harry was enjoying his own snifter of Calvados when Draco brought up the unpleasant subject of Alan Parker.

"And at no point during his super-villain monologue, nor under Veritaserum, did he indicate Umbridge or Calpurnia Fudge had any knowledge, direction, or sanctioning of his actions?" Draco asked, remembering the conversation he had with Severus before he and Ginny Portkeyed back to England.

"None, as Kingsley and I hadn't the chance to ask, because Moody and half the high-ranking officials at the Ministry barged into our interrogation and stopped it until a time they deemed more appropriate," Harry recounted with an aggravated growl. "That turned out to be the hastily-arranged trial less than twenty-fours later. I mean, who has a trial Sunday night when the Ministry is shut down, unless you don't want anyone to know. At least I was able to point out that Umbridge had to recuse herself due to a conflict of interest, given that Alan Parker is her godson, a fact she did not volunteer."

"That must have caused an uproar," Ginny added, sipping on some chamomile and rose hip tea. "Were Cornelius or Calpurnia present at the trial?"

"They wouldn't have dared to attend. With the election coming up, they wanted to distance themselves from this as far as possible. Even the coverage of the trial was minimal." Harry turned and patted Hermione's hand, giving it a squeeze of support as he added, "Healers at St. Mungo's were threatened to keep quiet and not go on about how Hermione was attacked. The only thing reported publicly was that she was attacked and the wizard, who was unnamed, was apprehended."

"Yes, but even if Calpurnia knew, there is no way to get her to admit it to anyone," Ron said, jumping into the conversation. "No one other than Umbridge. Those two are thick as thieves. I've seen them huddled next to each other at all those functions I have to go to with Bascom. But still, short of it plastered all over the front page of the Daily Prophet, which Fudge controls, there is no way anyone will know how those two are connected to that sicko, and if they told him to do it. And Fudge might get re-elected, which means she gets re-elected."

Hermione, who was feeling quite morose with the topic of Alan Parker and his relations, was suddenly struck with a moment of inspiration, thanks to Ron's unintentionally insightful ramblings. She also had to thank the memories of her Aunt Christine going on about a couple irreparably-catastrophic public relations disasters that she'd had to deal with over the years. As much as her aunt's stories bored her at the time, they served as inspiration now. A maniacal laugh bubbled up from her throat as she tipped her head back, suddenly feeling a rush of adrenaline that came when an idea came along that fit her needs.
"She's gone mad," Ron said as he drained his glass of Ogden's.

"Or madly brilliant," said Harry, knowing the glint that Hermione had in her eye meant she had another great idea.

Suddenly, Hermione face fell. "Bugger. Pity Polyjuice ingredients are still regulated."

"Regulated for purchase, but that doesn't mean you can't get some from a friend," Albert added with a knowing smile. Hermione had not forgotten that Albert had all of the regulated ingredients in his own stores, but did not want to assume he would partake in whatever scheme she had planned. "Unfortunately, I don't have any 21-day stewed lacewing flies."

"But I do," Lavender added. Everyone's head swiveled about in unison to give her a look of disbelief. "What?" she said innocently. "When Severus and Draco took off, do you think I'd leave myself without my own plan for escape in case things went pear-shaped for me?"

Ron looked hurt. With a pout, he asked, "You'd leave me?"

"What would you rather have? A wife living in Paris you could visit every day, or a wife locked up in Azkaban, had Moody decided I somehow had a hand in their escape?"

Ron nodded with a grimace of resignation that she did have a point, but he then realized the hitch. "Wait, but you don't have the regulated ingredients. How would have that worked out?"

"I have the stewed lacewing flies, and the fluxweed picked at full moon – as Hermione procured enough for three batches. I don't have the bicorn horn and boomslang. I would have paid Albert handsomely for those two items." Turning to her Potions master, she asked, "I hope I wasn't being presumptuous."

"Not at all," he assured her with a tilt of his head.

"So what do you have in mind," Draco asked. He realized that he was going to be included in the schemings of Potter's gang for once, and it was a bit of a thrill to be on the other side of said plans.
"Well, first we have to figure out if Umbridge and Fudge's wife knew of Parker's activities before the trial," Hermione began. "Then we'll have a course of action for the real coup de grâce."

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Life in Malu Palekaiko was a bit quieter with the Malfoys gone, sort of. Draco and Ginny had taken a Portkey that morning with the nouveau Mrs. Weasley. Closing up shop Friday was without the discussion of business matters, as the silence was usually filled with talk of a commission that was ready for pickup, or of a particularly dense student who was having troubles in a subject. Walking to Bongo's alone, Severus was greeted with the usual "Aloha", to which his was the only voice that replied.

Mounga introduced Severus to the island's newest resident and sanctuary-seeker, Jerry, an Auror in his early- to mid-thirties from New York City who had decided the Muggle government and law enforcement system was too corrupt to not intervene with a bit of magic to set things right. Jerry was of average build with short dark blond hair with a face which could easily blend into a crowd except for the rather prominent Muggle tattoo of a dragon on his forearm.

Jerry explained the local mob bosses had been putting the squeeze on his father, a Muggle, for decades, and recently had been getting rather rough with him when he refused to pay an increase in protection money. Police and other law enforcement officials decided not to pursue the case because it was too small, not while Federal law enforcement officials were busy building a RICO case against the gangsters involved. Taking action on Jerry's father's case would interfere with the much larger case they were building. Unfortunately, while the RICO case would take years, Jerry's father only had so many bones, and so much money to pay for trips to the hospital – and that didn't include the cost to deal with damage to his business. The U.S. Magical Department of Law Enforcement was already quite clear on their policy of forbidding Muggle-born children from using magic to protect their parents when there was Muggle law enforcement to deal with the matter.

A bit of Veritaserum, some Polyjuice potion, and a live broadcast on television with the Muggle prosecutor and others from the district attorney's office had made for quite the scandal in the Muggle news media when they confessed to taking bribes from the Mafia to stall the RICO case. Needless to say, the people who had made life difficult for Jerry's father – and the law enforcement officials who had turned a blind eye to it – were no longer a problem for the man. Jerry, however, was now persona non grata and a highly sought-after "criminal." Jerry made his own illegal Portkey to take him straight to Malu Palekaiko once his bosses at the U.S. Magical Department of Law Enforcement figured out he was behind the exposé.

"Was it worth it?" Severus asked.

"If someone you loved was going through what my father went through, I don't think you'd even
Severus had thought of what he would have done had Hermione died. He decided burning a swath of destruction through to the farthest corners of Great Britain and the world to track down and torture Alan Parker was only the beginning of it. And even if it meant living his life in Azkaban, devoid of a soul, it would still have been worth it. He merely asked if Jerry thought it was worth it for himself.

"So what are you? Welsh?" Jerry asked, picking up Severus' accent.

'And that makes it five' Severus noted to himself, since people had guessed he was from every English-speaking country but England.

Arnold was by the piano, belting out yet another tune from his favorite singer.

Before Severus could reply with a snarky comment, Jerry asked, gesturing with a drink in his hand, "Who's the Elvis fan?"

"That would be Arnold, fellow Potions master." Severus finished his drink and ordered another for himself.

"Is he a sanctuary-seeker, too?" Jerry spun around to better watch the wizard belt out a soulful rendition of "Blue Hawaii."

Severus nodded.

"Why did he come? What's his story?"

Severus picked up his new drink and took a sip before answering, "I don't know. He never told me, and it is none of my business. If he chooses to tell me, he will. A lot of us sanctuary-seekers are not so quick to share our tales of why we came."

Jerry glanced at Severus' left arm and said, "I recognize the ink. Is that why you came?"
With a tilt of the head to acknowledge Jerry's implication, Severus discreetly placed his right hand on his wand in his pocket. "Mounga knows why I am here, and I got the welcome packet, same as you," he said. He flashed a casual smile that held a glint of warning, his eyes darting to the bar top and stopping on Jerry's folder, an unofficial badge of approval for those who had sought and received sanctuary.

Being an Auror, Jerry didn't miss Severus had his hand on his wand. Putting both hands up, his drink in one hand, he said, "Hey buddy, I'm no threat. You don't have to worry about me being a bounty hunter or anything. If Mounga says you're cool, I've no beef with you." Severus noted Jerry's New York accent was particularly strong when he was agitated, becoming quite nasal.

Pulling his hand out of his pocket, Severus made a gesture of good will and flagged Bongo to get another drink for the ex-Auror, Severus' treat.

"You wouldn't have fetched a very good price for me anyway, as I've recently been exonerated." Severus and Jerry clinked glasses in cheers to the good news for the ex-Death Eater.

"You plan on staying? Mounga mentioned the friend you came here with is back home."

"Just for a visit. He and his wife have a new life here. As do I." Severus decided to say nothing more on the matter, which was just as well.

Jerry was applauding now that Arnold had finished singing. Then the ex-Auror picked up his drink to go talk with the crooning wizard, leaving Severus' side without so much as a farewell.

Mounga, who went to sit with his wife at a table closer to the piano, looked at Severus and shrugged. Seems that neither wizard knew quite what to make of Jerry, even with Mounga knowing all of the ex-Auror's secrets, having processed him earlier in the day.

After drinks, Severus grabbed a quick bite of take-out to enjoy at the Friday night movies.

The park was set up with the usual variety of lounge chaises, lawn chairs, and couches, low-hovering flying carpets with cushions, floating hammocks, and picnic blankets. It was a summer tradition, if you could call fourteen years a tradition.
When the summer Muggle studies youth program started in mid-June, so did the weekly Friday night movies, usually featuring a performance on a large Wurlitzer organ. The Muggle organist used to perform at her church before she and her wizard husband moved to retire to Malu Palekaiko. That performance was followed by a cartoon from various periods, from old fashioned black-and-white ones made shortly after sound was invented, all the way up to computer-animated shorts. After that, there was a double-feature focusing on some theme. The first week was Westerns, followed in subsequent weeks by film noir, historical pictures, mysteries, romantic comedies, farces, science fiction, musicals (such as the recent showing of *My Fair Lady*), and dramatic films, among the many genres included. Usually the first film of the evening was more family-friendly fare, as young children attended, with something more suitable for older teens and adults for the second film that usually started after the young ones were tucked into bed. Those who were more versed in cinema made no mention of the omission of fantasy and horror movies, since their stereotypical portrayal of "monsters," witches, wizards, vampires, and other magical beings was extremely insulting, obviously biased with little relevance to facts.

When Severus found out Mounga was the one behind the summer Muggle studies program, which included the summer movie series and Muggle camps for the kids, he asked what had inspired him to come up with such a curriculum. Mounga was rather evasive and muttered something about removing the temptation of forbidden fruit. It was clear there was more behind the story of its inspiration, but Severus was not about to press the matter.

As Severus finished the last of his Thai yellow curry with shrimp, he flicked his wand so the bowl and utensils would sail below the line of sight of the other movie patrons and discreetly into the proper bus pan. The various restaurants had each put out a bus pan to collect their dirty dishes, as many attendees treated the outdoor movie in the park as a weekly family picnic and outing.

The cartoon had just finished. Severus was ready to watch the movie, a musical-comedy, without having to worry about spilling curry sauce on his shirt.

The Finau family was next to Severus. They were also just finishing up their meal of Japanese fare, when Kaimi, who noticed that Severus was done, went over to him.

"Can I sit on your lap, Uncle Severus?" Kaimi asked without any shyness to her request.

Severus blinked back for a second, momentarily stunned that the child wished to sit in his lap when she normally cuddled in her father's lap during movie night.

"You want to sit on my lap?" he asked. It was what the child had asked, but he had never had any child ask him for such a request and wanted to clarify he had heard her correctly. Glancing over at
her father, Severus saw Mounga smile and make some non-committal gesture with his shoulders at him.

"Is that okay? I think you need a hug," Kaimi plainly stated.

Severus wanted to politely decline, but Kaimi was a very perceptive child. Severus did need a hug. Preferably one from Hermione, but the honest and simple affections from this child would certainly do. Reluctantly, he nodded, to which Kaimi hopped into his lap and settled in.

"Don't worry, I'm not a wiggleworm," she assured him just as the opening credits began.

Severus hated to admit it, but it was not an entirely unpleasant experience to have Kaimi snuggled on his lap. Her favorite part was where the main character, a court jester for whom the movie was titled, was babbling on about vessels and pestles and chalices and palaces. He found that having the eight-year-old giggle with delight at that part helped him find it a bit more humorous than he otherwise would have. There was a communal factor to it.

When the movie ended, Severus found Kaimi passed out cold on his lap, still clutching the front of his shirt. Mounga came over and gently lifted her from Severus' lap and into his arms to carry home.

"Kaimi has been very concerned about you and has been asking if you're okay recently," Mounga informed his friend.

"She asked to sit on my lap," Severus replied.

"I told her to ask you if it was okay and that you might not be the cuddling type. She said she could tell you were sad and that maybe a hug might make you feel better. You do look a bit better," Mounga said with a slightly humorous lilt to his voice. "She seems to have her mother's healing touch."

Severus did feel a bit better, but said nothing to confirm Mounga's observation. Even he did not want to admit he was feeling anxious about Draco and Ginny going back to England, and wondering what was currently happening with Hermione and if she was still his or not. He had given Draco another memory to hand her, as putting his emotions to parchment was a futile endeavor with no satisfaction of the end result. He could speak his heart plainly to her with greater ease, which seemed contradictory to his normally reserved nature.
Just as Severus was formulating a reply to Mounga's comments, Arnold and Jerry walked by, wishing Severus a good night. They walked off into the night and Severus cocked his head sideways, wondering if...

"Yeah, looks like Arnold's smitten," Mounga said quietly, confirming Severus' suspicions.

Arnold, in all the months Severus had gotten to know him, had never indicated any preference for men or women, but it seems tonight he was certainly taken with Malu Palekaiko's newest resident, even with an age difference of close to twenty years. Severus was the last to judge about an age difference that great.

Rainbow and the two older children had packed up the family belongings with their wands and were ready to head home.

"Can I watch the next film, Mom?" Akela asked, her eyes and voice pleading, a blanket draped over her arm.

"What's showing?"

"Monty Python and the Holy Grail; it's a comedy," Mounga answered his wife.

"A movie about the Holy Grail, the object that set King Arthur on a path towards a fool's errand, ignoring his kingdom much to the warning of Merlin? Is it probable the Muggle version has little resemblance to the actual account of events as it is supposed to be a comedy? And how do snakes factor into the story?" Severus questioned with circumspect suspicion.

"Trust me, it is written as a whimsical farce from frame one," Mounga assured the skeptical Brit who had grown up in the very same land in which Merlin and Arthur's tale was steeped. "It employs logical dissection of argument, in addition to making fun of Arthurian 'fables.' Stick around and watch it. You might actually laugh."

"Doubtful." Severus arched a brow in disbelief of his friend's claims.

Mounga gave his eldest daughter his permission to stay and watch the film, while Severus assured
Mounga he would escort Akela home safe and sound after the film. Both wizards' eyes had glanced over the slew of young wizards around Akela's age who were still hanging around for the second feature, as well as the few vampires who were there. The vampires in Malu Palekaiko were well behaved and never sampled without express permission, but Akela was an attractive teenage girl. Any father would be concerned.

That weekend was the Japanese Bon festival. Severus attended after he finished with his Saturday appointments, enjoying the festivities and learning more Japanese words. He had begun learning the language, in addition to Hawaiian. There was dancing, taiko drumming, and fireworks over the next three days, in addition to the setting of lanterns to the sea in remembrance of ancestors.

Severus had no wish to remember or honor anyone he was related to. His parents had passed with little to no mourning from him. The only ones he had mourned were those who had become his new family, but many had died during the war. Though Minerva wasn't exactly like a mother or aunt to him, she was a colleague and an amicable friend who always had good advice, though they were not close. Albus Dumbledore had become the father he never had. Of all the ones who had passed, Severus missed him the most.

With the revelation of Dumbledore's will and the proof needed to clear his name, some long-held misconceptions and resentments Severus had regarding the headmaster were now gone. He'd thought Albus had cast him adrift with no one to vouch for his loyalty to the Order and efforts in the war. Severus thought Dumbledore had died without any consideration to his and Draco's names and reputation, but the old codger had done so. It just had taken years before his will was found by Hermione, hidden in plain sight, revealed with a simple spell.

Standing alongside the shore, as the tide began to go out, Severus and many others set their paper lanterns into the water to head out to sea in the Tōrō nagashi ceremony. As there were no major rivers on Malu Palekaiko, people did this in the calm sheltered waters of the harbor. Some waded out into the ocean up to their hips before setting the warmly glowing white lanterns into the water. With the setting of the lantern in memory of Albus upon the softly swelling waves, Severus allowed his disappointment and resentment he'd held for his old mentor drift away as well, letting go some of the anger he had held in his heart for so long.

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Waking to the sight of Severus' bouquet of flowers and the two leis on the bedside table should have been a wondrous sight for Hermione, but the pounding in her head tampered the pleasant feeling down significantly. The wave of nausea and the sandpaper glued to the inside of her eyelids did nothing to improve the morning. Risking the choice of sitting up and vomiting, or continuing to
lie in bed all morning, Hermione chose the less wise of the two. Fortunately, upon sitting up, she found a vial of hangover relief potion, courtesy of Albert, waiting for her along with a note next to the vase of flowers.

It was after she drained the vial of its contents Hermione realized she wasn't even in her own bed. She finally remembered she was put up in one of the guest bedrooms at Lavender and Ron's mansion. Ginny and Draco were also staying there during their brief stay in England, and were probably already awake. Reading the note, now that she could focus her eyes, she learned Albert was giving her the day off with the acknowledgment she had some important matters to deal with.

Recalling last night's events, she remembered coming up with a plan to deal with Calpurnia Fudge and Dolores Umbridge, with Albert more than happy to deal a blow to the Minister's wife. He had received some thinly-veiled threatening letters recently, specifically tied to taking Hermione on as his apprentice. The letters seemed to coincide with the timing of Alan Parker discovering Hermione's apprenticeship that night in Flourish and Blotts. Albert Dobmeir did not take kindly to threats, but decided to wait until an opportunity presented itself before he addressed Calpurnia Fudge's imminence. This recent revelation only firmed the resolve of everyone else in the room to help Hermione with her idea.

With the plan laid out, and already a fair amount of alcohol coursing through her system, it was then Draco said they should celebrate and decided to fix everyone who was drinking a new libation he learned in Malu Palekaiko called "Wipe Out." Everything after the second sip was just a blur, though Hermione noticed Albert didn't drink any of Draco's annihilating concoction. She would have to ask Draco for the recipe so she could surprise the other Potions masters with a round of "Name what's in this drink" at the next booze-up. Even she couldn't figure out what she was drinking, the mix of fruit juices and alcohol masking whatever it was that had knocked her for a loop.

Dressed in her clothes which were clean, most probably washed and pressed by the house-elves while she slept, Hermione hobbled down to the breakfast nook where everyone but Ron was up.

"Morning, or should I say good afternoon," Ginny said a bit too cheerily, with a plate full of something that looked like lunch in front of her.

Hermione may have had a dose of hangover relief potion, but it still didn't mean she was entirely recovered. Later on she would concoct her special supplemental hangover treatment that included ginger, lime, and peppermint, but for now she needed tea.

"What did you poison me with last night?" Hermione asked, glaring at Draco who was enjoying his plate of poached fish and lightly sautéed vegetables.
"Same thing Severus drank during our first night in sanctuary, and he was just as far gone as you," Draco said with a satisfied grin. "Don't worry. Before you came over, Albert said if we had a chance to get you to relax this weekend and forget your troubles, we should do so. I told him about the drink and he gave his blessings for me to serve it up, should the opportunity to arise. He said you should try it yourself before serving it up at your next Potions master meeting next weekend."

Hermione didn't know if she should be worried that Albert knew what she was going to drink, or kiss the old bastard for coming up with the same idea she had to serve it up next week.

"Does that drink cause muscle soreness and aching feet?" Hermione asked, wrapping her hands around a delicate china cup filled with tea – glorious, life-giving, sanity-saving tea.

"No, that would be due to the dancing at the club last night," Ginny illuminated her friend.

"I went dancing at a club?" Hermione wondered if this was some joke.

Lavender, who was enjoying a light lunch as well, said with refined poise, "Well, after you and the 'boys' were done with your bets on who could come up with the most raunchiest dirty limericks, Ginny mentioned how she had a craving for Korean barbecue and kimchee, to which everyone decided going out at eleven at night for Korean barbecue was a dandy idea."

"Dirty limericks?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, and you won with your limerick," Ginny said.

Hermione placed her head in her hands and wanted to whimper. She prided herself on not being crass, so this was becoming as painful to listen to as the recounts of her behavior after her post-NEWT binge that wound up in the papers.

Draco cleared his throat as he began to recite,

"A wizard with a wand made of rose
    Had a very prodigious nose.
    His feet were as large
    As a giant's own barge,
    And the rest well endowed, we suppose."
Hermione slumped down onto the table and whimpered pitifully.

"You never did answer Ron's question about the size of Severus' feet," Draco volunteered. He was enjoying this ribbing just a bit too much, which resulted in a sharp elbow in his own ribs by his wife.

"None of your damn business," Hermione muttered against the wooden table top.

"That's what you said last night," Ginny informed her.

"I still think my limerick should have won," Draco insisted. "It was by far, more crass than yours."

He took a sip of tea before reciting,

"A witch who worked as a harlot
Would easily shag any varlet.
In a very rough pub
She yelled, 'Finish yer grub
And I'll fuck every one of the whole lot!'"

Hermione groaned and agreed it was far more crass than hers.

Ginny shook her head, still amazed Draco could be so refined one moment and then something like that could spew out of his mouth. At least with the twins, you could expect something like that from them.

"You still haven't explained why my feet hurt," Hermione reminded her host and fellow guests.

Lavender said, "After some late-night nibbles, Harry spotted a dance club and suggested we all go dancing."

"Harry? Dancing?" Hermione said with disbelief, wondering if Lavender was putting one on her.

"Yes, imagine my surprise when he said considering his aversion to dancing, especially in public, but his broom was listing worse than the German Quidditch team during Oktoberfest," Ginny added, still sounding surprised at the occurrence.
"I didn't do anything... foolish, did I?" Hermione had no recollection of the events. She hoped that this morning's *Daily Prophet* didn't have yet another topless photograph of her.

"All of us sober witches made sure no one misbehaved in any way," Ginny assured her with a wink. "You certainly cut loose last night and danced like some wild maenad."

This did not in any way comfort Hermione, who put her head back down on the table, not giving a fig about table manners at the moment.

"Come, drink your tea and put something into your stomach," Draco told her. "Potter will be coming over here soon, and we have things to do if we're going to carry out your plans in time before the election."

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Walking home after the fireworks which signaled the end of the Bon festival, Severus pulled out his wand to unlock his front door. The faint mewling of a cat drew his eye towards a darkened corner not illuminated by his front porch light.

"*Lumos.*"

His wandtip glowed blue and reflected off the wide chartreuse-colored eyes of a young juvenile cat. It was more than a kitten, its legs lanky and grace still somewhat ungainly with youth. It was also looking quite underfed.

The young cat did not fear Severus, but moved forward, sniffing at the tip of Severus' wand as if it was something to possibly eat or rub up against.

"Where's your home?" Severus asked, knowing the beast could not answer for itself. It merely looked up at him, mewling in a plaintive way.

Severus surmised it must have sought shelter from the explosion of fireworks at the end of the Bon festival. The pyrotechnics seemed to have put many of the pets on the island into a tizzy, like after the Fourth of July.

Lighting the candles in his home, the light spilled out onto the front porch. Now Severus could
better see the apparently homeless creature. If it had a home, it wouldn't have looked so malnourished. Even by the light of the candles and lamps, Severus could see the ribs plainly visible through its black fur.

Severus felt pity for the poor beast, remembering what it was like to be young and hungry. Leaving the front door open, he said, "Well, come inside if you want to eat." He was sure there was something suitable in his pantry.

The lanky cat poked its head about the threshold for a moment. Severus was ready to give up and close the door in its face when the beast finally padded its way into the house. It looked up at Severus for him to lead the way, since he was the one who had invited it in.

There was a chicken Severus was going to have the hired house-elf who cooked for him prepare for tomorrow night's dinner. He already had all the offal put aside for stock and gravy.

Fetching the liver, he chopped it up and even warmed it up to the temperature of a fresh kill with a swirl of his wand, since the cat probably would be unsure what to make of cold meat.

After Severus set the liver down on a plate, the cat greedily wolfed it down, a sign the cat had not eaten for a while and was definitely homeless. Severus fetched a small saucer and filled it with milk. He let the cat lap away at it, contentedly purring that it finally had something in its stomach, thanks to this kind wizard.

The animal showed its gratitude by rubbing up against Severus' legs, swirling about in a figure-eight pattern between his legs, its head rubbing along his calf.

"Ginny has been talking about getting a cat. You should make an acceptable pet for her when she returns," Severus reasoned, explaining why he bothered to let the cat stay instead of evicting it, while spelling the cat hair off of himself.

Severus had never had a pet. He had an owl but that was not anything he was attached to, as he viewed it more like a service animal to deliver his mail than as a companion. Currently, Severus kept his owl at work most of the time, roosting at his house only on the weekends.

As Severus didn't want to wake up with cat by-products in his house which might come out of either end of the cat, or fleas, he grabbed some extra bedding and laid it out on the back porch, under the broad eaves to keep the cat and bedding dry should it rain overnight.
Still, Severus was not going to adopt this cat.

What Severus didn't realize was that just as the wand chooses the wizard, the cat decides who it wants to adopt. He didn't really have much say in the matter.

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The fact-finding mission to Dolores Umbridge's residence earlier in the day yielded some interesting results. Draco had taken Polyjuice Potion and transformed into Calpurnia Fudge, in order to gain entrance into Umbridge's home before stunning her. Lavender did not reveal how she had gotten hold of some of Mrs. Fudge's hair. It was fortuitous that Umbridge was a spinster, so there was no husband or other family to deal with.

Harry, Hermione, and Lavender arrived once the officious cunt of a witch was secured with several binding spells and her wand was taken away. Veritaserum and some very specific questions revealed that while Umbridge and Calpurnia Fudge had no idea Alan Parker was behind the murder of several Death Eaters, nor did they direct him to attack Hermione, Umbridge was aware of Mrs. Fudge's machinations to stop Hermione from getting an apprenticeship for many years. It also came out that Umbridge and her friend not only wished Alan had finished dispatching Hermione Weasley, but a few other choice bits of information that went beyond the pale.

Lavender made use of her exceptional talents for memory charms, making sure Umbridge remembered nothing more than Calpurnia Fudge visiting, and both drinking a bit too much sherry for them both to remember the afternoon.

Back at Lavender and Ron's home, Draco changed back into his regular form. His talent for mimicking vocal and physical mannerisms had made him the first choice to take the Polyjuice Potion.

Now they knew what Umbridge knew, they could begin to plan for the second phase of Hermione's operation. Fortunately, the opportunity to implement it would be later this week, before Draco and Ginny planned to return to Hawaii.

Before Hermione headed home to eat a dinner she knew Marf would have waiting for her, ready and hot, Draco and Ginny took her aside.

"We brought back a few things for you from Hawaii, but here is one more thing from Severus. I promised to deliver this to you personally." Draco placed a vial into Hermione's hand.
Looking at the glass tube, this one with a green cap, she knew it was another memory for her.

Hermione thanked Draco for all his help and gave him a hug, filled with the same warmth she had for all her friends. Somehow, between when he left all those months ago and his return, Draco had changed dramatically. Gone was the animosity he once held for her, and in its place was not only sincerity and warmth, but a sense of serenity he had lacked before. Draco had found happiness and peace with all his wishes fulfilled, thanks to Severus and Hermione.

She wondered if Severus had found peace himself since reaching Malu Palekaiko, and if he had changed as well.

After dinner, Hermione went to work to use Lavender's Pensieve, which was still in her office among her Potions journals, books, and apprenticeship paperwork.

Standing by the desk, she tipped the vial into the bowl of shimmering liquid, watching the memory swirl in a quiet ballet of fluidity. Leaning over, she felt the cool liquid touch her nose and was pulled into a new memory from Severus.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to my tireless and talented betas, JuneW and Cygnuz.

Beta/NOTES:
Before Moody and the other officials arrived to interfere with Harry's interrogation of Alan Parker, Harry had Lavender come in and remove some key memories from Alan regarding Hermione and Ginny, and had Lavender leave before Moody and certain Ministry officials arrived. But Harry cannot tell that to the Malfoys or Hermione, since "it never happened."
Upon entering the Pensieve to view the new memory from Severus, Hermione gathered her bearings, finding herself in a strange place. The ground was damp – from recently fallen rain, by the look of it – and though she could not feel it on her skin, there was a breeze from the nearby ocean in the air, judging by the way the trees moved.

Severus was standing on a broad veranda at the front of a house that overlooked the tops of the
He still was sporting a beard; it looked even more grown in, but well-trimmed. There was a slender shock of solid white hair at his temple; it wasn't large, but it was still quite visible in stark contrast to Severus' raven locks. He hadn't had it in the photograph, and it went down to the very ends of his long hair. Severus wearing a Hawaiian shirt was a bit of a shock, but at least he was wearing trousers, and not shorts. She doubted Severus had broken down and bought a pair yet.

He smiled into the distance as if trying to focus on some unseen ghost. She knew this wasn't a past memory – rather, he had made it specifically to send to her as a message to watch.

“Welcome and Aloha, Hermione.” Severus turned and walked inside, then glanced over his shoulder. “Come. I know you will be taking in your surroundings in this memory, but you can watch it again. I have much to show you.”

Hermione followed him inside, noting the dark woods and high, open beamed ceilings.

Looking about, turning around, Severus said, “I had this house built with the hope someday you could come and share it with me, and make it a home.”

It was beautiful and Hermione was awestruck. The design was spacious, simple, and elegant while the architecture still evoked a hint of something foreign and exotic. Severus walked on towards another room. “I had a library built with you in mind, anticipating there would be enough shelf space for all your books and mine.” He gave a short laugh, adding, “I do have about half of my other books at work. But I hope I planned enough space for you.”

Hermione spun about looking at the richly exotic woodwork and the tall bookcases lining the room. In the ceiling over the center of the room, there was a skylight that cast bright and even light about the room – plenty of reading light for the two chairs placed with a table between them. There was also a couple of hanging chandeliers which were currently filled with half-burnt unlit candles. Hermione glanced at the cover of the book Severus was reading and noticed it was written in Chinese. She wanted to say how the room was perfect, and she could imagine them spending many nights in there reading together in quiet companionable silence, but she knew this was merely a memory and he could not respond.

Severus then led Hermione to the kitchen where her bouquet of palm fronds and rudbeckia was placed in a vase in the center of the table. There was plenty of cupboard space. Hermione recognized some of the skillets hanging by the cooker on a rack with hooks, remembering the many meals they cooked together using those cast iron pans.
Severus sat down at the table, as if they were about to have a cup of tea together. Looking out across the room, he said, “I can't tell you how much I have missed you. It would take far too long to say how much, but know you've occupied my thoughts and are still entrenched in my heart. And while I had to let you free when I left, I also regret not contacting you sooner and telling you plainly how much I've needed you.”

A bittersweet smile grace his lips as he looked at his hands folded on the table. “I have everything I've ever wanted: my freedom and my name restored, all thanks to you. And through your act to help me reach sanctuary, I've also been able to build a thriving business, gain the respect of the community, build a house, have everything I've dreamt about for years while I suffered under the Death Eater Decree, and before that even. Yet you were right, I was never truly free until you exonerated my name and deeds. I'm finally free, and it's all because of you.”

Severus looked back up and across the room, exactly where Hermione was facing him in this memory. “But even with everything I have, it still lacks what I need the most, and that is you.”

Hermione felt the tears coming. She pulled out a handkerchief she had brought along with her into the memory, knowing she would probably cry at some point. Her heart sang and danced knowing he still loved her just as much, but still broke at the sight of Severus' face, telling of the pain he felt in missing her, a reflection of her own longing for him.

“And as much as I would like to ask you to pick up your life and come here to be by my side now, I know that would be selfish of me.” There was a sigh of resignation from both Severus and Hermione in unison. “Just as I've striven so long for the things I now have, thanks to you, I cannot deny what you've sought for so long as well. You must finish your apprenticeship with Albert Dobmeir. Unfortunately, the old traditions and prejudices of our profession frown upon any apprentice who changes masters unless there are certain conditions, such as death and incapacity. Finish your apprenticeship, become a fine mistress of the art of Potions, and then come join me.” When he said the last part, she heard his hint of warning that despite how much she might want to buck convention, she must stay the course.

Hermione watched as Severus swallowed hard, the same nervous swallow she had seen him do before talking about something difficult.

“To say that I was upset about hearing how you received the wrong flowers would be understating it by a bit.” Severus actually gave a short laugh, and Hermione could tell he'd made the choice of his words to trivialize his reaction. “I hope by this point you have received the correct flowers, though I can't wait to hear from Draco how that original mix-up occurred.” The somberness returned to Severus as his face became grim and he drew his lips into a thin tight line. “But to hear about what that monster did. I...”
Severus dropped his chin to his chest. She saw him take a moment to collect himself, as Hermione did as well, as her tears started up once again.

“I was overcome with grief. Looking back, I can objectively say I went temporarily mad. I had heard most of the story when I stormed off... and into a cyclone. Literally.” Severus lifted his head and pulled a hank of his white hair aside from his head, frowning a bit. “No doubt you've noticed the hair.” He sighed with resignation. “As Mounga said, 'Not everyone who has been kissed by Pele has lived to tell the tale.' And knowing you, you've probably already researched a bit about Hawaii and know that Pele is not only the goddess of fire and volcanoes, but wind and lightning as well.” There was a bit of humorous lilt to Severus’ voice, and she could see he had tried to make light of something very grave.

Hermione gasped in shock realizing that Severus had been struck by lightning.

“I am glad you have recovered. Please know I would have done anything to spare you from what happened, even risked coming back to face Azkaban,” Severus admitted freely with sincerity.

Rising from his seat, Severus held out his hand, his gesture inviting Hermione to come along with him. “Enough talk of that which has brought us much grief. This is supposed to be a happy memory, something for you to view when you miss me, and bring a smile to your lips and hope to your heart. Come with me, and I'll show you the rest of the house.” Hermione smiled and followed him as he took her on a tour of his house – their house.

The bathroom was better than she could have imagined. There was even an outdoor shower, where she could imagine her and Severus showering beneath the stars at night, and it even had a bench to sit. It did not miss Hermione’s notice that there was a photo of her on Severus' bedside table, and he gave a brief explanation it was a gift from Ginny. Next to it was the lemon she had given him as a promise to clear his name. Severus didn’t say anything about the card with a child's drawing of two people flying in a lightning storm; one of the flyers had obviously fallen off their broom. It was on the table beside her photo, and it must have meant a great deal to him to place it there.

The Potions lab was gorgeous, and she delighted in the spacious work space. Severus reminded her not only the house was built for her in mind, but this lab as well. Looking about, she did see that both of them could comfortably work in the same space and not get under each other's feet. The guest bedrooms were introduced as such, and Hermione noticed a slight shuffling of Severus’ foot. She wondered if he wanted to bring up the option of a bedroom for children in the future, but was afraid. Or maybe he didn't want children and this was a way for him to avoid talking about something they may not have in common. The rooms were empty and barren, being left as an afterthought to deal with later.

The house was minimally furnished, filled with only the absolute necessities for daily life. There
were only a few decorative or extraneous pieces – a beautifully carved wooden bowl that rested on a simple console table made of some exotic striped tropical hardwood, both by the front door entrance. There was the same mahogany armoire in the bedroom she remembered from before, but everything else was new, though the bed looked amusingly very similar to the one they shared back in London.

Out in the garden, Severus talked of life in Malu Palekaiko, his usual daily life at his shop, Friday night drinks with the Malfoys and the Finaus, Sunday dinners with Draco and Ginny, and Wednesday night trips to the hot springs to soak away his aches and pains of working over cauldrons daily once again. He told the stories in between familiarizing Hermione with some of the plants in his Potions garden and some of the rarer tropical plants she may not have seen before.

“Now that Lavender has been able to transfer to Draco and me all the gold we earned in her employ, I've been able to pay back Draco for all the money he lent me to help get my business up and running and to have my house built.” Severus kicked at a rock along the path between the beds. “Now that I have a small fortune, I was thinking of getting another parcel of land on the leeward side of the island where it's drier. Many of my Mediterranean plants find all this rain and humidity a bit much too properly thrive.”

Severus looked about and tilted his head back, his face full of the morning sun. “I found this place thinking about you.” He dropped his head and went back to scuffling his dark canvas shoe in the dark dirt, like some small boy somewhat embarrassed to admit something. “Draco said I should write to you. And I tried. Part of me was afraid that if Moody or other Aurors raided your flat, they'd find my letter to you and then you'd be under inquiry by the Ministry. But a large part of it was that I couldn't find the words, which is pretty ironic.”

Severus gave a crooked smile. “I would berate others for prattling on and here I am, going on to empty air in hopes that I haven't begun to bore you with details. As hard as I tried, I couldn't put to parchment everything I felt. I was worried about being too sentimental, and here I am pouring my heart out to you, talking to an imagined vision of you, listening to me with the same intent as when you would ask me to go on about the history behind a certain potion. And in my frustration to find the words back in February, I went stomping off into the jungle and came upon this abandoned property. All that was left was a barren slab when I found it.”

Sitting down on a simple functional bench carved from a fallen log, Severus continued on with his monologue. “I found distractions to keep me occupied with as I tried to ignore the desire I had to send word to you, any word. I also feared you had moved on as I suggested, but I'm glad you didn't. I've never stopped thinking about you, and from what Lavender has told me, neither have you.

“I've waited decades to have my freedom, something that I wanted most in the world. But now I need you, and I will not wait decades to tell you.” Hermione crouched close, seeing the same look
in his eyes as the morning when he fled Polyjuiced in her form. “I love you, Hermione. And I always will. I'll wait for you, and hope that Draco and Ginny will return with news for me that you will wait for me as well, and that any misunderstandings, falterings, or doubts are put behind us.”

Severus drew in a deep breath before announcing, “I've ordered a Pensieve of my own from the town's general store. It should be arriving within the next week. Send me back a memory of you so that I can see your face and hear your voice once more. I've missed the sight and sound of you as much as I've missed you.”

Smiling one last time, he said, “Ku’u lei. Nau ko’u aloha. My beloved. My love is yours, Hermione.” Once he finished uttering those words, the memory ended.

Hermione had to sit down in her office and catch her breath. Her head was spinning in the same way that her body flew with the same euphoric elation as when she first realized she was in love with Severus. She had told Severus to find peace, and by his demeanor, she could tell that not only was he far more relaxed, but many of the demons which had periodically seemed to cloud his face had now vanished. Hermione had noticed the same relaxed and free-from-anxiety sensation from Draco as well, as if that which troubled his mind had been swept away with the same Hawaiian breezes that ruffled Severus' hair in the memory.

In the memory, Severus did not hesitate to tell her his heart plainly, whereas before, he struggled to state such matters. The barriers that would have kept them apart were gone now, except for her finishing her apprenticeship. While Severus seemed quite changed by his eight months in Malu Palekaiko, he was still the same man she had fallen in love with. There was still the dry humor and the wit, but there was also an acceptance and less armor around his heart. The anger that had colored Severus' face to the world seemed to have melted away. Not entirely, but he seemed rested, and had that same tranquility about him after they would have made love, or enjoyed a long, conversation-filled dinner together, happy in the moment. He seemed no longer restless.

Hermione had to think about what she wanted to say to Severus before she could create her own memory for Draco and Ginny to take back to him. Pulling out a sheaf of parchment, she began listing all the things she wanted to remember to tell Severus.

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The mewling outside the sliding glass door to his bedroom woke Severus up. It was time to get up anyway.

He padded into his kitchen for a cup of Kona coffee, as he needed something a bit strong that morning before his morning swim. In the kitchen, his attention was drawn to the cat whom was carrying on on the other side of the back door, having run around to the other side of the property when it heard that the wizard was up.
Severus opened the back door and was greeted by the young cat proudly standing behind two rats that lay on his back porch. One was dead, the other was still twitching but definitely stunned. Severus dispatched both rats, as he had plenty of rat parts. His students brought him in properly processed rat parts that he paid them well for, but still below cost from the local apothecary.

The cat jumped as the magic left Severus' wand and made the rats disappear. The diminutive furry beast decided it had earned a reward. It promptly invited itself into Severus' kitchen and sat there, looking up at him expectantly for some food for a good night's work.

Crossing his arms across his chest, one eye squinting as he gave the cat a dismissive glare, he said, “All right. I suppose you've earned your keep for now. Now maybe I won't be losing so many tomatoes to those little thieves, so I'll have more tomatoes for gazpacho.” A plate of leftover locally-caught grilled fish that wasn't quite enough for a whole meal was given to the cat for a job well done, along with a saucer of milk. Severus set out a small bowl of water on the back porch, as the animal was going to keep his property free of vermin until Ginny and Draco could come back and take charge of the cat.

As Severus walked down to the beach for his morning swim, the cat followed him like a familiar, keeping him company. Before Severus went into the water, he pointed at his shirt and towel, and instructed the cat it was not to claw at, piss on, vomit hair balls on, or otherwise rub any cat hair on these items while he was out for his swim.

The cat merely made a trilling noise. Severus was unsure if this was a sound to indicate it understood or to say, “Fuck you, I'll do what I damn well please,” as he knew cats were wont to do at times.

Returning from his swim, he found that his items were untouched as instructed, but that the cat had left three partially mauled giant cockroaches in his sandals. He was glad to have caught it before slipping his feet in the sandals, and made a point to remember to mention the footwear next time as well.

In the bakery, Kosal remarked on what a sweet cat Severus had adopted. After Severus paid for his morning croissant, Kosal gave the cat a bit of cheese danish to nibble on. He petted the cat's head before it followed Severus out the door and back home.

Severus refused to let the cat into his bedroom while he was showering and changing into his work clothes for the day. He knew how Pettigrew hid for years in his Animagus form. The spell to turn an Animagus back into human form was cast and the beast remained in its current state, with a short hiss in response to the surge of magic that coursed through it. This meant that it really was a
cat and not someone who was spying on him or seeking a free meal. Still, having the animal about watching as he paraded around in the altogether was just not going to happen.

The cat seemed to forgive Severus pretty quick about having a spell cast at it, and went back to rubbing up against his leg, willing to forgive him as he did give it the best meal of its short life. It's hard to lose a cat's loyalty after giving it fresh liver and grilled fish.

Severus evicted the cat from his home as he locked up for the day. He wondered what other “gifts” the cat would have waiting on his doorstep when he returned at the end of the day, or find the cat had moved onto a new home, one that would spoil it rotten with inside bedding, spells to amuse it, endless petting, and effusive cuddles.

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There was a new vigor in Hermione's work. She had more energy and was more focused than she had been for the past few months. There was a bounce in her step that did not go unnoticed by Albert or Lavender, and her cheerfulness was almost downright annoying.

Ginny and Draco were busy themselves while Hermione was at work. Draco had to check his vault at the London Gringotts branch to see if all the money taken by the Ministry had been returned, along with what items were replaced and what the compensation was for unreturned confiscated items. Then there was the surveying of Malfoy Manor, and hiring of repair wizards and witches to fix what was damaged during the years of abandonment. At least there were no owners to kick out as Malfoy Manor had no one interested in buying the place.

Hermione learned that the overgrown mansion she saw in the distance the night she and Ron went to the Grand Royal Supper Club was Malfoy Manor. She knew there would be a lot of work to bring the property back up to habitable levels. It wouldn't be ready to inhabit until after the Malfoys had gone back Hawaii, but it would be ready, with a small staff of caretakers, for when they returned. There was talk of them coming back for a grand ball in the spring already, after the baby was born.

For the first few nights, Hermione tried to create a memory for Severus, but would become frustrated when she had forgotten something and wanted to go back to a subject she already discussed, or she had forgotten whole topics she wanted to include all together. Sometimes a subject came up causing her to burst into tears, when she needed to stop, collect herself, and start fresh from the beginning again. By Wednesday night, after the third try that night, Hermione realized this just wasn't going to work. She was better at putting her thoughts down onto a scroll versus speaking freely, the opposite of Severus' problem. It was in its own way also pretty ironic, considering how she originally came to Severus spilling her heart out so freely, talking on and on.

Sitting down with several sheaves, she began writing. Hermione would still create a memory for Severus as he requested, but it would be something a little different and special.
Scratching with quill and ink into his ledger, Severus heard the front door bell ring indicating another customer. Now that Draco was gone for the week, he had deal with all of his customers personally versus having someone field the nature of the call before being disturbed.

“Come in,” the Potions master called from his office, finishing up some notes on some recently-delivered commissions.

“Buenos días, Señor Snape,” Maria greeted him as she sat down in a chair opposite from him.

Severus put down his quill and sat upright in his chair, gazing at the witch with a cool eye. Speaking in Spanish, he asked, “And what brings you into my business today, Señora?”

Maria did not look at him with any of the same hostility she had for the past several weeks. Instead there was a contrite look about her. “I’ve come to tell you that I just received news that my husband has passed away. And with that, I am free to go back home, no longer fearing his wrath directed at me or our son.”

“Are you looking for sympathy or my congratulations?” he asked, his exterior as icy as a glacier.

“Neither. I am telling you that I will be leaving for Peru soon so that my son can grow up to be surrounded by my family. As much as Hawaii has become a home, I have family that I want to go back to. And Miguel would love to get to know all his cousins, his grandparents, aunts, and uncles.”

“And you are bothering to tell me now after refusing to speak to me, and spreading word about the island about what a lousy screw I was... because?” he asked, becoming agitated by her mere presence, feeling his resentment towards her simmering to the top once more.

“I’m here because before I leave I felt I should apologize,” she answered hotly, beginning to yell, agitated by Severus' blunt and abrasive confrontational style. “Rainbow evidently didn't know about you and this Hermione when she tried to set us up, telling me how I should get you to come around. She said a nudge was all at was needed to push you in the right direction. How was she to know?” Maria as being rather defensive, laying the blame upon Rainbow.

“It was none of her business to begin with. And let's not forget that you were the one to act upon such suggestions, so she's not entirely to blame,” he reminded her of her part in this as well.
Rainbow had already apologized to him personally and did it in a manner that was much more gracious and sincere than this witch before him.

“Nor did you have to shove me up against a wall and fuck me like some macho shithead,” Maria jogged his memory as well, getting quite aggravated at Severus evading his part in the whole debacle.

“You were quick to accept my impromptu advances, and seemed to have no qualms about fulfilling your needs right there and then, after you provoked me into such action by word and touch,” he growled at her, not willing to let her forget she was the instigator. “And as for the 'lousy' part, you seemed to enjoy yourself quite a bit during the act.” There was a smug grin of triumph as he sat back in his chair.

“You arrogant bastard!” she huffed with indignation.

“I've been called that and far worse by people higher in my esteem than you, but never by the many, many, witches I've had have I ever been called 'lousy.' So your opinion matters not, and with your departure, we'll never have to cross paths again. So there does seem to be a bright side to this conversation.” Severus went back to his ledger. “Adios, Señora.” He was ignoring her as he scribbled away once again.

Furious at being dismissed rudely, Maria stood up and grabbed a jar of pickled bat wings from the corner of his desk and threw it against the wall behind Severus.

“I’ll be sure to send you the bill,” Severus said nonchalantly to her retreating back as his wand casually swished to clean up the mess, echoing the same last words she had spoken to him during their previous encounter.

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Lavender insisted on a long girls-only lunch, which consisted of eating at some wizarding restaurant with lovely outdoor seating amidst a garden and requisite bubbling fountain. The meal was followed by some shopping for clothes at Madame Maurelle Mandel's House of Haute Couture.

“So have you made a memory for Severus yet?” asked Ginny with a wicked grin. She was glancing over her shoulder as she was shuffling through some of the maternity lingerie Madam Mandel had brought out for her, upon learning the good news of her pregnancy.
“How did you...?” Hermione was about to ask, but Ginny answered her unfinished question.

“Because I remember Severus talking with Draco about which Pensieve to buy: the one made in China with ancient Chinese characters, the one made in Greece with ancient Greek symbols, or the Swedish model with runes like Dumbledore used to have.” Ginny held up the dark green silk and lace peignoir, sticking her hand underneath the fabric, imitating an enlarged baby bump to gauge how flattering it would be, and deciding if Draco would like it. “And I saw the way he handed off his own memory to Draco to give to you, like he was handing over a precious relic.”

“It was a very precious memory he gave to me. And no, I intend on making mine tomorrow night. I’ve tried, but I put most of my thoughts in a very long letter and intend to make a short but very sweet memory for Severus.”

“Please tell me you're going to dress up or him,” Lavender said, as she looked over stylish yet functional nursing bras, accented with lace.

“Well...” Hermione hadn't really thought about it.

“The wizard has been mooning after you like a love-sick boy, pouting and moping about. Give him something to keep him warm at night until you get back together,” Ginny suggested, hinting that the memory should stress the “fun” in the functional part of communicating with Severus across the vast distance between them.

“You don't have to go starkers,” Lavender said, sensing Hermione's hesitation, “but wear something stylish and then reveal yourself wearing some very enticing lingerie underneath? A bit of teasing of things yet to come would not be out of order.”

Hermione couldn't believe it, but she agreed to get herself a bit of racy lingerie. Hermione had thought to wear the purple dress she wore to Viktor and Anne's wedding, since Severus had not seen that one yet and it was rather flattering. Though she had a matching bra and knickers set to go with it, Lavender suggested a corset for something a bit different.

Madam Mandel brought Hermione a variety of corsets which would go along very well with the royal purple dress.

When Hermione disrobed, Ginny stifled a gasp at the sight of the scar across Hermione's left breast, where Parker's hex had sliced open her chest.
Noticing the look of shock on Ginny's face, Hermione said, “Maybe this was a bad idea. I mean, he wouldn't want to see my scar. It's so ugly.” She held back tears, as she thought she had dealt with how upset she was with the scar marring her body.

“No,” Lavender insisted. “To Severus it will not matter. I'm sure he has his own scars from the war and if his scars do matter to him, it's not like it made you appreciate him any less.”

Hermione nodded, knowing Lavender was quite correct, but it still didn't stop her from being self-conscious about her scar. At least the staff at St. Mungo's assured her if she ever had children, she could still breastfeed from both breasts without any problems, but there was nothing they could do about the surface scarring due to the hex.

Madam Mandel, who was still in the fitting room, said, “Do not worry, chéri. I shall make sure the corsets we try on you will cover you just so, if you wish. You will look magnifique for your beau.”

Hermione turned around to allow Madam Mandel to slip the purple silk and black lace corset around her. As Madam Mandel began to lace up the corset, cinching tighter and tighter to give her shape, Hermione suddenly began to panic.

She felt bound and restricted, as if she couldn't breathe. Closing her eyes, she tried to force herself to calm down. Hermione knew she was safe, she was with her friends, and nothing was going to happen to her. Still, no matter how much she tried to convince herself, the more Madam Mandel tightened the corset, the more it was like Hermione was back in that dungeon bound by Alan Parker as he talked on before hitting her with that slicing hex.

“Get me out of this,” Hermione demanded, her voice trembling and filled with fear. “Get me out of this now!” she shrieked, fighting against the hook closures in the front.

Before Madam Mandel could cast the spell to pull free the corset ties, Hermione whipped out her wand and cast a spell that split the garment in two down the front.

Collapsed on the floor, breaking into tears, she saw the beautiful piece of lingerie ruined. “I'm sorry. I couldn't... I couldn't...” Hermione shook her head trying to fight the memories which still haunted her nightmares. Even Zhubanysh's sweet songs and healing touch at night before going to bed could not erase all the pain and fear she still felt inside.
Ginny pulled Madam Mandel aside and quietly explained the scar was given while Hermione was recently restricted under a binding spell.

Hermione could hear Ginny, and felt ashamed she had reacted so violently when all it was was some scraps of lace and silk.

Pulling herself off the floor, Hermione straightened up and said, her voice still trembling despite her brave face, “Please allow me to pay for that. It was truly lovely, but I can't wear anything so... restrictive. I'm sure you understand.”

Madam Mandel came over and gave Hermione a brief hug and kiss upon the cheek. “I understand, and I am sorry for your pain. Let me come back with something a bit looser fitting, but just as alluring.”

Hermione nodded, trying to smile while wiping away the last of the tears.

Lavender insisted she should pay for the torn corset since it was her idea to begin with.

Once back at work, Hermione sat down and wrote a letter to James Hoover, asking to see her old Muggle marriage counselor for personal counseling at his nearest convenience. She had tried to move past the trauma of what happened to her, but what transpired that afternoon was surely a sign that she could no longer deal with it by herself any longer. Harry had said how much James had helped him with personal one-on-one counseling with all the things he had suffered over the years, Hermione figured he could help her deal with not only the trauma, but other things she still had trouble processing by herself. There were so many things she still needed to get off her chest, besides the recent attack.

Severus had seemed to have found peace, but she had yet to find her own.

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Calpurnia Fudge stood at the window of Dolores Umbridge’s Ministry office, peering down with contempt at the witches and wizards gathered below in the atrium to listen to the debate between her husband and Amelia Bones for the upcoming election. The Ministry had decided to hold the debate on Saturday when people could attend or listen in on the Wizarding Wireless Network at home.

“Tea, Calpurnia?” Dolores offered in syrupy sweet tones she used with only those in her closest
“Yes, Dolores, I think I'll need a cup to brace my nerves, as I'll be expected to mingle amongst the vacuous masses after the debate.” Mrs. Fudge turned to accept the proffered cup and saucer with milk and just the right amount of sugar from her friend.

There was a slight clearing from Umbridge's throat before she took a sip from her own cup of tea. “Well, my dear, imagine how much more hostile those witches and wizards would be had they known that Alan Parker was your nephew. But as you and I have been able to keep news out of the Daily Prophet that it was he who murdered all those Death Eaters and nearly killed Hermione Granger...Weasley – whatever her last name is – last month, that won't be an issue.”

“It is a pity he didn't kill that divorcing Mudblood who has polluted the purity of wizarding with her filthy Muggle notions. But at least Alan's heart was in the right place. Kill the Death Eaters so we could make the hoi polloi forget that much faster about the war, so we could begin to rescind those pointless laws that punish discrimination against Muggle-borns. To think that Mudbloods would deign to think themselves as equal to one of us is ludicrous.” Calpurnia continued to gaze down her nose at the mass who appeared agitated. They were an unruly bunch, and she would only show up on the stage near her husband when it was time for the debate to begin.

Madam Fudge certainly sympathized with the Dark Lord and his views, but she knew to ally her husband with either side of the war, as it raged, would risk having him be kicked out of office and replaced with a candidate picked by the victors. Sitting on a fence was one way to say her husband was there and then claim he'd helped the side that won in the end, despite what his and Calpurnia's personal views were.

“Where is our dear Minister of Magic, your husband?” Dolores asked as she gazed about.

Calpurnia huffed. “Doing an interview with that silly little blood traitor, Luna Lovegood. It's about time she's come around to granting an interview to Cornelius.”

“Well, with you and me controlling what does and doesn't get printed in the Daily Prophet, it's not like that rag of hers, The Quibbler, matters much.” Umbridge said with a sneer, distaste curling her lip while uttering the name of that printed tripe.

“Don't discount those who might speak against us,” Calpurnia warned her friend as she turned away from the window, unable to stomach looking down upon the crowd whom had become even more boisterous and restive. “Remember The Quibbler ran an article which was flattering of Mergatroyd Morgan, the wizard Cornelius ran against in the last election. It was enough to tip the
scales and I had to make some ballots disappear so that Cornelius won. But if you hadn't helped dispose of those ballots so cleverly, Dolores, I wouldn't be running the Ministry today thanks to you.”

Umbridge nodded in agreement. “Indeed. And does Cornelius enjoy deferring to you for your expertise? Or is he still sometimes difficult – insisting on running the Ministry himself?”

Calpurnia gave a short laugh. “As if he's bright enough to know when he's being told what to do. Unfortunately, I can't be the one who speaks out there, as I certainly would make more sense than his incessant ramblings.”

“And shall we employ the same methods of ballot disposal should the count be in favor of Amelia Bones?” Umbridge asked.

“Might as well, since it worked in the past. This isn't the first election I fixed, you know.”

Looking down, Umbridge spied Harry Potter among the crowd. “I see Harry Potter is down there now. What will you do should he ever decide to run against Cornelius? It would be harder to obscure the vote count if the margin of error is much higher in his favor.”

“Maybe arrange an 'accident' to happen to him on an Auror assignment abroad before he would even run. Too bad he didn't die during the broom race in Asia. Or better yet, pity You-Know-Who didn't kill him first instead of hitting that stupid Mudblood mother of his first. Would have saved both of us years of grief if he was the Idiot-Who-Died instead of the Annoying-Twat-Who-Lived. Now we have to smile sweetly to those blood traitors who won the war and pretend we were always on their side.”

Finishing her cup, Dolores Umbridge sighed. “Well, I guess the debate will be starting soon, so I'd better visit the Little Witch's room before it starts.” Opening her office door, she held it open as she added, “If you'll pardon me, I won't be but a moment.”

Calpurnia nodded her head in recognition of her friend's needing to excuse herself.

As the door to Dolores Umbridge's office shut, the toad of a witch ran as fast as her fat, pinched feet – shoehorned into heels too small for her – could carry her. Running into the loo four doors down from her office, she held the door open a little longer than necessary.
Shutting the door, she whispered aloud to the seemingly empty loo, “Did it work?”

Hermione pulled off Harry's Invisibility Cloak and turned to Lavender, who had emerged from a stall that held the real Dolores Umbridge, who was comatose.

“I could hear Calpurnia and you loud and clear, Draco,” Lavender replied to the wizard transformed into the officious Ministry bureaucrat. “I don't think there was a corner of the Ministry that didn't hear your 'Hot Mic' Spell, Hermione. Well, except for the office where Luna is interviewing Fudge right now.”

Hermione handed off the Invisibility Cloak to Draco, who had taken Polyjuice Potion to look like Dolores Umbridge. If Draco was going to make it back to Lavender's home without being torn apart by the masses of angry witches and wizards now teeming through the Ministry, he would need to be hidden while in Polyjuice form as Umbridge. Unfortunately, like Hogwarts, one could not Apparate directly from within the Ministry, except at the designated Apparition point at the far end of the atrium.

“We'd better hurry,” Hermione reminded them. “Kingsley can only misdirect everyone from Umbridge's office and this toilet for so long. Have you done the Memory Charm on her?” she asked indicating to Umbridge, who was still passed out while sitting on a toilet.

Lavender nodded before Draco, still looking like Umbridge, disappeared under the cloak. As the three of them left the toilet, Hermione and Lavender walked down the stairs with Draco trailing right behind them as they made their way towards the nearest Floo in the Ministry atrium. Harry soon joined behind them to make sure no one walked too closely and accidentally stepped on his Invisibility Cloak, and in the process, reveal Draco Polyjuiced as Umbridge. Harry walked far enough behind to give Draco space.

“It was a pity we couldn't stay longer in her office, as Calpurnia kept rambling on, providing more rope to hang herself with,” Hermione admitted under her breath.

“Yes, but it was prudent of Draco to end the conversation when he did,” Lavender added quietly to avoid being overheard. “Once she mentioned about her wishing Harry had died as a baby, there was a roar of outrage from the crowd which seemed to shake the walls. Good thing you thought to add the 'sound feedback' dampening part of the spell so you and she couldn't tell how outraged the crowd was, nor could they hear themselves broadcast through the whole place.”

No one would have likely overheard Lavender and Hermione, as people were shouting with rage having heard Calpurnia Fudge and “Dolores Umbridge's” candid confession. Draco had merely
repeated close to word-for-word what Umbridge had admitted to under Veritaserum. Everyone was trying to hunt the two witches down. Kingsley had placed a spell to misdirect anyone trying to locate them until he saw Lavender and Hermione next to a fireplace – rather, he had spied a tip of a pink shoe poking out of the bottom of an Invisibility Cloak. Upon their exit, Kingsley ended his Mislocation Charm, and let the crowd find the instigators of their ire.

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The biggest frustration for Hermione was she and Albert could tell no one at their monthly Potions master meeting she was the one behind the “Hot Mic” Spell earlier in the day. Even if she had told them, none of them would even get the reference to the situation where a Muggle would ramble on at the mouth, without realizing that their candid words were being broadcast by a live microphone for everyone to hear, with them none the wiser that they were being overheard.

Calpurnia Fudge had “friends” and allies all throughout the wizarding world, and not even Albert was sure who at their meeting might have had an allegiance to the machinating witch. It was better to play innocent and keep their opinions to themselves anyway, as Potions masters were usually apolitical. Usually.

As Hermione and Albert showed up at the monthly meeting of fellow masters, Hermione was greeted with a mix of hearty claps on the back for her brilliant work discovering Albus Dumbledore's will and consoling handshakes for the attack she had suffered. One of her bouquets of flowers at St. Mungo's was from several Potions masters who had chipped in together, wishing her a speedy recovery.

Once everyone had their turn congratulating or consoling Hermione, the talk immediately turned to the news of the day regarding Calpurnia Fudge and Dolores Umbridge broadcasting the crime of election tampering, in addition to the various other bits of impolite talk. No one brought up the fact that Alan Parker, Calpurnia's nephew, was publicly named as Hermione's attacker by his own aunt.

Discussion went round as to how the conversation had been broadcast to the whole Ministry, and how the two machinating witches could not have heard themselves. Niles was convinced the confession was done under an Imperius Curse, a Sonorus Charm, and a dose of Veritaserum. Royston thought it was done with a set of some Weasley Wizarding Wheezes Extendable Ears and another sound magnification spell. Braxton came up with a scenario which was highly improbable and resulted in nearly everyone chucking something at him for being so daft as to suggest such a thing.

“I think it was two people Polyjuiced as Mrs. Fudge and Miss Umbridge,” Chuff volunteered.

“Yeah, but Polyjuice Potion ingredients are highly regulated, and no one short of a Potions master would have them on hand,” Royston countered.
“I admit it,” Albert put his hand up and waved dramatically, as if close to fainting. “I brewed a Doppelganger Potion and then had my copy and me take Polyjuice to pretend to be them, then I cast a Sonorus Charm.”

There was a pause before everyone, including Hermione, bust up laughing at Albert's “joke.”

“You lying sack of dragon shit. I was helping you in the garden this afternoon when it happened, as it came over the Wireless,” Niles pointed out. “If you're going to lie, make it half-way believable. Doesn't work to confess if you have an alibi. Though that doesn't explain where Hermione was,” he noted overdramatically in jest. “Anything to confess, young apprentice?”

“If you want to hear details about how I was doubled over with menstrual cramps today and would like to hear about my hands shaking with pain as I attempted to brew...” Hermione was cut off by the groans of wizards who did not care to hear about such matters.

She gave herself a small mental pat on the back for coming up with a way to deflect any accidental finger pointing at her, even as a joke, with a reply making any one of the men in her company wish to change the subject quickly.

Conversation rambled on for a while before the games part of the evening began. Hermione let the other Potions masters win the round of 'Name That Ingredient,' purposefully misidentifying the powdered toenail of troll in order to be able to select the next game.

“How about 'Guess what's in this drink?’” she offered, to the cheers of her fellow Potions masters who were always eager to drink something alcoholic while trying to identify what is in it.

“It's about time you concocted something for us. Hit us with your best shot, you young chit,” Reginald Chuff goaded her in good humor.

Hermione came prepared as Draco and Ginny had brought a case of distilled palm sap wine back to England, giving half the case to Hermione. They had also brought with them several crates of fresh pineapples to hand out to friends and family. Hermione had enough to serve everyone who was up for this round of the game. Niles already had rum and vodka stocked in his bar, but Hermione had to procure coconut liquor beforehand, and prepare her own fresh pineapple juice and guava juice before she came over with Albert that evening.
Erecting a screen with flick of her wand, Hermione began to use her knife with the speed of a fully-credited Potions master, preparing the drinks behind the screen so they could not tell what she was putting in each hollowed-out pineapple. Everyone, separated by the screen, was quite curious as she macerated the lavage in vodka and added essence of valerian, which effects were amplified tenfold when added fresh and combined with alcohol and an acidic base, versus added dried to hot water in tea. Hermione remained hidden from view, mixing with the distilled palm sap wine, rum, vodka, and topping off with fruit juices. She even did some fancy carving of the extra pineapple pieces, and sliced, twisted, and folded some pineapple leaves into decorative shapes.

“Voila!” she announced as she removed the screen to reveal a row of seven pineapples containing drinks, ready and waiting.

“If you don't cut it as a Potions mistress, you'd make a passable bartender,” Chuff said not too kindly.

“Drink and name the ingredients,” Hermione challenged him and the rest who were playing, her arms folded across her chest in triumph.

Everyone bellied up to the bar with their own pineapple. Nile turned around and asked Albert, “ Aren't you going to participate in this round?”

Albert waved his hand dismissively and shook his head. “It wouldn't be fair. I already know what's in this drink.”

“And what do you call this enticing little concoction of yours?” Braxton asked, licking his lips, drawn by the heady scent of fresh tropical fruit juices mixed with rum and other exotic scents.

“Wipe-out,” Hermione said with a smug grin.

Waiting in the atrium of the Ministry with a bouquet of flowers in her arms, Hermione looked about anxiously. It was late Sunday afternoon, and there were only a few people milling about. She arrived early, but still there was no sign of them. She hoped she didn't miss them.

Suddenly, the Floo across the atrium flared to life and out stepped Ginny, Draco, Lavender, and Ron from the fireplace. Ron was helping Lavender exit, holding her arm to help her keep balance.
“Sorry we're a bit late,” Ginny apologized, “but Bill wouldn't stop hugging me goodbye, and neither could the kids.”

“Yeah, he's been worried about you, so I'm glad you were able to put his mind at rest.” Hermione turned to Draco. “So, get a taste of what's to come?” Her eyes darted towards Ginny's still flat abdomen.

“A bit more boisterous than I anticipated, but nothing I don't think we can't handle.” Draco smirked as he put his arm around Ginny and kissed the top of her head.

Ron made an odd huffing noise.

“Something wrong, Weasley?” Draco asked, his eyes narrowing a bit, looking a tad defensive.

“Nope, just still getting used to the idea of you being my brother-in-law and spawning with my little sister. Not that I object any longer, it just takes a while.” Ron shrugged casually.

Draco held a large satchel in his free hand that wasn't wrapped around Ginny's waist.

Looking down at the bag, Hermione said, “I have something for Severus. I made the memory Friday night, but finished my letter this morning. And Severus will be wanting these two memories back. They're the ones I used at the Wizengamot. My memory is in the box with his.” She handed over a small wooden box with slightly tarnished brass hinges and a small swiveling hook closure. The other item was a thick roll made of many sheaves of parchment rolled together, and tied with a red ribbon and sealed with wax. Hermione also handed over a bouquet of flowers for Severus.

“I'll make sure he gets these,” Draco promised as he placed the parchments and wooden box in the satchel, while Ginny took the bouquet.

“We should get going if we don't want to miss our Portkey back home,” Ginny said reluctantly, not wanting to hasten their departure.

They walked across the atrium to the Portkey Office where the Malfoys went straight up to the front desk of the scheduled Portkey queue. Once they checked in, Lavender and Ron said their final goodbyes first, with Draco and Ron merely shaking hands, though with far less animosity then they once shared between them.
Hermione gave Ginny huge hug, making sure to not squeeze her too tightly, as much as she wanted to though. “I'm going to miss you both so much.”

“It's only a couple months until we'll see you again,” Ginny reminded her friend.

She smiled and wiped away a few tears before turning to Draco, who put down the satchel. Hermione gave him a warm hug. “Thank you so much.”

“I'm the one who should thank you,” he said with great sincerity.

Hermione laughed and gently hit Draco in the chest with her fist before giving him one last hug. “Take care of Severus for me.”

“That has been what Ginny and I have been doing since we left. Just don't take too long to finish up your apprenticeship, so you can take over that job full-time. Ginny and I will have someone else who will need our full attention soon.” Draco smiled and looked over at his wife, who was tearing up for the umpteenth time that day.

“I'm trying as fast as I can,” Hermione assured him before letting go and allowing the Malfoys leave to take a Portkey to San Francisco, and from there to home.

As the departing couple walked through the door, waving one last time, Lavender huffed with exasperation, “I have got to get someone in the Ministry to see about lifting Dumbledore's spell to block Hawaii, so we can start getting direct Portkeys, not to mention future advertising that doesn't have scrambled words.” Turning to her husband, she added, “Maybe I should contract your brother, Bill, to break that since it's almost like a curse, and he's good at curse-breaking.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to my lovely betas, JuneW and Cygnuz, for cleaning up my grammatical and punctuation messes.

And now the fast and furious chapter postings will ease back to a chapter a week, now that the story will slow down in pace again. Still need to keep of a buffer of betaed chapters in the works so I can keep posting a minimum of a chapter a week. Once my betas have finished with the epilogue, I'll then go back to posting them as fast as
possible again, depending on how fast I can get them validated through the Ashwinder queue.
Severus slept uneasily. Halulu and Greg had come over and mentioned the fact that Draco and Ginny were overdue to return, a fact that had not escaped Severus' attentions when the Malfoys failed to come back home by Friday night as they originally arranged.

Rising with the dawn, he went to the back door to let the nameless black cat in before mincing some leftover roast chicken and placing it on a small plate along with a small bowl of milk for the useful beast. Severus was no longer finding half-gnawed produce in his kitchen garden. Unfortunately, rats were far more clever than some wizard's spell to deter them from a garden, but cats were even more clever. There was a moment where Severus thought he might even miss the furball, once Ginny came back.
'If she comes back,' he pondered.

Looking on the back porch, he noted that there was yet another rat dead, proof that there were far more raiding his garden than he had guessed.

"Keep it up, I might actually have something to can this year," Severus told the cat lapping away contently at the milk that filled its belly after a full night of hunting.

Deciding that a day tending his gardens would be plenty of exercise for the day, Severus forewent his morning swim and had breakfast. He knew something more substantive than tea, toast, and fruit would be prudent, given the amount of physical work ahead, but he could not eat anything more filling.

As he fought against the passion vine that cuddled quite amorously up his leg, he hacked away at the vine's tendrils and shoots before they could get any more fresh with him, and further invade his bed of rare Indian elephant flowers that trumpeted softly in the early morning sun. That was when he heard a familiar voice call out, "Aloha."

Severus pulled out his wand and cast a Blasting Curse before turning around and spying Draco and Ginny opening his front garden gate.

"Aloha. Halulu was about to send out a search party since you didn't come back Friday." Severus picked off the last of the passion vine still affectionately curling about his ankles.

"We unpacked our things and came right over. I think you'll find the reason why we delayed our return was for a worthy cause," Draco said with a satisfied grin as he pulled out a copy of the Sunday edition of the Daily Prophet.

Severus looked at the front page and grinned as he read the headline.

"Minister's Wife & Dolores Umbridge Confess To Election Rigging"

"My, you have been busy," Severus said nonchalantly. "Care to come in for a cup?"
Over a pot of tea, Draco and Ginny recounted Hermione's plan, and how now the Ministry was in an uproar, because Fudge had to resign as Minister, since he didn't lawfully win the last election. The wizard who should have won – Mergatroyd Morgan – had recently left the country to travel abroad, unwilling to stomach watching another electoral cycle. An owl was being sent to the remote tropical island where he went on holiday to inform him of recent developments. Deputy Minister McPeebles was running the Ministry until the election later that week, which was now between McPeebles and Bones. The election should have been between Morgan and Bones, but Morgan had been quoted a few times by the Daily Prophet saying that he had formally resigned from politics, and if he ever had to step foot in the Ministry ever again, it would be too soon.

Severus laughed and periodically shook his head, silently amazed by Hermione's inventiveness and her ability to right yet another injustice. He was not surprised by Morgan's refusal to remain in politics and feeling a bit empathetic with rightfully elected Minister where the Ministry was concerned. Most of all, he was glad Hermione was able to finally exact revenge against Calpurnia for interfering with her life, and was thankful Draco was there to help, as having a Slytherin available was useful whenever one was hatching cunning plans.

As Draco began to unpack the satchel that contained items they had brought back for Severus, he announced, "I have all the things you requested. Monies from the Ministry in compensation for your seized house – good thing you thought to have Mounga draw up that 'power of attorney' document, granting me the right to bring back the money on your behalf." There was a thump and jingle as a small pouch of Galleons was placed on the counter, given that Severus' former home was rather modest and wasn't worth much to begin with.

"Bangers from Abattoir and Haunches, plus enough so that our local butcher can finally find out what a real banger should taste like. Oh, and proper British back bacon." The blond wizard pulled out more packages of wrapped meat from the satchel, which had an Extension Charm. "Teas, from the apothecary you sent me to. Jammy thumb biscuits. Clotted cream, since our local cows don't have the right butterfat content. And some good French and Spanish cheeses, plus Stilton."

Severus was thankful that his friends brought back most of the things he requested, but what he was looking forward to most was not among the items Draco placed on his kitchen counter.

"And lastly, I have this." Draco pulled out a large tube of parchment consisting of several sheets rolled together and tied with a ribbon. "And this," he added, pulling out the same wooden box Severus had left Hermione as a Christmas present. "Hermione said two of these in the box belong to you, and the third is from her."

Severus wanted to appear cool and collected enough to appear almost disinterested, but he rose quickly and nearly snatched the box out of Draco's hand hastily.
"She still loves you, Severus," Ginny said, answering the question he had yet to ask aloud.

"So how did she get the wrong bouquet?" he asked, offering his guests some more tea and nibbles.

Draco decided he was better at spinning the tale with more flare than his wife, as he knew how to use words that pandered to Severus' temperament and conveyed the right sentiments that only another Slytherin could truly appreciate. Ginny was the one who told Severus about Hermione receiving her leis, and the toast that Draco proposed and all who joined in.

Throughout the morning, they continued to recount the party to Severus. He even heard about the dirty limerick contest, which Ginny tried to convince her husband to not retell. The redhead apologized for Hermione's crudeness in her absence, since she was quite drunk from that "Wipe-Out" drink that Draco fixed the former Golden Trio. Then there was the story of Hermione challenging Draco, Harry, and her ex-husband, Ron, to a beer-drinking contest at the Korean barbecue joint, followed by dancing at a club afterwards.

Severus had gotten Hermione tipsy before, but never quite that drunk. By Draco and Ginny's descriptions, Albert was doing a fine job of bringing her tolerance for alcohol up to an acceptable level, as that was part of the apprenticeship training.

For centuries, unscrupulous witches and wizards have attempted to get Potions masters and mistresses drunk enough to spill their most guarded secrets, only to have the intellectual property thieves drunk under the table and secret potions formulas remaining secret in the end. It was yet another way to protect their knowledge from those who would try to steal it. Pity Ranjit didn't drink alcohol, and Arnold had the alcohol tolerance of a first year. Severus hadn't been to a proper booze-up in years, though he and Draco had one every year on Victory Day during their oppression under the Death Eater Decree, but it wasn't quite the same when you were drinking to mope, instead of socialize.

The Malfoys also told Severus about their visit to Molly and Arthur's and what a strained affair that was. While Ginny was thrilled to see her father, things were still rather tense between mother and daughter.

"And when Ginny was feeling a little nauseous, I offered to make some ginger tea for her," Draco recalled. "Molly nearly had a heart attack on the spot, hardly believing I was willing to venture into a kitchen and not demand she or a house-elf do it."
"Would it have been so terrible if she did have a heart attack?" Ginny bit out.

"Not at all. As for her comment that maybe you weren't pregnant and it wasn't too late to have a divorce, it did not endear her to my bosom any further," Draco said rather icily, still frosted about his mother-in-law's words.

"But at least my father apologized. He was thrilled to see how happy I am with you and how attentive you are to me," Ginny reminded him.

"Yes, Arthur was civil and gracious. Your mother is another matter." Draco ground his teeth at the memory of the visit.

The topic was quickly dropped. They moved on to other more pleasant subjects, including the restoration of Malfoy Manor and the refilling of the Malfoy vault at the Gringotts London branch.

"Unfortunately, my mother's silverware was missing." Draco sighed heavily. "I was hoping to find that returned, but they said it had been sold in the meantime to some buyer from abroad."

"Well, you never know. With time, it might turn up again," Severus noted as casually as possible. "Did you find out what you were compensated for the set?"

"About six-thousand Galleons."

"What?" Ginny reacted with shock.

"The set is a full service for twenty-four, with both a lighter luncheon setting and a heavier dinner setting, so it's actually forty-eight settings in total. All Goblin-made, of course." Draco seemed rather nonplussed by the value of the set, and more concerned over its sentimental value. "Each setting includes, besides the basic salad and entree forks, a teaspoon, place spoon, and knife, a bouillon soup spoon, cream soup spoon, iced beverage spoon, demitasse spoons, butter knife, fish knife, fish fork, ramekin fork, fruit fork, lobster pick, and other pieces. Then there are the various serving pieces, such as meat fork, ladles, serving spoons, and so on."

Severus nodded, quietly thrilled Naomi had been able to purchase the set for under three-thousand. It had taken a bit of effort for him to scrimp together that much, but he had wanted to find the set before anyone else purchased it. Though, had he known Hermione would win their property back
for them, he would have held off and let the Ministry buy it back from the dealer in Knockturn
Alley. But six-thousand Galleons was double what he'd paid, so the discrepancy in price made
Severus wonder if the set's spell to avoid being split and sold off had been broken. He would have
to retrieve the set from Naomi and do a count, as there were a few pieces to the set he was unaware
of until Draco listed them. Still, it would make a fine first wedding anniversary and Christmas
surprise later that year.

"Oh!" Ginny said suddenly. "I just remembered one more thing from Hermione." Getting up from
her seat, she reached far down into the satchel, practically having to stick her head into the bag to
find the last item.

"This bouquet is from Hermione," Ginny said.

In the center were two red roses for love. Surrounding the two roses were ox-eye daisies mixed
equally with corchorus. Severus laughed to himself at the heartfelt yet contrary nature of the
mixing of those two, as the ox-eye daisies symbolized patience, and the corchorus impatience of
absence. It was her way of telling Severus she would wait, but that she couldn't wait to see him.
Surrounding the daisies and corchorus were a mix of alstroemeria, heliotrope, and white
periwinkle, symbolizing devotion, faithfulness, and pleasures of memory. It was quite a change
from her previous bouquet that he had recently discarded, as the rudbeckias (for justice) had
withered and the palm fronds (symbolizing victory) were beginning to turn brown, a few weeks
after he and Draco had been exonerated by the Wizengamot. Today, this new bouquet's message
was love.

Running a finger along the petals of the white periwinkle, Severus did recall Lavender mentioning,
in a round-about way, that Hermione would spend many a late Friday night – based on what the
house-elves told her – locked in her office with Lavender's Pensieve. Lavender made some
innuendo-laced remark about not needing so much time to review just two memories.

As Severus gazed at the bouquet, drinking in Hermione's message to him, Ginny fetched a vase
from the cupboard and filled it with water from her wand.

"Why have you never bought me flowers?" Draco asked Ginny.

"Because you would have said something like it's the wizard's job to woo the witch, not the other
way around," she replied.

"Too true. Too true," he conceded. "But I don't think Severus minds something a little
unconventional now and then. Am I right, Severus?"
Severus didn't hear Draco. Instead, his gaze was set upon the roll of parchment on the table, curious as to what Hermione had to say to him in the many, many, many words she had written him.

"Come Draco. I'm sure we can catch up with Severus later." Ginny rose, watching the way Severus was lost in thought. "Besides, my body clock is still on London time, and right after I just adjusted to the new time zone. I'm ready for bed."

Severus walked his guests down to the garden gate and thanked them for all that they had done for him, taking care of important matters. It was after the Malfoys had left he realized he forgot to tell Ginny to take the cat with her.

'Figures the wee beastie would make itself scarce at an inopportune time.'

Once back in his kitchen, he debated which to open first, Hermione's letter or her memory. Thinking how much easier it would be to imagine her voice as he read, he decided to view the memory first.

Entering his private Potions lab, he approached his new Pensieve. It had arrived a few days earlier than expected while the Malfoys were away.

The base was made of white marble, cut from the same Pentelic quarry that had supplied the marble for the Parthenon in Athens. On the base was a bas relief depiction of Mnemosyne, Titaness and Greek goddess of memory. It was a round base, instead of edged with flat faces, to evoke the fact that memories can be circular, coming back to a beginning with no end.

He'd chosen the model with the hand-hammered silver bowl that rested atop the base, with a locking lid for security, instead of the model where the bowl and base were one. His bowl was made to slip easily into the depression on the top of the base so it would never fall off or tip over. The lip of the bowl was decorated with a series of ancient Greek characters engraved into the metal.

Reading the ancient words, he translated them. "Memories can be air, stone, fire, and water. They can lift up, weigh down, deflagrate, or drown us."

Those words weighed heavily upon Severus. He had drowned in his own memories, as if unable to
breathe at times. Or he let the weight of the memory of his wife weigh like an anchor around his neck, dragging it around for years as penance. But there were some memories that also lifted him up and made him soar like a bird on wing. Hermione had lifted his spirits with those memories that he recalled of their months together.

He gazed at the green-capped vial for a moment in anticipation of finally seeing Hermione, even if only in a memory. In Lavender's memory, Hermione was quite stern and forceful as she faced the Wizengamot, with little warmth. As much as he admired her in those memories, he longed for some of the tenderness that emanated from her, directed towards him.

As the memory swirled in the argentine water, Severus leaned forward, eager to see her once again.

Severus found himself once again back in his old flat. Hermione was there waiting for him, a vision in royal purple.

"Hello, Severus." She smiled sweetly, though he could tell that she was a little nervous by the way the corner of her mouth twitched and her eyes would dart away. He still knew her and her habits.

"I tried creating a memory as wonderful as the one you gave to me, but just as you had trouble putting your thoughts down on parchment, I had trouble speaking my heart to an empty room. Rather strange considering the circumstances under which we met?" She smiled at the irony.

Turning about, she asked, "Do you like it?" Hermione smoothed down the front of her dress when she stopped spinning. "I bought it for a wedding I attended in June, but you can read about the details of that in my letter to you."

Severus liked it very much. His hands wanted to slip over the silk to enfold this glorious creature in his arms once again. For now, the sight of her would have to satisfy his thirst for her. Not only had she donned a beautiful gown, but she’d had her hair done and was wearing make-up, just for him.

"Your home looks lovely, Severus, and I can't wait to see it in person one day." Hermione's gaze cast about the room. "And for now this is my home. Though even before I officially moved in, I think I already felt this was my home." Gesturing with her hand, she indicated Severus to come sit on the settee with her as they had done so many times before.

"Come, let us have some tea, and I will talk of pleasant things this time."
It did not escape Severus' attention her choice of words to indicate that the topic of her attack would not come up in this memory.

There was already a tea service with two cups on the low table in front of the settee. Hermione poured some tea into the cup that was set for Severus before pouring her own. Granted, Severus could not drink the tea, but it stirred more memories – of a time when they would sit and talk, watching the fire together. Not only had Hermione created this memory for him, but was evoking old ones of their time together.

"Albert has been a fine master and mentor to me. He's watched out for me when we go to those monthly gatherings at Niles Goggin's home. He warned me about how some of the Potions masters like to play pranks on each other, so he's made sure that none of the more inappropriate ones happen to me, though having my nose turned into the trunk of an elephant was pretty tame by comparison. Reginald Chuff, your old master, slipped Jack Braxton a potion that..." Hermione paused, before squinting her eyes shut momentarily as if pained by the memory. "As I said before, let us talk of pleasant things."

"I've mastered Latin and Greek, and I'm currently working on my Spanish." Smiling even more sweetly, she gazed across the settee where Severus had placed himself in this memory. "If you were here, or if I were in Hawaii with you, I'm sure you could tutor me and I'd learn it that much faster. I'm doing everything I can to finish my apprenticeship as fast as possible. When Lavender told me of her plan to set up operations in Hawaii and have me run the region, I was thrilled. I've thanked Draco for his idea, but tell him thanks once more for me. It is wonderful to have another purpose to strive for after my apprenticeship. Wanting to be with you is my greatest drive, but this opportunity is just the icing on the cake."

Hermione paused to fetch her tea from the table and sip, holding the saucer her hand.

"Lavender has been teaching me how to run the company, and there is so much I've learned. She intends on having me run the company while she's on maternity leave, so by the time I'm done with my apprenticeship, I'll know all the ins and outs of the operations and be fully up to speed. I just hope I can finish learning Spanish, Japanese, and Chinese in time for the opening of the facility in Hawaii, as Draco will be helping with preparations before I arrive."

Draco had told Severus of his plan to go back to work for Lavender, but now it really sunk in that Severus would be losing his co-worker and fellow tutor. If Draco was going to prepare the facility before her arrival, that meant that Draco would be supervising construction and would no longer have time to work at his shop. This would be something he would have to talk with Draco about regarding timelines, once he and Ginny had rested from their trip.
Hermione smiled to herself, as she put her tea down. "And while it may be at least a year or possibly two before I am fully accredited, and hopefully not longer, we have a chance to see each other before then." There was a small frown that pulled the corners of her lips down, and she furrowed her brow as she played with a callous on her thumb. "As much as I know you could never return back to England, I understand why. And as much as I would love to come to Malu Palekaiko, I know that having to leave you to come back to England at the end of a trip would be very, very difficult for me." The smile returned to Hermione's lips and her eyes grew hopeful. "But now that you're truly free to travel all over the world without any persecution, what is to stop us from seeing each other somewhere else?"

Severus smiled at that idea, realizing it wasn't going to be as long as he feared until he saw her once again.

"Lavender will be doing her launch for India the first weekend in October. She can't go because she'll be too close to her delivery date to Portkey. So, Lavender has asked Draco to come so he can be there for the launch as well, and I can introduce him as the new Vice President of Advertising and Marketing for the Asia Pacific region. And so, while I may be busy on the Saturday doing the whole boring press thing," Hermione said with a roll of her eyes, looking as thrilled as Severus would be if he was forced to do that kind of thing, "I'll have Sunday off, and Lavender agreed to extend my trip out to Monday or Tuesday so we can have time to catch up."

There was a twinkle in her eyes that Severus knew well, and all that it implied.

"So, I hope you can come to India." Dropping her chin down to look up though her lashes, her eyes almost focused to where Severus placed himself in the memory, she said with mock gravitas, "And as much as you may mock my Gryffindor sense of fairness, it would only be fair that you meet me half-way." Hermione became a bit more serious and genuinely sincere when she added, "Though in all honesty, I'd gladly go to the ends of the earth to be with you once again."

If Severus was a more physically demonstrative person, he would have placed his hand over his bosom and sighed dramatically, throwing his head back. Instead, he merely reveled in the heady sensation of emotions coursing through him at her words and sincerity.

"Before this memory ends, do you think we could have one dance?" Hermione rose from the settee and walked over to a space cleared away. "I know you cannot touch me in the memory, and you're not here with me, but we can still have one dance. I can imagine you here, and you can dance with the image of me."

Hermione drew her wand from the discreet pocket in her dress and turned the music box to play. Severus recognized it as Lavender's music box.
Standing straight, in heels, Hermione put her right hand out about where Severus' would have been, and held the other hand up as if placed upon his shoulder.

The familiar strains of a song began to play.

"I left my heart in San Francisco
High on a hill it calls to me..."

Severus remembered dancing with her to this song so many times and the way they moved about the room. As he danced with her in the Pensieve, he anticipated most of the time where she would move, dancing with near-perfect synchronicity to the memory of Hermione. His hand once in a while would pass through hers and there would be a slight shimmer of where their hands would have met.

As the song came near the end, Hermione held her hand up and twirled about once, as if Severus was guiding her.

The song ended, and there was silence once again.

"I've missed you, Severus," she sighed with plaintive longing, closing her eyes momentarily. "God, how I've missed you. I ache to the very center of my being for you."

He sensed a change in her tone, and guessed she was choosing to not dwell on how much they missed each other. Instead, Hermione began walking over towards the bed where she paused by one of the bed posts. "Lavender and Ginny thought I should leave you with something to occupy your thoughts for a while. And that doesn't seem too amiss."

Keeping her back turned towards the room where she had correctly guessed Severus would be standing, she began to slowly unzip the back of her dress. She let it slowly slip from her shoulders and past her waist.

Beneath her dress, Hermione was wearing a floor-length silk slip that hugged her form rather snugly. The slip was in the same royal purple as her dress, edged with black lace along the slit up the thigh and across the tops of her breasts. Severus felt his breath seize in his chest. God, he wanted her more than ever.
Slipping her feet out of her heels, Hermione crawled up onto the bed, still in her stockings and slip. Before she reclined back, she pulled the pins from her hair, and let the carefully-styled smooth curls that were piled atop her head spill down about her shoulders and back. As she laid back, she gazed at the empty space on the bed next to her, the place where Severus would normally lay.

"I lie here and remember you in this bed with me many nights. And as much as I wish I could join you, I will stay and finish my apprenticeship here." She sighed with longing, stroking the pillow next to her.

Severus had come to lay on the bed next to her. His vision was momentarily clouded when her hand passed through his head to touch the pillow.

Hermione smiled one last time as she said in nearly a whisper, "I love you too, Severus."

Severus found himself once again in his laboratory. The words inscribed in Greek never rang more true. He was at once soaring at the chance to see Hermione once more and hear her words of love for him; weighed down with the knowledge that they would have to remain apart for a while longer; and consumed with a burning desire for her. And as for the last element, he could understand how people could easily drown in memories, dragged down to depths that they no longer wanted to escape, but embrace like a watery grave, lost in a euphoric peacefulness. Severus could easily spend hours reliving this memory time and time again, to the exclusion of everyday life, much like those who had wasted away in front of the Mirror of Erised.

But Severus would not live in the past. He had a future ahead, one where Hermione would return to his side. As for the trip to India, it would mean having to push practice test schedules up by a few days for the Autumn SATs in late October, though it was still early enough to make such arrangements. He would have to make sure that he didn't have any potions simmering away while he was gone, which meant brewing extra Wolfsbane Potion and a few other long-term, regular commissions ahead of schedule, but it was nothing he couldn't work around.

Looking at his calendar, he noted that the India trip was just under six weeks away. Severus also noticed that Hermione's birthday was in exactly four weeks. He would have to ask Draco if the Weasley twins had taken his special commission to make a birthday present for Hermione. There was still much to catch up on with Draco and Ginny, but until that time, he would finish work in his garden, with breaks to read Hermione's lengthy letter in between chores.

Hermione had taken the anatomy portion of her apprenticeship exam with Albert earlier in the week and passed with flying colors. It was a nice little birthday present to herself, considering she was turning twenty-five and Severus would not be around for her birthday that year. Now she
could focus on her code of ethics, Potions theory, and her remaining three languages.

It was Friday, two days before her birthday, and Fastrada Johnson had taken Hermione out to lunch to celebrate. The two witches had lunch about once a month to keep up on talk of the Potions trade, research, and idle chatter, including finding out that Trevor was not the father of Madam Dushka's baby. Once she learned of Hermione's attack, Fastrada had sent Hermione some flowers, which were waiting for her on her desk when returned to work back in July. Hermione wished she could have told Fastrada about her participation in the downfall of Calpurnia Fudge and Dolores Umbridge, but it was best to keep that on a need-to-know basis.

After returning to work from her birthday lunch, the house-elf at The Lovely Lavender Company's reception desk directed Hermione to go to Lavender's office.

Knocking on the door, Hermione entered and noticed that no tea or nibbles had been put out, which was a good sign. That, or Lavender didn't bother because Hermione was returning from lunch and figured it would have been refused.

Waiting with Lavender were Fred and George Weasley.

"There she is! The birthday witch!" George crowed and picked up Hermione in a grand hug, spinning her about shortly before putting her back down.

"And it's good to see you too!" Hermione said cheerily, a little surprised by their presence.

Fred also gave Hermione a warm hug, asking if she had time in her busy schedule of "Vice President of The Lovely Lavender Company, Potions apprentice, and righter of world wrongs," if they had time to squeeze in and have that brainstorming luncheon they talked about.

"Well, surely you didn't come over here just to ask me that. You could have owled, you know," she reminded them, though Hermione figured that Lavender and the twins had other business to discuss.

"Actually, we're here to deliver your birthday present to you. You see, we had this very strange request from Malfoy." Fred and George looked at her with a mix of suspicion and amusement, as the latter continued. "Malfoy came to us with the request of a secret commission of a birthday present from an unnamed party."
Hermione knew exactly who the unnamed party was and couldn't help but break into an elated smile.

"See!" Fred shouted with glee, "I told you she was seeing someone."

Shaking her hands, palms outwards, Hermione said innocently, "Wait, what makes you think I'm seeing anyone?"

"Because you're blushing worse than a virgin who wandered into The Sirens' Secrets by accident," George said smugly.

Hermione didn't want to have this conversation. It had been bad enough when Harry and Ron found out about her and Severus, she didn't need the twins to throw in their off-color remarks, making comparisons of him to vampires and Filch.

"So, you have my present? May I have it?" the still furiously-blushing witch asked, hoping to distract the pair of wizards from their line of questioning.

"Considering how much was shelled out for this little beauty, I am tempted to not hand it over without at least first getting a hint," Fred said, casually examining his fingernails.

"Yes, it is a new prototype," George elaborated. "But Malfoy, surprisingly inventive git in his own right, also had some new ideas to expand upon your present. We even promised him five percent royalties, since he gave us so many other ideas for variations on your present."

Hermione didn't exactly feel like dealing with any mocking of her lover from these two, and she crossed her arms over her chest. "And if I don't give you any hints? Not that I have either confirmed or denied seeing anyone, so there may be no hints to give," she asked with a bored look on her face to show her patience was starting to run a bit thin, despite her inward excitement.

"That sounds like something a Slytherin would say," George remarked, to which Hermione began to blush a little more despite her efforts not to.

"Well, the look on your face certainly takes a few contenders off the list," Fred noted, as if reading her mind. "Hmmm, who trusts Malfoy well enough to have him do this task for them, yet could not come to us himself? Does Malfoy know that Spanish twit, Delgado?"
"My present?" Hermione asked, with her hand outstretched, glaring with unamused impatience, endeavoring to not let the twins on to her relationship with Severus, not yet.

She knew Ginny and Draco had not told the twins or anyone else about his work for Lavender, her association with Severus, or how Hermione had helped them escape. Things were still rather hot concerning the topic of Death Eaters and the exoneration of Malfoy and Snape, especially since Draco and Ginny came back last month for a quick visit.

"Alrighty. Just make sure you open this in your flat once you have made as much space as possible. Something about folding away the bed and removing all furniture was included in the directions. And your office is far, far too small to open it in," Fred warned her. "As a matter of fact, whoever commissioned your present knew the exact dimensions of your flat. And that is my clue that you're seeing someone."

Hermione took the present, which was about the size of a large shoe box and weighed no more than if it was shoes in the package. Tied on top with the bow was a set of simple directions, Fred explained.

"This is not an entirely new idea, but let's say, one of our old products was supposedly the inspiration for this," George admitted. "But that's as much as we can say for now."

If Severus did commission the twins to make her a present, what old joke of theirs did he re-imagine into something for her? Severus was not one to give joke gifts. Now her curiosity was even more piqued.

The twins wished Hermione a happy birthday before parting. Once gone, Lavender reached into her desk.

"Now that they are gone, I can give you this. Severus handed it to me back in Hawaii and said to give it to you when the twins delivered your present."

A simple letter was handed to Hermione with her name written on the front. She recognized his handwriting.

Hermione stood in Lavender's office looking at both the box and the letter, lost in thought, when Lavender interrupted her silent contemplation. "Since it's your birthday this weekend, why don't
you go home and open it up. If it's nothing too personal, you can tell me what it is Monday, as I'm dying of curiosity."

Harry and Zhubanysh were taking Hermione out for a birthday dinner that night, since her Saturday days were busy with her Herbology apprenticeship work and that Saturday night was the monthly Potions masters' booze-up, which would certainly involve copious amounts of drinking for her birthday. Even Sunday was another all-day workshop with Albert at his home. So Lavender's permission to leave would at least give her enough time to appreciate her gift before yet another busy weekend ahead.

Arriving home, Marf was surprised to see his mistress home before the end of the workday. The house-elf was more than happy to help Hermione clear the main room of her flat to accommodate the surprise inside the box.

Before opening the box, Hermione read Severus' letter to her.

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My beloved Hermione,

While this may not be as functional as the book I gave to you last year, even I can admit that something a bit frivolous now and again is not entirely a bad thing.

I do hope the Weasley twins have fulfilled my commission according to my specifications. Given their 'talents' even back at Hogwarts, I have faith that they have created something worthy of my level of expectation. I hope it will meet yours and will delight you as well.

Until we are reunited once again, I count the days until you are in my arms once more.

May your birthday be filled with good cheer and the good company of friends.

Eternally yours,

Severus
Hermione did have Severus' address, as Draco and Ginny had given it to her. Given she was going to see him in early October, she felt little need to write when they would see each other soon. Besides, she was leaving for India in thirteen days, while an albatross took between fifteen and twenty days to get from London to Hawaii. By the time it arrived, it would be after they had left to go to India, coming from opposite sides of the world.

Tucking the letter into a pocket, Hermione now stood in the middle of her empty flat and read the directions. All one had to do to activate the gift was open the box, and to put it back in the box required a simple incantation with directions on how to wave one's wand. She read over the direction twice to make sure she knew how to put it away, since Hermione had no idea what to expect.

Lifting the lid off the box, out leapt a flash of green and other bright vivid colors that filled every space of the parlor-cum-bedroom. When everything settled, Hermione looked around in amazement at what the twins had produced. They had taken their Portable Swamp idea and – she guessed it was upon Severus' suggestion – turned it into a tropical paradise instead. No doubt the charms were similar, but this was filled with perfumed flower-laden trees and shrubbery, and a waterfall, instead of stagnant water, muck, and dank smells. Birdsong filled the air along with the sounds of water splashing. Lush foliage, branches, and fronds obscured much of her flat's walls and ceiling, giving it an almost private, enclosed feeling.

Hermione laughed and spun about, enthralled with the splendor surrounding her. Beneath her feet was soft grass, and the waterfall that splashed over a rocky cliff edge – about where the crown molding was – cascaded over rocks into a small pool, just large enough for two to slip into. Walking over to it, after a detour past a clump of bamboo, bright flowering gingers and vivid shrimp plants, she placed her hand in the pool and noted how it was warm enough to soak in – a mini-hot spring.

She recognized several plants from her memory Severus gave her. Some of them he'd pointed out himself, some were from a book on tropical plants of Southeast Asia, South America and the Pacific Islands she'd purchased via Owl Order from Flourish and Blotts.

As she walked through, she named each plant she recognized aloud. "Cochlospermum vitifolium 'Florepleno'." She cupped one of the huge, richly yellow ruffled blossoms in her hand, amazed at the size and beauty of it. "Gardenia taitensis, Delonix regia, Schizostachyum glaucofoliolium," the last being a Polynesian bamboo Severus had pointed out in his memory for her, also giving her the
Hawaiian name of "'Ohe Kahiko." There were even several bushes of *Jasmine sambac*, the flowers included in Draco and Ginny's lei to her, which gave off a rich and heady perfume that nearly made her head spin.

This was as romantic and glorious as any photo spread she had seen in many of her books of Hawaii.

After a tour around her own flat to look at all the different plants and flowers, Hermione was tempted to pick one of the flowers, but did not know if the flower could be kept out of the box, after packing away. If picked, would the flower be forever gone from that plant's stem with no new growth to replace it and never to re-bloom the next time she opened the box, or would it alter the spells used to create this lush and hedonistic scene. She would definitely have to owl the twins about the stellar work they had done and some follow up questions.

Hermione decided a dip in the warm pool was in order. After shedding her clothes, she toed into the small pool nude, feeling her muscles relax in the warm waters. It was certainly cooler than the hot springs at the spa, as she could see herself sitting for a long while in this temperature without getting overheated.

More than anything, she wished Severus was there to sit with her in this mini-tropical paradise he had given her for her birthday. It was small enough, she could easily pack it and take it with her to India in thirteen days and her wish still come true.

She wondered if the hot springs Severus talked of visiting once weekly was similar to this, as it was also similar to the photos she had in one of her books that she frequently fantasized her and Severus making love in. The boughs of flower-laden branches cascading near the edges of the pool certainly were close to her fantasy scenario.

After a long soak, Hermione got out of the water and wandered about some more, envisioning herself and Severus naked in the tropical forest. It almost brought back memories of the Dionysus Fever Potion she took and the game of chase that she and Satyr-Severus had before he captured her, taking her roughly within the hallucination, under the mind-altering influence of her final Greek project.

Hermione laid back on the soft grass and began to masturbate, remembering the image of Severus – with his beard and even longer hair with a white streak – taking her in the midst of their own private paradise. She came with a fierce cry, calling out his name.

As she laid there, feeling more satisfied from a round of masturbation than she had in a long, long
while, Hermione stroked the grass, imagining Severus beside her. She whispered, "Soon we'll be together again, Severus. Soon."

Severus didn't normally attend children's birthday parties. Actually, he never did, but he was willing to make an exception for Kaimi. Draco and Ginny were invited well, but they were busy getting ready for the belly dancing recital later that afternoon.

The youngest of the Finau clan was turning nine, and her party was held at the Oktoberfest celebration, at a reserved table in the community center. Mounga's other children had reached an age beyond birthday parties, except for a few friends coming over for cake. Kaimi wanted one last big party as a child, which was normally held during the event since it was easier to get all her friends together there as the rest of the town tended to be there as well.

Rainbow was there in full German native dress, in a dirndl befitting a married woman, picked up during their family trip to Germany that summer. Rainbow felt a strong affinity towards her German roots, in addition to her Hawaiian roots, as she had a great-grandmother, Margaretha, with whom she was close. The German witch got pregnant around the turn of the century by a local Bavarian Muggle of some noble title now forgotten, whom she could not marry. She was perceived as a peasant, and had they known she was a witch, as her Muggle lover was unaware of her magical abilities as well, it would have been an even worse scandal. As it was, his family gave her some money and the promise to marry her off to some farmer in another village thirty miles away. She took the money and instead fled to Malu Palekaiko where she had the child, a witch and Rainbow's grandmother, and in time became a member of the local town council.

Rainbow was not the only local who had German blood, as there was also a small wave of Germans who had left their home country in the mid- to late-1800's. The immigrants made it to the Sandwich Islands as it was known at the time, so it seemed there was a smattering of Teutonic blood in many of the locals, in addition to Portuguese, Spanish, American, Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, some various South American countries, and the other Polynesian Islands.

There were a lot of celebrations from other countries in Malu Palekaiko throughout the year. The Mexican community had their Cinco de Mayo celebration, plus El Dios de la Muerte for the sanctuary-seekers from Central America, the Japanese with the Bon Festival, the Irish with St. Patrick's Day, which was surprising since back in Ireland it was rather a non-event for the wizarding community in the country, and the Chinese and other eastern Asians with their Lunar New Year.

Shortly after opening his business, to harbor good will in the community, Severus had even paid for one of the local Chinese lion dance clubs to perform the "Cai Qing" or "Picking the Green" in front of his business. Since many of the local businesses were doing it, he figured for his first year in business it was good policy to follow local customs. There was a small parade featuring the small troops of lion dancing clubs and even a dragon dance, but the dragon dance only occurred
when a dragon was not currently nesting on top of the volcano. No one wanted to tempt a dragon down from the volcano thinking there was a possible mate in the middle of town chasing an illuminated pearl.

And now it was time for Oktoberfest, which meant lots of German foods, music, dancing, lots of drinking and Kaimi’s birthday party in the midst of the celebrations. Severus did note the coincidence that Kaimi’s birthday was the day before Hermione’s, though he made no mention of it.

Severus was told that he didn't have to buy her anything, just that his mere presence for blowing out the candles and cake was all that was required of him, since Kaimi was rather fond of her "uncle." He did splurge and get her a small gold necklace with a pendant of a snake that had a tiny emerald for the eye. Kaimi had been quite thrilled upon learning that the Slytherin House mascot was a snake, and she was rather fascinated by them. She even asked him about Salazar Slytherin himself, not having been brought up with certain prejudices against Slytherins that some wizarding folk back in England had towards Slytherin House and Parselmouths.

Kaimi was dressed in her own dirndl of light blue with Tyrolean ribbon trim and a lace-edged white apron. Even her pigtails were braided and looped. Iakona was in lederhosen, and a red gingham shirt, with requisite knee-socks. Mounga refused to wear the traditional male German outfit, citing he had no German blood in him that he knew of, and that even though he was a good sport, even he had limits to what he would do.

Akela was wearing her own bright red dirndl, the skirt portion hemmed to just above the knees, which was quite flirtatious for a young witch who was coming into womanhood. She was dancing with a wizard who had been courting her recently. After the viewing of "Monty Python and the Holy Grail," the young wizard, named Tristan, had asked Severus for permission to escort Akela home after the movie – with Severus chaperoning, of course. Tristan was an adequate Potions student of his, of no remarkable talent, but he was quite good at Transfiguration, based on Draco's praise. He was an acceptable suitor for Akela in not only Mounga's eyes, but Severus' as well. Even Akela admitted to Severus, when he asked about their courtship, that she wanted to take things slowly with him and not rush things, unlike before. Rainbow and Ginny had the good graces to not mention that Tristan resembled a much younger version of Severus with a different nose.

Severus sat nearby as everyone, but him, joined in a chorus of "Happy Birthday" – sung wizarding-style, of course – before Kaimi made a wish and blew out the candles. He still was not comfortable with singing in public. The cake was a moist and delectable passion fruit flavored yellow cake with whipped cream frosting. After Kaimi polished off her piece of cake in no time flat, she ran over to Severus. She gave him a hug and brief kiss upon his cheek in thanks for her gift, which she was wearing proudly instead of the usual edelweiss flower necklace she would have worn to Oktoberfest with her outfit. He didn't even flinch when she kissed him, and Severus said he was glad she enjoyed her present so much. Even Severus was willing to accept that it was her second favorite gift, right after her new broom. It was hard for a bauble to compare to a new and proper riding broom.
As she trotted off to play with her friends and dance the polka with another witch of the same age, Mounga saddled up to Severus.

"Have you and Hermione ever talked about kids," Mounga said out of the blue, after watching the exchange between his daughter and his friend.

"Only that she was never going to have them with her ex-husband," he admitted freely, quiet enough so that no one else could hear their exchange, despite the fact it would have been hard with the oom-pah band playing up on the stage.

"What about kids with her second husband?" Mounga countered.

Severus swiveled and gave his large friend a look of mild shock, given the implications of his statement.

"Don't tell me, in all the time you spent together, even when you asked her to come with you here, you never talked about kids?" Mounga asked with a slight nudging of Severus' arm.

"No. It never came up. I never asked her to marry me either, though it may have been implied when I offered to be her master, but given how she had recently escaped an unpleasant first marriage, I didn't want to press the issue. When I did ask her to come, she promised to stay behind and clear my name. And when she did decide to come, it was but seconds before the vial of hair broke and she had to stay behind despite everything." Severus heaved a troubled sigh. "There was no point, since there was no plan of us being together again in the future. When I left, I gave her permission to move on with her life without me. But now that she will return..."

Severus shook his head weary. He had no idea how Hermione would feel about children with him. Even he wasn't sure if he was ready for children yet, if ever. He had killed his pregnant wife, and while Hermione had forgiven him, some part of him feared that if he became a father, he would be just like his own.

"I don't know. My own father was a monster in his own right, ruling through fear and alcohol-fueled fists, and I dread that I would be just like him," Severus admitted. "I don't want to raise children in a home of fear."

"Just because your father was like that does not mean you will be," Mounga assured him.
"But—"

Mounga shook his head and placed a large hand on Severus shoulder and leaned in. "If we all wound up just like our fathers, then I would be an unforgiving tyrannical bastard who plays favorites with his children, pitting them against each other, and this town would be a very different place. Trust me, as long as you make the effort, you can avoid becoming just like your father."

Severus had rarely heard Mounga speak of his father, though when Akela heard her mother mention earlier that day that her grandfather and Mounga's brother were coming for Thanksgiving, she looked rather grim and mildly shaken. The Potions master had never even known his friend had a brother until Rainbow's casual comment.

"Besides," the large wizard added, "I've seen you with Kaimi. You'd be a great father."

Severus didn't know whether to believe his friend or not, as Kaimi was not his own, and he was not the most forgiving or patient of wizards either.

Rainbow tried to ask Severus to get up and polka with her, but Severus was unaccustomed to the steps and preferred not to learn in front of others. The only reason why Severus stuck around the Oktoberfest festivities, besides Kaimi's personal invitation to attend for cake, was the good food and the fact that Ginny would have her first belly dancing school recital when the oom-pah bands were done playing. The recital was to be used as a transition before the evening bands began. He was there for moral support for Ginny.

The evening bands were part of the reason the community center was packed, as it was a music festival of sorts. Mounga encouraged him to stick around and listen to at least a few songs, since this music festival was a bit different than most.

As Severus sipped on good Bavarian pilsner, Portkeyed in directly from Munich for the event, he strolled around. It was the island's 148th annual Oktoberfest, though the sign hung above the stage said "Malu Palekaiko's 11th annual Sausage, Suds and Sounds Festival" with the addendum added on, "Now with more Shimmy!" It was rather trite and Severus felt that it cheapened the whole decorum of Ginny's efforts to incorporate a belly dance recital into the festival. However, Ginny wasn't picky, just thrilled to have a chance to show off her students that she was so proud of.

As the afternoon waned, witches of all ages took off backstage and began to get ready, switching from dirndls, sundresses and muumuus to fringed and beaded belts, swirling skirts, and fitted bra
tops, or baladi dresses that usually covered the arms and midsections.

Around five o'clock, the last oom-pah band finished their last song and cleared the stage of all their instruments. Halulu introduced Ginny to those who had only come to the island for the festival, as everyone else on the island knew her or of her. Ginny, with aplomb, addressed the crowd, thanking everyone for coming before introducing the various sets of dancers. Since Ginny's Middle Eastern dance school was still a new venture, there weren't as many students as there were during the Christmas hula recital. Still, there were enough students to break down into three underage age groups and a couple adult groups.

Kaimi performed with her age five-to-ten group, and Severus promised her he would stick around to watch her dance even though he was there for Ginny as well. Having seen Ginny perform before, he could now tell the difference between a novice and experienced belly dancer. But just as Ginny was able to quickly pick up the hula, based on years of training as a dancer, the hula students made an easy transition to Middle Eastern-style dancing as well.

The highlight of Ginny's recital was her performing two dances, one with finger cymbals and one with a long silk scarf. Ginny was at the end of her first trimester, and she was just on the verge of beginning to show. Already, Severus could tell she'd had to alter the bust line of her dance outfit, since she wasn't quite so filled out on top before her pregnancy. Draco waited by the side of the stage to make sure that if Ginny collapsed yet again on stage, he would be there for her, though she promised not to perform a routine quite so taxing.

At the end of the recital, there was a great cheer and a few extra rounds of applause. The crowd roared when Ginny took her bow, thrilled and mesmerized by her dancing prowess and grace.

Afterwards, the first band of the evening began to set up.

Ginny joined Severus and Draco, once she had put her caftan on to cover her costume. While Severus was tucking into a plate of a Bockwurst sausage, mashed potatoes, and sautéed red cabbage with apples, Ginny came over with a heaping pile featuring two Hannover sausages, a pork chop, a mound of sauerkraut, two large potato dumplings with mushroom gravy, sautéed red cabbage with apples, boiled carrots, spaetzle, and a large tankard of non-alcoholic sparkling apple juice.

"I don't know about you, but I'm famished," Ginny exclaimed as she dove into her plate like someone who had been deprived of food for a week.

Severus was too distracted to eat, stunned that this witch who was half his size ate a meal that
could choke a hippogriff, and in no time flat.

Draco nudged Severus, to distract him from the stunning fact that Ginny had eaten everything on her plate and was talking about getting some apple strudel with vanilla ice cream, evidently having found a way to open the sluice to her other hollow leg. "So Severus, do you think Hermione will wait until her birthday to open her present, or do you think when the twins dropped it off Friday she opened it?" he prompted him, trying to ignore the fact his wife's appetite at the end of her first trimester had returned with a vengeance.

Ginny wasn't the only witch with an appetite. Halulu, who was also pregnant, was herself diving into a large plate of food, but hers was still nowhere near in size as what Ginny had polished off. Mrs. Malfoy came back to the table with three servings of apple strudel a la mode. One of them was for Draco, the other two for herself, after Severus declined as he was plenty full from his dinner.

"I don't know," he said distractedly, as Ginny practically inhaled both portions of dessert. Severus remembered his own wife had a small spike in her appetite, but this was getting beyond belief even for him.

Ginny then excused herself from the table to suddenly run off to the loo once she was done.

"Where does she put it?" Severus asked.

"Don't ask. This morning I found her chugging sauerkraut juice straight from the jar. Followed by eating whole cloves of garlic, saying they tasted sweet, like almonds to her." Draco gave a brief shudder. "I'm not sure if I'm going to be father to a human child or a tapeworm. Is this normal, Severus?"

Severus was not the authority on pregnancy. He almost joked that Draco should ask his mother-in-law about such matters since Molly had been through it six times already and was practically an expert, but he knew how Draco was still quite vexed over her comments during their visit. He merely shook his head and suggested talking to Rainbow or one of the other Healers on the island about his concerns.

Noting the time, he figured it was around six in the morning London time and officially Hermione's birthday. Silently, he raised his tankard in a silent toast to her for her birthday, looking forward to seeing her in less than two weeks.
Severus was eager to not only having some intimate time with Hermione, but some nice long conversations, like the ones they used to have. He was hoping they’d finally have a chance to talk about their future together. There was also news of a new dragon species found in Antarctica that had just made the papers that day, as there hadn’t been a new breed of dragon discovered in nearly 400 years. He was anticipating discussing the particular ingredient properties of this new breed of dragon with Hermione. Perhaps as her final apprentice project she could even create a new potion using parts of this new breed of dragon. He was happy to help her come up with ideas if she needed to bounce ideas off of him, remembering fondly their collaboration and brainstorming sessions.

As the first band started playing, Severus decided that songs that change from one style of music to another were not his cup of tea. Hearing the melancholy pop love song, "Which Coast Witch," performed in a Dixieland jazz style, then changing to an angry punk style half-way through was just a bit too eccentric even for him. And from what Mounga had told him, every band would be changing from one style of music to another part way through their songs. It was the signature of the event that drew people to waltz for the first half of a song, then line dance to some country-western interpretation of a "classic" song.

As Severus reached his home, with a bit of leftover sausage wrapped up for the cat that refused to be adopted by Ginny and steadfastly stuck with him instead, he could hear off in the distance the faint strains of the band playing an Irish ballad that morphed into a Calypso beat.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to my betas for this chapter, Hope and JuneW.

Lani is Hawaiian for "heavenly", and mauna is Hawaiian for "mountain." Severus lives on Heavenly Mountain Trail, as it is the street that turns into a path up to the volcano and goes past the front of his house.

*Cochlospermum vitifolium 'Florepleno'* is the Double Buttercup tree. Quite lovely when in bloom.

*Gardenia taitensis* is also known as Tahitian Gardenia, a white, six- to eight-petaled fragrant flower on an evergreen shrub. There are Hawaiian songs that sing about this flower and how its loveliness is equated to the beauty of women.

*Delonix regia* is also known as Royal Poinciana, a tree with vibrant red (sometimes orange or yellow) flowers, seen frequently used as street landscaping trees in Hawaii. And yes, there is a Royal Poinciana tree in Draco and Ginny's Japanese garden back
home, in case you recognize the tree name.

_Jasmine sambac_ are also known as pikake flowers. The single pikake form is most often used in leis.

You can read more about the lion dance and "Picking of the Green" here online: http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/Chinese_Customs/lion_dance.htm

Baladi dresses are long fitted folk-style belly dancing dresses that cover more skin than the more traditional midsection-baring outfit. You can read about them and see some nice examples here: http://www.shira.net/costuming/cg/baladi-dress.htm
"Draconem antarcticus glacihalus"

Chapter Summary

A newly discovered dragon species winds up being not such a boon to the wizarding world. Severus is “not so hot” about the discovery either.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Ninety-Five
"Draconem antarcticus glacihalus"

Disclaimer: One, two! One, two! And through and through
The fanfic author went “Disclaim!”
She admitted with no growling that Potter's owned by Rowling
She went galumphing in vain.

A/N: This disclaimer is a parody of Lewis Carroll's poem, “Jabberwocky.”

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The news of the new dragon species in Antarctica was a momentous event globally in the wizarding world. An international team of witches and wizards, specializing in plants and magical creatures, had gone to explore the vast Antarctic deserts. There, they found the previously unrecorded breed of dragon they called the Antarctic Ice Dragon, or *Draconem antarcticus glacihalus*, for its ability to breathe ice instead of fire, as observed by the team. Some might have thought being caught in the breath of an Ice Dragon would be preferable than being burned to a crisp by most dragons. The Ice Dragon's breath was so cold, it was as if one had been burnt, similar to a Muggle handling dry ice without proper protection.

However, what the wizarding world did not count on, was a new strain of dragon pox which was unintentionally brought back by the international team and quickly spread throughout the wizarding world. Not every breed of dragon was a vector for dragon pox, so they did not think the Antarctic Ice Dragon would be a source of one either.

Charlie Weasley was one of the lucky few who went to Antarctica with the team of explorers, as they needed experts on magical beasts, should they encounter new species. Arriving back in
London, after samples of the newly-discovered dragon's eggshells, molted scales and scat had been collected, Charlie went to the Ministry to deliver the artifacts to those within the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, who would study the items and compare its properties to that of other known dragons.

As Charlie was walking back to the lift, looking forward to seeing his wife, Angelina, and their three children after being gone for the past three weeks, he was suddenly overcome with a fit of sneezing. The sudden sprouting of frozen snot icicles out of his nose two feet in length did not bode well.

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It was late and long past dinner. Severus had everything packed for his trip to India where he would finally see Hermione, but he was far too busy to think about her at the moment. Right now Severus, Ranjit, and Arnold were at the clinic combining their talents in search for a cure to this new Ice Dragon pox sweeping through their world like wildfire.

There were a few deaths from ice pox, as they called it, but those who died were the very old who, like the regular strain of dragon pox, were much more susceptible.

Most remedies for the standard case of dragon pox called for the cure that Gunhilda of Gorsemoor developed in the late 1500's. In addition to the potion to help treat regular dragon pox symptoms, lowering one's body temperature was recommended. This was because the disease usually had symptoms such as fever, burning throat – literally, sparks coming out of the nose when sneezing, profuse sweating, and, in rare cases, a craving for raw mutton. In more severe cases, one had permanent scars, not to mention permanently green-tinged skin if not cured. This new strain of dragon pox involved snot icicles hanging from the nose, sweat which turned into ice crystals on the skin, bone-shaking chills, fatigue, small bumps that felt frozen to the touch and itched, headaches, and – when the patient was not suffering from fever – a lower than normal body temperature that resulted in blue-tinged skin.

The Potions masters of Malu Palekaiko had been in contact with others from China, Japan, Australia, Canada, the United States, Mexico, Equador, Peru and Chile, which were the closest countries by albatross since the disease started spreading immediately following the arrival of various exploratory team members back from Antarctica. The exploratory team had members from Great Britain, Russia, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, and Brazil. It was the perfect dispersion to spread an unknown vector throughout the wizarding world.

More isolated places like Malu Palekaiko were some of the last places to get the disease, but it arrived there nonetheless in less than a week from the first reported cases. It had been brought in via a witch who had Portkeyed in from Vancouver, Canada to talk to Severus and Blanche about an exclusive distribution deal for the Miniature Man-Eating Masdevallia pods throughout North America. She didn't have any symptoms until after she had arrived and infected everyone who worked in the Portkey office. Thankfully Halulu wasn't working there that day, since they had no
idea how this disease would affect unborn children. Ginny had fortunately not caught the disease, and was being very cautious since the outbreak began, canceling all belly-dancing classes until further notice. Even Severus had canceled all tutoring and private consultations, corresponding through Owl Post only, for now. Besides, he was busy reading research other Potions masters around the world were doing and using their work – along with his own, Arnold's, and Ranjit's findings – to come up with a cure.

Gunhilda's cure involved using some blood of the Common Welsh Green, the breed which was the source of the dragon pox disease. Unfortunately, there was no blood of the Antarctic Ice Dragon, since none was collected and a new team was back in Antarctica trying to locate an Ice Dragon on the vast and desolate continent. The fact it had white scales made it blend in more, making it even harder to spot by broom or by Apparating to mountaintops to scan horizons from above.

There was talk of stopping Portkey travel until either the disease had run its course or a cure was found. Severus hoped if they did quarantine borders between countries, it would be after he had left for India. All these weeks of anticipation, and he was ready to see Hermione once again.

Severus was wondering if the outbreak was an emergency enough to call off his trip to India, as the Potions masters' code of ethics dictated he stay if such an emergency occurred. Rainbow assured him that Arnold and Ranjit were there, so he wasn't leaving their island without at least one Potions master to help deal with the problem. Besides, if Severus talked with other Potions masters in India, they might have some new ideas he hadn't come across in the correspondence with other Potions masters around the world, and bring those ideas back when he returned.

The clinic was full of witches and wizards of various ages, complaining of chills and other symptoms, despite the recent heat wave when it was 90 degrees F degrees outside. Most were diagnosed and sent back home with recommendations to keep as warm as possible to ease their suffering, as there was nothing else they could do for them at the clinic.

Draco had come to get Severus at the last minute before they left, indicating that Ginny was waiting for them at the Portkey office.

"Go, Severus," Rainbow said, seeing the conflict in Severus' face whether to stay and help or go. "No one has had much luck here, and maybe you'll learn something there that'll help."

Severus' bag was packed and by the door. As he headed to join Draco, who was waiting for him just on the other side of the door to the clinic, he felt a cool tingling in his sinuses. He stopped and paused in his tracks before sneezing violently.
Turning around, with two large icicles hanging from his nostrils, Severus looked at Rainbow with a look of dread plainly written on his face.

"No." He shook his head in disbelief that fate would be so cruel as to not only infect him, but prevent him from traveling and seeing Hermione at the last minute.

Draco, wondering when Severus was going to get his arse moving along, peered through the small glass window set high into the door to the clinic. There he spotted Severus looking back at him, icicles hanging from his face and his skin suddenly beginning to take on a pale blue cast. Draco's heart went out to his friend who would be denied being reunited with his love. Severus couldn't travel if he had the pox.

"Go," Severus said, loud enough so that Draco could hear through the windowpane. "Tell Hermione..." What could he tell her?

Standing on the other side of the glass and nodding, Draco said, "I know." His face was full of empathetic sorrow for his friend. He would tell Hermione about how Severus had been looking forward to seeing her so badly, but could not come now.

Rainbow ushered Severus over to the last empty bed in the clinic. As chills overtook him, he thought about the fact that Ranjit, Arnold, and he had been hesitant to try anything too experimental on the others' suffering. This was because the Potions masters code of ethics forbade them from dispensing experimental potions that they hadn't tried on oneself first, nor had any one of the three Healers on the island come down with it yet. Maybe they could now reach a breakthrough with Severus as the guinea pig.

One of the island's several Muggles, who were immune to all magical diseases, was in the clinic helping as best she could. Janine Watters, an African-American Muggle and former nurse when she lived in Minnesota, had retired to Malu Palekaiko with her wizard husband. She wrapped a blanket around Severus and offered him some piping hot coffee until Rainbow could look him over.

Hermione was waiting at the Varanasi Portkey office in India, eagerly awaiting the arrival of Severus, Draco, and Ginny in the mid-afternoon. Albert was there too, by her side, eager to speak with Severus about any research he had been doing in Hawaii regarding the outbreak of ice pox.

As the Malfoys alighted in the Portkey office, Hermione's heart sank. The look on Ginny and Draco's face was enough to tell her that Severus was not coming.
Hermione embraced her friend, as Ginny said with somber regret, "He was coming, but at the last minute, he came down with the pox." There was no need for Ginny to clarify which pox it was.

Hermione blinked back tears, knowing that not only was she not going to see Severus, but he was sick with the malady as well.

Albert and Hermione had been busy for the past week, prior to their departure, spending most of their time at St. Mungo's. All research and development at The Lovely Lavender Company was temporarily put on hold, though the house-elves in the warehouse were still manufacturing and shipping products. Lavender was avoiding going out into public, working from home instead in order to reduce possible exposure to the new contagion.

While at St. Mungo's, Hermione got to meet Reginald Chuff's current apprentice, Dvalinn Chrysalis. Chuff did not bring Dvalinn along to the monthly Potions masters' drinking parties, instead keeping the young wizard back home doing more cleaning, preparing of ingredients and low-level brewing for commissions that Reginald took as his main source of income.

Dvalinn was a lad of nineteen. He looked somewhat undernourished, and was skittish when his master, Chuff, was around. While Chuff did not physically beat Dvalinn, she could tell that Chuff was still just as much of a demanding and unrepentantly remorseless master as when Severus had studied under him. Hermione would have just plainly called him cruel. Watching the way Chuff ordered Dvalinn about and insulted him, Hermione could see where Severus learned his style of teaching from. Even with Severus' less than fond memories of Chuff, he had absorbed some of the harsher aspects of his mentor's personality when it came to teaching.

When Chuff wasn't around, Hermione gave Dvalinn tips and hints on how to chop and slice certain ingredients, given her years of work in her prior job, as Dvalinn was still uneven in his knife work.

But despite all the available Potions masters and mistresses in Great Britain, and their apprentices as well, in addition to nearly every country around the world working to create a cure for ice pox, none was discovered yet. Considering all the planning and great expense Lavender had gone through to plan this launch in India, Hermione and Albert still went despite the medical crisis. They hoped to consult with the Potions masters in India regarding any breakthroughs they might have discovered.

Hermione, Albert, and the Malfoys all headed to the hotel to check in.
Hermione's Aunt Christine, Lavender's Advertising and Marketing Vice President for Europe, Africa and Western Asia, had already arrived via plane the night before and was checked into the hotel, as the hotel also accepted Muggles, as long as they had some connection to the wizarding world. A liaison from the hotel brought Christine from the airport, via a magical rickshaw, similar to the Knight Bus, with orders to proceed carefully with its pregnant Muggle passenger. The entrance to the wizarding quarter of Varanasi was through one narrow, unremarkable alleyway that was otherwise unnoticed by the local Muggle population.

Lavender had already arranged for a team of stylists to meet Hermione and everyone else to take measurements for custom-made clothes for the big launch party and press event the next day.

The valet witch assigned to Hermione's room put away her belongings while a seamstress took measurements for her sari outfit. She would need a petticoat, choli top, sandals and jewelry to match for the complete outfit. Before Hermione arrived, Lavender had already ordered Hermione's sari to be in a bright fuchsia pink which was quite complementary to her coloring, but it was up to Hermione to pick which fuchsia sari, of the many the dressmaker brought to pick from for the event tomorrow. Lavish jewelry was already rented for the occasion for the women.

Looking through the row of folded saris laid out for her choosing, a portion of the decorative pallu end visible, Hermione had a hard time deciding, as they were all so beautiful. Some had intricate paisley patterns along the body with ornate gold patterns along the bottom edge, some featured a heavily beaded pallu of intricate craftsmanship. Finally, her eyes alighted upon one fuchsia sari with violet and orange secondary colors, with just a hint of emerald green accenting the bottom border and pallu.

Now that her sari had been selected, the seamstress began waving her wand about, much like Madam Mandel, listing off measurements in Sanskrit while the hovering charmed quill and parchment took dictation. Once done, the witch told Hermione her outfit would be ready tomorrow in time for the event and she would help her dress, including charms to keep her sari in place.

Ginny and Aunt Christine had their own seamstresses measuring them as well. Because Aunt Christine was nearly six months along in her pregnancy, Lavender had ordered a double-layered abaya-style churidar kameez in a turquoise georgette silk to help minimize her baby bump and flatter her blonde hair and pale complexion. Ginny was in her fourth month and had a two-piece lehenga in vibrant green to cover her now slightly swollen abdomen and complement her hair color.

Draco and Albert were also being measured and outfitted as well with dhoti sherwani suits of their own, befitting a formal affair of this caliber. Albert was told he would have a cut-away front, while Draco's long lean form was more flattered with the full-front sherwani jacket with right angles and no curved bottom jacket hem.
Now that everything had been put away by the valet assigned to the Malfoys' suite, Ginny laid down for the night, though it was only five in the afternoon local time. Draco headed up to the rooftop garden, bar, and restaurant. He found Hermione sitting at the bar, sipping a cup of hot tea.

Sliding up onto the bar stool next to her, Draco decided to stick with something non-alcoholic for once, as it was hotter than even the heat wave back in Hawaii. He was slightly perplexed Hermione wasn't drinking something with ice.

There was a silence that stretched between the two for a moment as they gazed out past the unobstructed view of the vibrantly-colored city. They could see the Ganges River stretching along the land like some great sleeping mythical snake, its waters undulating like the rippling of scales, swollen near the edge of its banks at the end of monsoon season. The sun, behind them in the west, began to color the buildings to the east in pale saffron tones.

"I can't tell you how much Severus was looking forward to coming," Draco said softly, his voice tinged with regret as he looked out cross at the far-off horizon. "It was just as we were about to leave for the Portkey office. He had his bag by the door of the clinic, Rainbow told him that they would be fine, as Arnold and Ranjit were there. And just as he was about to head out the door, that's when he came down with it."

Draco waited for some reaction from Hermione, but she kept staring blankly towards the fields located on the other side of the banks of the Ganges. There was a thin trail of smoke rising up from nearby where a cremation funeral was taking place along the shore, next to one of the many ghats, or staircases, leading down to the river, ruining the otherwise perfect view.

Just as the view was not perfect, marred by the knowledge that someone's corpse was currently being burned as part of the funereal purification ritual, so was Hermione's trip to India marred by Severus' absence and knowledge he had come down with ice dragon pox.

On another rooftop nearby, a woman – witch or Muggle, it was not known – was sitting while playing her sarangi. She sang a soft lament as she gently played her instrument. It was as if this woman had peered into Hermione's heart and seen the sorrow that subdued her, then translated it to song for all in that quarter to hear. Her voice rang clear, undulating as if in a prolonged sob.

"Ever since we came back with your letter, memory, and bouquet for him, he's..." Draco hadn't asked him directly, but knowing Severus as long as he had, he could tell his assessment of his friend was correct. "He's been happy. Happier than I've ever seen him before. Hopeful, even."

Draco turned to watch Hermione's reaction to that news. He saw her give a bittersweet smile, as
serene as any smile gracing the lips of the many statues of Buddha they had seen throughout the city.

Hermione realized that Fate was toying with her, and she would not give it the satisfaction of seeing her suffer. Fate had given her the choice of staying behind or leaving with Severus, and when she chose to leave with him, Fate had caused that vial to slip from her shaking hand, removing her choice from her. Severus had made the choice of coming half-way around the world to see her, and his choice had been taken from him at the last minute as well.

"Keep calm and carry on. Isn't that how the phrase goes?" she asked before draining the last of her tea from her glass cup.

Damn that British pride to keep a stiff upper lip and all that rot. But what would a temper tantrum up on that rooftop in Varanasi do to cure Severus, or the rest of the wizarding world that was suffering from that damned plague? If anything, since Hermione would not be spending any time with Severus, every spare moment she had, when not fulfilling her job for Lavender with this launch, would go towards working with Albert for a cure. Albert had already made arrangements to visit some of the local Potions masters and brainstorm with them, compare notes, and continue to work towards some breakthrough. She would go as well, since she wasn't going to be holed up with Severus in a hotel room for a few days, living on nothing but each other's kisses and room service.

Draco stifled a yawn. "Sorry, not you, it's just that Portkey travel can be quite taxing at times. And now we have to get used to this time zone. It was close to eleven at night when we left, and now my body feels as if it's well past midnight. I wish there was a potion for Portkey travel across vast distances to reset my body to the right time zone. Are you aware of any?" he asked, regretting not querying Severus before he left Hawaii.

She shook her head. Hermione was not aware of any, and she herself was going to be wishing for a potion as Draco described. Her body felt like it was around noonish, as she herself was still on London time.

There were sleeping draughts, but it still did not do anything in regards to resetting one's internal body clock any faster, or with more ease. Perhaps no such potion existed, since Portkey travel across vast distances was still not common – just as in the Muggle world jet travel was not common and not exactly cheap either. Maybe Draco had inadvertently solved Hermione's problem of what to create for a new potion for her apprenticeship. Hermione did overhear her Aunt Christine complaining she couldn't take melatonin for this trip, due to her pregnancy. She would have to ask her aunt about how melatonin was used to help Muggles with jet lag.

There was nothing else Rainbow could do for him once she diagnosed Severus but for him to go
home to rest. In his rapidly deteriorating condition, even he didn't trust himself to Apparate the ten blocks without making things worse, nor did he have the strength to walk those ten blocks that were all uphill. Even going by Floo was risky, since he was sure he might pass out during the short trip. Neither Arnold nor Ranjit wanted to touch Severus to Side-Apparate him home, as they didn't want to catch the ice pox either. Luckily, one of the Muggles on the island, Matt, had a two-seater surrey bicycle. Matt offered to take him as far as within one block of his house, where the road became too steep to peddle up all the way to his front garden gate.

Severus had seen the odd side-by-side two-seater bicycle about town once or twice. It was even used as a way for introducing young witches and wizards to the concept of a bicycle before graduating them to a regular two-wheeled model during summers. He had first informally met the owner, Matt, on Christmas Day when he went flying with the Finaus and they introduced Severus to the Muggle who surfed with Shark, the clothing store owner.

Matt, whose witch wife, Lorraine, was at home with the pox, helped Severus onto the surrey bike and ran around to the other side to hop on and begin the ride through town. The bike rocked and jostled a bit, as the roads on the island were not built for cars, even though they were wide enough to easily accommodate them.

Once the road became too steep for Matt to continue peddling the weight of two adults up the hill that became steeper, he put the brake on and helped Severus the last block up, as Severus had become quite weak.

Standing on the front porch in the flickering torchlight, Matt asked, "Do you need me to help you get to your bedroom?"

Severus shook his head, while his teeth chattered, and weakly thanked the kind man for helping as much as he could. He wasn't sure if he would have been able to walk that last block without leaning on Matt once or twice, dismayed this malady was sapping all his strength.

Once inside, Severus thought maybe he should have taken Matt up on his offer. It took the last of his will to nearly crawl upstairs into his bedroom and into bed, barely able to summon every blanket in the house to climb under.

He didn't even have the strength to take his clothes off, except for his shoes, before he passed out. He was worn from lengthy days working on a cure with no results, and the late hour.
Nearly all the Muggles in Malu Palekaiko were helping witches and wizards – running errands, shopping, cooking, and helping any way they could – since they weren't susceptible to the disease. Even some of Tina's Muggle relatives flew all the way from the East Coast to help Tina, who had come down with it as well, plus do "the good Christian thing" and help around with a few neighbors as well.

Elves and goblins were immune as well, so they were kept quite busy. The laundry service run by Mr. Loddy, a free elf, was running 24 hours a day with the increase in demand. The elf-for-hire service was also booked beyond capacity, with people willing to pay extra for services.

Goblins, seeing an opportunity to make an extra buck, also jumped on the bandwagon and ran errands for a fee if no Muggle or elf was available.

When Severus did finally stir from sleep, it was due to someone rapping on his bedroom door, sometime after mid-morning.

"Severus? Severus, its Janine. I'm here to check on you," she announced loud enough to warn him she was there.

Janine had experience having to come in and check other patients who were at home alone and sick. She knew to make her presence known to avoid getting hexed or walking into wards, especially since she was a Muggle.

Severus grumbled out some incoherent acknowledgment and waved his hand, poking out from under the covers, indicating it was all right for her to enter.

"Rainbow was worried, since you seemed to come down with it pretty quickly." The retired nurse approached his bed, unable to see him buried under the pile of blankets. "I'm going to pull the covers away so I can take a look at you."

Peeling the layers back, she finally found him under the bedclothes. There was a small gasp that she didn't quite stifle, as Severus had quite a bad case of ice pox. There wasn't one square inch on his face and arms that wasn't covered in icy lumps and bumps, and his skin had a cast so blue that he reminded Janine of a rare blood disorder she had read about during her studies as a nurse –
something called methemoglobinemia. The Muggle condition was due to a higher than normal level of methemoglobin in the blood that caused the blue cast to the skin. Severus' blue skin was due to this disease and low body temperature.

"Can you cover me back up now?" Severus asked, his teeth chattering, lacking the fortitude to dispense a scathing remark.

Janine put the blankets back up to his chin, but left his head uncovered so she could talk with him. "I've been talking with Rainbow, Arnold, and Ranjit." She sat down on the edge of his bed as she talked with a look of hesitation about her face. "So far there still isn't a cure, but I have an idea that I'd like to run by you, if you're game. Would that be okay?"

Severus nodded as best he could, considering he was shivering violently enough that it might have been construed as a nod.

"Arnold and Ranjit say that regular dragon pox is treated with a potion that uses dragon's blood. Word came back that there was no luck adding powdered ice dragon dung either, nor scale, from the Ministries that got the original samples. So far, there is still no word on finding that damned dragon, so no blood. Now in the Muggle world, to bring a fever down is to prolong it, as the body needs to raise the temperature to fight the bacteria or virus and kill it off quicker. When I worked as a nurse in a hospital, we sometimes would not interfere with fevers unless the patient was uncomfortable, or the fever got too high and there was a risk of brain damage. My grandmother used to wrap us up as kids to hasten the fever to break; that worked for us and we were usually over it in a day."

Janine could tell Severus was getting impatient and wanted her to finish so he could go back to huddling under the covers once again and go back to sleep.

"Just hang on a second, Severus. My point is, despite the use of regular dragon pox potion having no effect, or raising body temperature to little effect, what if instead of raising the body temperature, we do the opposite and lower it? Maybe the fever will break if we drop your body temperature. I know you wizards can handle more extremes than us Muggles. Maybe if we lowered your body temperature, it might break it like a fever. Rainbow is hesitant to try it on anyone in the community, since it could make their condition worse, but it's the only treatment we haven't attempted yet, and there is no word on any potion either from abroad."

Severus was feeling colder than that time Potter and Black "played" dunk with him in the lake, holding him under water until a grindylow grabbed hold of his leg and dragged him down to the bottom until he could cast a stinging hex at the creature to break free. Madam Pomfrey had had to give him two doses of Pepperup Potion to finally take the chill from his bones. And even though he was now feeling like death warmed over, Severus could see where Janine's line of thinking was a
"Sounds possible," he muttered through clenched teeth, afraid that if he didn't hold them together, he'd chip them from the chattering.

"You want to try it?" she asked for clarification.

"Yes," he barked impatiently. He wanted her to either cover him back up, or get a move on trying to get him over this fever faster so he would be less miserable sooner.

"Okay, let me run back down to the clinic and tell them you're up for trying this."

Janine ran out of his house. To Severus' dismay, she didn't cover his head up, which meant he had to put the considerable effort to pull the blankets the last few inches back over his head, which was quite exhausting in his state.

Just as he was falling back asleep, he heard the thunder of elephants, or maybe it was just the clomping of Rainbow's, Janine's, Arnold's, and Ranjit's feet trooping through his house and into his bedroom. It could have been elephants as he was starting to dream of India, but alas it was not.

Severus just wanted to hex Rainbow's mouth shut as she kept on asking if Severus was really up to this, and if he was of sound mind in his current condition to consent to such an experimental procedure.

"Yes, yes, yes!" he snapped at her, then clenched his jaw together. "You're going to make me into a blue ice lolly to see if we can do a reverse breaking of my fever. I understand, so let's get on with it."

Before they proceeded, Severus, Ranjit, and Arnold discussed which potions to use in concert with the ice bath they were going to give Severus.

Severus gave Ranjit permission to access his personal lab. He waited patiently under the covers while his fellow Potions master brewed up a Chilling Potion. Ranjit also made a skin-cooling ointment commonly used for bad sunburns, but upon Severus' suggestion, this batch would have more Arctic Mongoose blood added to it to make it even colder than normal upon application.
Once Ranjit returned, Rainbow and Janine stripped him down to just his underpants.

Severus didn't care that the ladies saw him in his skivvies, as they were medical professionals. There wasn't anything they hadn't seen before.

The ointment was applied to his skin. Then Ranjit helped pry open Severus' jaw, which seemed nearly frozen shut, and gave him the Chilling Potion.

Rainbow ran the bath as cold as possible, waving her wand to make it cold enough she had to break the layer of ice on the surface that formed before they could lower Severus into the bone-chilling waters of the bathtub. As Severus' skin made contact with the icy water, his body controlled by Rainbow's wand with a Mobilicorpus Spell, a keening howl let loose from his throat.

Hermione was crossing a vast desert. Despite having never been in this featureless expanse of scorching sand and air so hot that it felt like she was inhaling fire, there was something familiar about this place. It seemed she had been there before, but could not recall, as if it was some far-off dream. For some reason, she was without her wand and could not recall why she was without it. Or her wand was under the many layers of clothes and she couldn't find it, as if it was hidden in some unknown magical pocket she was unaware of.

Wrapped under layers and layers of clothes, like some nomadic Bedouin, she trudged on. Despite being under layers of cool, loose, flowing white clothing, she was sweltering under all that cloth in the mid-day sun.

With nothing to guide her, she knew what direction to head towards, her sight fixed upon the sand dune looming in the near distance, since it was the only distinguishing object in this indistinctive no-man's-land.

As Severus' body slid into the icy water, his body became even more rigid. The shock of the cold made his mind go blank, lost in the excruciating pain of a frigidness so consuming, it almost felt like his skin was on fire.

The fever worsened, but this was expected. The sweat poured forth and froze so thick, it was as if Severus had become encased in a shell of ice. Rainbow kept vigil of Severus' vitals, and Arnold and Ranjit now kept Severus' head afloat just above the waterline. Janine prayed her intuition was right as she knelt by the tub and watched Severus' face, noticing his eye movements beneath eyelids covered with a thin sheet of ice, and a small trail of blueish vapor cloud escaping from his
nearly frozen-shut mouth to indicate he was still breathing.

Unable to hold onto consciousness any longer, overcome with the unbearable pain of the mind-numbing freezing of his body and extremities, Severus slipped into a hallucinatory state.

He was in hell; Severus was sure of it. Where else would he wind up in some place as desolate and blisteringly hot as this place. He had surely died of the pox and was now stuck in a searing wasteland, his last dying wish that he could be warm once more.

'Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it.'

Just like the time Chuff had dragged him out into the North African desert without any protection, Severus was stuck in the underpants he was wearing when he was placed in that infernal ice bath. He would sunburn, blister, and be even more miserable than he currently was, feeling the scorching sun burn him from above, the air baking his skin as if he was thrown into a oven in some Muggle horror tale about forest witches.

His only hope was that there was something more than sand waiting over the next sand dune in front of him. It was the only direction to go, because everything else was flat, barren sand with no shade to offer in the other direction. It would figure he had gone to hell without a wand to aid him, nor proper clothes. Maybe there was an oasis on the other side, if his luck would change for the better, for once.

This was worse than Hermione's dream of wandering aimlessly for hours or days on end that she could almost recall. At least the air was cool and reasonable amid the endless night that she wandered through, though when and where that was, she couldn't remember presently. Hermione was sweating profusely and was terribly thirsty, that much she was certain of now.

Hoping there might be something on the other side of the sand dune in front of her, she debated if it would take less energy to walk over it or around it when she saw a lone figure cresting over the
Holding her hand up to her forehead to shelter her eyes from the glaring sun, she saw a familiar silhouette.

'But it couldn't be.' It made no sense. Severus was back in Hawaii with that damned pox. But she could not explain how she had arrived in this damned desert with no recollection of how she arrived there, nor by what means.

Severus was not cast alone into desolation. There was someone else there too in the distance, and by the look of it, the person was properly attired for it as well.

Seeing the figure gazing up, he waved his arms to show that he needed their help. He couldn't recall how long he had been in the sun. It could have been minutes or hours, but it seemed that the sun never moved from its zenith above his head.

As he began to half-walk, half-slide down the face of the sand dune, the lone figure clad in layers of native desert robes began unwrapping the cloth from around their face before finally removing all of their head covering in one swift movement.

He saw her hair shining in the sun and recognized her immediately.

"HERMIONE!"

Hermione heard his voice calling out and began running towards Severus, overjoyed. He was blue, as blue as the Indian deities she had seen depicted on the walls and in art back in Varanasi, but she didn't care. She had never been so happy to see him in her life. Why he was in this desert, she didn't know. She just couldn't wait to hold him again. Maybe they could find a way out of this endless desolation together, but at least they would be together.

He saw her run toward him in haste. Severus quickened the pace, trying not to fall down, as his muscles screamed and protested, feeling unyielding, stiff, and weak. Once on the flat ground once
more, he ran towards her, ignoring the scorching heat of the hot sand on the bottoms of his bare feet.

Hermione could see him better now. He was still wearing his beard and his long hair flowed behind him, but he was clothed only in his underpants, obviously dropped in the desert without any protection from the elements.

Fifty feet from finally reaching Severus, the ground cracked upon and swallowed up Hermione whole. The hole expanded to show that Hermione had fallen into a sea of molten lava that had been simmering just underneath the thin crust of sand and earth above it. That would help to explain the unbearable heat.

Before the molten lava could burn though her protective clothing, Hermione, who suddenly had found her wand, cast a Flame-Freezing Charm, hoping it would last long enough until she could reach the edge and crawl out. Flailing, Hermione could not swim through the thick molten lava. If anything, it was like quicksand; the longer she struggled against it, the more she sank.

"Hermione!" Severus screamed, trying to stretch out his hand until he realized his own wand was somehow in his hand. It hadn't been there before, for he would have conjured some protection from the sun earlier.

He tried a Summoning Charm, but he could not free Hermione from the molten lava. Severus tried conjuring something long enough for Hermione to grasp, but for some reason, anything that came out of his wand was never quite long enough to reach her, despite his attempts to lengthen it. It was not enough.

Casting another Flame-Freezing Charm, Hermione began to panic as the lava crept up to her chin.

"Severus? Severus!" she cried out as she tilted her head back, having one last gulp of air before her head was submerged beneath the glowing pool of molten rock.

Without hesitation, Severus cast his own Flame-Freezing Charm and a large air bubble about his head and person, and dove into the molten lava.

Despite the charm, the lava seemed to scorch his skin. It was excruciating, but he didn't care. Severus would save Hermione. He hadn't been there to save her from Alan Parker, but he was now here and would save her from any further danger.
Unable to see, he could sense where she was and grasped her by the hand. Pulling her body close to his, he brought her into the air bubble he had created.

Hermione gasped, taking a huge lungful of air once inside the enlarged Bubble-Head Charm he'd modified to withstand the pressure of the molten lava pressing down around them.

Together now, they tried to kick and rise up through the molten lava, but Severus was losing strength. He was already weak when he arrived in this hell, but the blistering heat of the lava was making it so he could barely move his limbs anymore. Hermione was also losing the strength to struggle against the searing quagmire, her flowing robes floating upwards and around the clutched-together pair, enrobing them both.
Both looked at each other and realized that this might be where they met death together, their faces aglow from the super-heated rock surrounding them. Without words, they had one last kiss before meeting their inescapable doom, unable to free themselves.

Severus' lips touched Hermione's, and he felt a sweet warmth emanate from them and into his
lungs. Despite the unbearable heat that began to burn him, Hermione's warm breath was welcoming upon his lips.

Hermione felt Severus' lips upon hers and found them chilled. She drew his breath into her lungs and felt it cool her from the inside out, starting as a tendril in her chest and tingling as it spread throughout her body.

They exchanged breaths, giving each respite from what the other suffered.

Lost within the comfort of being in each other's arms and their kisses that were the source of relief for the other, neither of them noticed that they began to float up through the lava.

As their heads broke through the surface of the lava, they gasped for breath.

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"He's going to make it!" Janine shouted with relief when the fever broke. She could tell as Severus' lips went from blue to pink, and his breath began to warm.

With a sudden jolt, Severus woke and began flailing in the tub, shattering the shell of ice surrounding him in the process. "Hermione? Hermione!"

She was just in his arms. Where had she gone? Why was he in this freezing water?

Rainbow used her wand to lift Severus from the tub, which was pretty difficult as Severus was looking about in panicked confusion, trying to gain his bearings. Shivering violently, he was placed onto some bedding laid out on the floor that had been warmed with a charm, ready and waiting for him.

After wrapping him in toasty blankets that helped warm his skin, Rainbow moved him with her wand. Severus was swaddled like an overgrown babe, and was laid to rest in his bed where Ranjit had some Pepperup Potion ready for him to drink.

Already the blue cast about Severus' skin began to fade and change to white, a sign that the fever had broken and he was over the worst of it.
Severus, too weak to struggle, let himself be moved about, finally realizing it was all a dream. But it had felt so real, as real as that time he was dragged through the mud and Hermione saved him from the same fate as his wife, fighting to save him, until he fell in the forest.

"How long was I out?" Severus asked through teeth that still chattered, but not as bad as before.

"I would say it was about an hour at most." Rainbow settled him down into bed. She stroked a thumb along his cheek and saw the frozen crystals bumps under his skin simply melt away with her touch. "How do you feel?"

Severus had woke in a tub of frozen water, but the phantom feeling of the heat and molten lava scorching and singeing his skin still burned brightly in his memory.

"Better, I guess." He wasn't sure.

Ranjit helped him drink the Pepperup Potion. The sight of steam coming out of Severus' ears was a positive sign that he was recovering. All previous attempts to give Pepperup Potion to people suffering from ice dragon pox had been met with no steam.

Severus' mind was still elsewhere, having mentally faced a certain death in his hallucination with Hermione in his arms. He was rather discombobulated.

"Well, you certainly look better," Rainbow told him.

Severus could not focus on whatever Rainbow was rambling on about. It was something probably important, but he could not follow, having been wrenched so violently from his hallucination, or had it been some alternate reality?

He only thought of Hermione's lengthy letter she'd sent him and her description of her dream after recovering from that slicing hex. Draco had told Hermione about Severus' prolonged and unexplained sleeping spell. What details Severus shared with him, Draco relayed to Hermione. The timing was too coincidental for Draco not to mention something to her.

The similarities were too close to discount. His own unexplained falling into an unwakeable state months prior, the forest, the semicircle of wizards, Alan Parker there, his lying there in the mud and all that transpired. That dream and this recent hallucination were close enough to think he and
Hermione had shared a dream. Now there was the possibility they had shared a dream twice now.

She had wondered in her letter if there was some unintended side effect of the Irresistible Potion, which included pomegranate juice, that they developed together, but even her own research at St. Mungo's into an increased correlation of spouses falling ill at the same time since the potion went on sale indicated that there was nothing to that theory regarding their possible shared dream. She wondered if the pomegranate was somehow an agent that strengthened not only bodies, but emotional connections as well, harkening back to Severus’ discussion of potions that amplified emotions that already existed.

He was willing to discount her theory until he finally remembered that one tome he'd read once. Short of going back to Hogwarts and plowing through the Restricted Section to find it, he would have to see if he could find another copy of that ancient Greek book.

His head was spinning and he was already exhausted. The Potions master would have to think on this when he was better and rested, not feeling weak and bereft of Hermione's presence once more.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Bolting awake, Hermione cried out for Severus. She found herself smothered under every blanket and towel in her room, plus the curtains.

Her nightgown was soaked with sweat. Pushing off all the heaps of linens atop her, Hermione freed herself from the weight of the fabric that was crushing her and making her sweat profusely.

Panting and shaken, Hermione wanted to cry. She'd had Severus in her arms and now he was gone. Though it was only a nightmare, it had felt so real.

Placing her hand up to her mouth, the pads of her fingers grazed her lips. They were still cool to the touch; cool from Severus' kisses. She exhaled, and a small puff of chilled air escaped her lungs.

This was confusing. Why was she under all those blankets when the night was so hot? Did she somehow Summon them in her sleep? But why? And if she was sweating and overheated, why were her lips cool if the kiss she shared with Severus was but a dream? It was as confusing as to why she was chilled earlier in the day despite the high temperatures that drove everyone else to drink iced beverages at the rooftop bar while she sipped her hot tea.

Hermione herself wondered if this was the possibility of yet another shared dream and shared suffering. Was Severus cold while suffering from ice dragon pox? Did she unconsciously Summon
the blankets to help warm him in the dream they shared? Was it a shared dream or just wishful thinking that he was there with her and she could somehow take care of him and cure him?

After going to the bathroom to splash some cold water on her face and get a drink of water, Hermione called for the valet on duty in the middle of the night to change her bedsheets, since they were soaked, and she didn't feel like going back to sleep on sweaty sheets. Magic could only do so much with fabric; it was better to just get new clean sheets.

As the witch changed her bed linens and refreshed the room's expired Cooling Charms, Hermione contemplated going over to Albert's room and recounting her strange and vivid dream. Then she figured he had probably gone to bed late as well and needed the rest, given their big event was that day. It was only about three o'clock in the morning.

Instead, Hermione went to the desk in her well-appointed room and pulled out some parchment, ink, and a quill. She would write down her dream, and ask Severus if he'd had a similar dream as well. Hermione had hoped to talk to Severus after arriving in India about her theory of the Irresistible Potion, or some potion they imbibed together creating some dream-bond between them, but he was not there. So Draco would have to take her letter to him when he and Ginny returned to Hawaii after the weekend.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to my glorious betas, JuneW and Cygnuz, for their tireless work editing my away my fuck-ups and errors.

I have commissioned a piece of fanart by Bokuman to go with the dream sequence of Hermione and Severus floating in the air-bubble in the molten lava. To view it uncropped, visit here: http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/image/150667266535

Bokuman's DeviantArt page: http://bokuman.deviantart.com/ Yes, I know, Severus is missing his beard, but I forgot to relay that bit when doing my commission and didn't notice until after it was completed. Oh well. Beardless Severus it is for the fan art.

"Glaci" is Latin for ice and "hal" or "hel" is Latin for breath. I added the "-us" to imitate how many subspecies names also end "-u", such as *Thymus praecox articus* for Elfin Thyme.

Dvalinn is an old Norse name meaning "slumbering." His last name, Chrysalis, implies that he will emerge changed, like a butterfly, once he is done with his apprenticeship under Chuff.
I picked Varanasi in India for the location as it's one of the oldest cities in India and the world, having been inhabited since about the 11th or 12th century B.C., so it must have a sizable wizarding population, having been around for so long.

Dhoti sherwanis are the long frock coat suit with the gathered loose pants, paired together as a suit.

Methemoglobinemia is a rare genetic blood disorder that can cause the person to have blue skin; otherwise, the people are perfectly healthy. To see photos of this condition, Google "Blue Skin Appalachia". There is a small genealogical pool of people in the Appalachian region who have this condition, and they have been featured in some news stories.
"Chaat, Chats and Cats"

Chapter Summary

Severus recovers from the ice pox. Hermione comes to realize certain aspects of her relationship with Severus.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Ninety-Six
"Chaat, Chats and Cats"

Disclaimer: We all know that Rowling invented and owns Harry Potter and the entire world she created. We all know I am merely a humble fanfic author borrowing her characters, concepts and world for the purpose of having a bit of fun, for entertainment purposes only, and receive no compensation other than the wonderful reviews you post.

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Rainbow ordered Janine to sit by Severus' bedside while he recuperated, in case he had a relapse. The Healer had given the retired Muggle nurse a playing card that - when torn in half - would Summon Rainbow if Severus took a turn for the worse.

To Severus' dismay, he was not allowed to go back to sleep. Rainbow wanted him awake so that if his symptoms returned, he could alert Janine and she could Summon Rainbow quickly. Mental confusion would be the first sign of a relapse, so Janine had to keep him talking.

Rainbow, Arnold, and Ranjit then left to see if their new method for breaking the fever could be replicated successfully with someone else suffering from ice pox.

Janine moved a chair from Severus' library to sit in while keeping him company. When she returned with the chair, the cat had taken up residence on Severus' bed, happy to curl up next to its master now that he wasn't as cold as an ice cube.

"How are you feeling now?" she asked as she settled into the chair by the bed to keep watch,
observing Severus' familiar purr contentedly while snuggled on top of the covers.

"The same as when Rainbow asked me not five minutes ago," he replied tersely.

"Just checking," Janine said, not affected by Severus' attitude. She had been a nurse for many years and was used to the odd cantankerous patient who didn't like to be bothered. "What's your cat's name?"

"Cat."

Janine could tell Severus was not in a talking mood and she would have to find something to keep him awake and engaged for now. Looking about, she saw the photo by his bed. "Is that Hermione in the photo?"

Severus was about to ask her how she knew about Hermione, but then remembered he'd called her name out when he came to in the bath earlier. "Yes." His clipped tone tried to convey that he was not in the mood to talk about her, but that didn't seem to discourage Janine from asking more questions.

"She's lovely. If I may ask: Is she back in England right now?" If Janine had to keep Severus awake and not drift back to sleep, yapping at him was a sure fire way to keep him from dozing off.

"Normally yes, but I was supposed to meet her in India when I came down with the damnable infection," he growled testily. Severus understood she was obligated to keep him talking, for if she stopped talking, he surely would have corked right off. It still didn't tamp down the impatience he felt bubble up from her line of questioning.

"I'm sorry." There was no pity in Janine's reply. "You've been living here for nearly a year, so I'm sure you miss her. Is there a reason why she hasn't been able to come here? I remember that Lavender Weasley witch was here a few months back, and she is from England too. Am I remembering correctly?"

"Yes," Severus sighed. "Mrs. Weasley..." He still couldn't get used to calling her that. Severus had to refrain from calling her Miss Brown and had often resorted to using her first name during her visit, counter to his tendency to be more formal. 'Mrs. Weasley' was Hermione, and that name was linked to his memory of her. But Lavender was now married to Ron, and Hermione had merely never bothered to stop using her married name. "Mrs. Weasley is from England. In regards to
Hermione, she is finishing her apprenticeship before coming here to join me."

Severus was expecting some sort of reaction of shock that he was involved with such a young witch who was still working on her apprenticeship, but Janine gave him no odd look or questions about her age. Perhaps the Muggle did not understand about some societal norms regarding apprenticeships reserved for those who only recently finished their main schooling.

"How did you two meet?" It was in an innocuous question, but if she was going to pry, he perhaps could give her answers to make her uncomfortable enough so that she would drop this line of questioning.

"I was originally her professor in school." He wasn't ashamed of that fact, but it did sound a bit... lecherous.

"Hot for teacher. Nothing wrong with that," Janine threw out casually, letting Severus know she wasn't fazed by any possibility of a large age difference between them, picking up on his brusque tone. "So did sparks fly while she was still at school?"

"Absolutely not!" he replied hotly, insulted by the fact that this Muggle would insinuate that he did anything untoward while working in an academic position of authority over students.

"I'm not accusing you of anything, just curious." Janine put her hands up defensively while trying to keep the tone light. "So sparks after she finished school. Was it right away, or did you two need some time apart before there was a mutual interest?"

"Definitely time apart."

Severus didn't know why he allowed her to continue on with her line of questioning. Maybe it was the fact he didn't have to think about how he had rehearsed for days how he would tell Hermione that he didn't care about the scar across her breast, the scar that Ginny had informed him about beforehand to prevent an embarrassing situation. Ginny had confessed her own shock upon seeing the scar and warned him so that he would not react the same way she did. Hermione was fragile enough regarding the incident and the scar, and didn't need an unprepared reaction from him. All that preparation was now for naught. Talking about something else kept his mind from that train of thought.

"So how did you two meet up later on then?" Again, it was an innocent enough question, but
Severus was not going to share the details.

He could tell Janine some thread of the truth, while not revealing much. Reluctantly, but truthfully, he admitted, "She needed a friend with whom to talk."

Janine smiled. As if sensing that she was on the verge of delving too deep, she changed the subject. "So tell me how this whole Potions thing works. My husband Jimmy has tried to explain it, but he's an Astronomy person who barely passed Potions. What is it, like Chemistry? But with magic?"

Severus didn't know if Janine was truly ignorant about how Potions worked versus Muggle Chemistry, but it kept him engaged enough talking with her. As they were nearing the end of their discussion, Rainbow returned to check up on Severus. The Healer gave him and Janine the good news that they had done the ice bath and Potions treatment on two other patients and broke their fevers.

It was very good news, since some people had been suffering for a full week with the disease. Arnold and Ranjit were preparing a scroll to owl to Honolulu with their experiment and results.

Once Rainbow left, Janine tucked Severus in.

"Thank you," Severus said to his caretaker. He didn't have to thank her, but he did anyway. She had kept him awake and engaged in conversation lively enough so that it did not seem quite like the chore he'd feared it was going to be.

"You're welcome, Severus." She patted his hand and bid him goodnight before letting herself out.

Drifting off to sleep, Severus wondered how Hermione was doing in India. When Draco and Ginny returned, he would have to ask them for a few memories of Hermione to share with him.

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The Lovely Lavender Company India launch was a great success. Hermione looked fabulous, and her sari hung perfectly with the pleats and creases laying just so.

The hired jewelry was almost too much, but it was part of the "uniform" she had to don for the event.
She wore a heavily jeweled necklace featuring faceted sapphires of pink, violet, golden orange, and green. Hermione knew the precious gem came in colors other than blue, but to see them was quite dazzling. The earrings were a bit heavy, so they were charmed to float just enough to hang properly, but not drag on the ear painfully. Ginny and Aunt Christine were also bedecked with jewels that highlighted their hair and eyes, and coordinated with their outfit colors. Draco and Albert looked quite dashing, though Draco refused to wear the turban.

Hermione overheard Ginny say quietly, "But you don't mind wearing the turban when I dance for you," but she was quickly silenced by Draco giving her a look that said not to reveal all their secrets in public.

The press was looking for something fun and frivolous to fixate upon other than the dark and depressing news of the ice dragon pox epidemic. The wizarding population in India had been hit just as badly as most other countries around the world, so this launch of The Lovely Lavender Company in India was something to keep people's minds from more somber news. Hermione spoke eloquently, having been coached by her aunt. She fielded questions expertly, directed the press to watch models hired to show the application of the new roll-on henna tattoo kit developed just for the Indian market, and discussed other aspects of the company.

There was food and drink of the alcoholic and non-alcoholic variety. Ginny liked the sparkling mango juice and Hermione stuck with non-alcoholic drinks as well, needing to stay on her toes for any challenging questions from the press. Draco was introduced as the new Vice President of Advertising and Marketing for the Asia Pacific region; photos of Draco and Christine together were taken, to show a bridging of both hemispheres. It was also quite the nouveau thing that a Muggle worked for a company owned by a witch, which also added to the buzz about the spectacle. There were questions as to who would head operations for the Asia Pacific operations, but Hermione diplomatically said that there were a small number of candidates in the final phase of interviews and that the announcement would be made later.

They had decided that it would not be prudent to announce Hermione as the new Potions mistress and head of Asia Pacific operations when she had yet to finish her apprenticeship. She was an extremely capable witch, but accreditation and rank still mattered in the grand scheme of things, especially in international business.

Instead of a formal sit-down dinner, hors d'oeuvres were passed around. They were actually chaat snacks served up like fancy appetizers: mini-samosas, various pakoras, bite-sized stuffed parathas, chana masala served up in tiny papadums fried into a bowl shape to hold the savory garbanzo bean mixture. Also, each chaat hors d'oeuvre was served with chutneys on the side of the serving trays. There were at least a dozen different chaat dishes to sample as they floated around on trays, with the press and business associates invited to the event sampling and enjoying the free food and drinks. Hermione made sure to sample at least one of everything, since it was all so delicious, though it was a bit spicier than the Indian food she was used to back in London.
There was talk of meetings in the coming months, calling cards exchanged, and promises of owls to discuss future business and distribution deals. Hermione was more than happy to have her Aunt Christine handle the press, which was not that different from the Muggle press in many respects. She didn't mind talking business, since she didn't have to force herself to smile so much as when photographers were snapping shots left and right. Instead of handshakes, Indian people greeted each other with the Namaste – placing the palms of their hands together near the heart, with fingers pointing up. Handshaking was mostly a Western custom, and keeping physical proximity to a minimum was the recently adopted norm since the ice dragon pox broke out in Varanasi.

After what seemed like hours, the event wrapped up. Gift bags featuring products from The Lovely Lavender Company were distributed to guests and press, and smiles and thanks you's were exchanged before the night finally ended.

Ginny and Christine were exhausted and ready to call it a night. Even Hermione was worn out, having been short on sleep the night before, and required to do a whole lot of smiling and conversing during the event. Albert invited her to come over to his room for a celebratory night cap, but she begged off. She could have told him about her dream the other night, but decided that would be a discussion for tomorrow. Right now she wanted to just sleep.

As all the women left, the staff at the hotel were cleaning up the last of the party decorations and empty glasses, folding chairs and tables away with their wands. Draco and Albert sat in a pair of empty chairs near an open window with a view of the star-filled sky above the fields, spread out like some dark green quilt on the other side of the Ganges River. They were leaning over toward each other as if talking in some conspiratorial tone.

Back in her room, the witch valet helped Hermione remove her sari and took her clothes off to be cleaned. In her nightgown, Hermione flopped onto her bed. During the night she had avoided thinking of Severus, knowing if she let her mind go down that rabbit hole, it would be much harder to pull off another convincing smile for the camera. Now alone in her bed at night, the valet gone from her room, she could let herself think of him.

Recalling the dream, she noted that the blue of Severus' skin was the same blue as some of the more severe cases of ice pox. She hoped Severus' case of ice pox was not that bad, but there was no way to know. And as much as Hermione swore to herself that she would not go to Hawaii until after she was done with her apprenticeship, fearing how difficult it would be to leave Severus yet again, she was reconsidering her vow. In the morning, she would ask Albert if she could change her plans and go to Hawaii, and see if she could work with Arnold and Ranjit on a cure. And maybe Albert could Portkey over if he learned anything in India. If anything, she could take care of Severus, even if that meant she might come down with it as well.

Happy with the thought that she still might see Severus, even if it was for only a few days, or longer if she caught ice pox and was stuck there until better, she drifted off to sleep.
The Wireless Wizard Network broadcast the emergency announcement for the third time in thirty minutes.

"Due to the plague of ice dragon pox, all international Portkey travel has been suspended until further notice. All countries worldwide have unanimously agreed to the ban until a cure or treatment has been discovered. We will continue to broadcast updates on this situation as they become available. Thank you."

Severus grumbled to himself. They had come up with a treatment, but evidently the idiots in Honolulu were waiting to verify the treatment method before forwarding the news of a treatment to authorities, since there was no coverage of it in the broadcast. Portkey travel to the U.S. mainland was also severely limited to emergencies only until further notice.

This meant that Draco and Ginny could not return home until the ban was lifted. He hoped it wouldn't be too long. It was now Sunday, and Draco was supposed to start interviewing Potential Charms and Transfiguration tutors on Wednesday. With the ban, none of the candidates that were coming in from abroad could travel either, so in the end it didn't matter if Draco was there or not.

As the kettle came to a boil he poured himself a hot cup of tea, eager to drink something warm. He was even dressed in his long linen trousers and one of his old long-sleeved shirts for breakfast, instead of wrapped in a light silk dressing down or shirtless in a pair shorts.

Grabbing the kettle, he hissed in pain. Normally, he could grab the handle of the tea kettle and pour it without burning his hands, as his tolerance to heat and his layer of calluses allowed him to not bother using a potholder or towel to protect his hand from the heat. Now it seemed his ability to handle hot things was severely diminished, as well as his tolerance to even the slightest chill, given how the slight morning breeze through the open sliding glass door made him shiver.

Fetching a potholder, he grabbed the kettle once more and poured himself a cup of tea. Even the mug was too hot for him to hold, and he had to grab it by the handle.

Severus hoped his intolerance for temperature variations was merely a short-term effect from the ice pox and not a lifelong hindrance he would have to adapt to.

During breakfast, he went over the Owl Post that had arrived overnight. All of them were from candidates who were sending regrets, unable to make the scheduled interview date for the tutor position to replace Draco. They all said they looked forward to a new interview appointment once
the travel ban was lifted.

After breakfast, eating for the first time in a couple days, he went to the bathroom. Gazing in the mirror, he noted how his skin was dull, slightly lumpy, and still had an odd whitish pall to it. He hoped this wasn’t what his skin was going to look like for the rest of his life, as those recovering from regular dragon pox had green-tinged skin and lumps for the rest of their lives. If this was a long-term effect, he was a Potions master and he would endeavor to find some way to correct his newfound skin condition, should it be permanent.

Last night, he had allowed his cat this once to sleep in his bed to keep him company as he recovered. Now, the cat was rubbing along his ankles as it was finally ready to eat something, having to fend for itself while Severus was sick. Severus fortunately had some tinned meat he gave the cat, which sniffed at it haughtily.

"Be grateful I have anything at all in this house. I was planning on being gone and paid Akela to feed and water you." That plan had also been waylaid as Akela had come down with ice pox as well.

The cat eventually began eating what it was given, too hungry to complain that it wasn't fresh chicken livers or poached fish, like it was used to.

Dressed for the day, Severus headed off to the clinic to help Rainbow, Ranjit, and Arnold perform the newly-devised treatment for ice dragon pox on those they had not gotten around to curing yesterday, after himself.

He walked a bit slower than normal towards the clinic, still feeling quite weak, but unwilling to sit at home and recuperate for the next few days as he had been ordered by Rainbow. He wanted to be useful in order to keep his mind busy. If left alone at home to rest, he would most likely spend the entire day in his Pensieve, reliving memories with Hermione, having been denied his chance to reunite with her finally in India.

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The one upside to all the inconvenience of the Portkey travel ban was that Albert and the Malfoys could stay in their rooms until the ban was lifted, since the people who were going to occupy those rooms next could not travel into Varinasi now. Temporary Portkey travel restrictions were based on regional bans in India, besides international. Hermione had been planning on staying a few extra days anyway, but that was rather pointless now, except for needing a place to sleep at night.
Ginny and Draco decided to treat the extended stay like a second honeymoon, before the birth of their child, and spent most of their time up in their room alone and ordering room service, the same plan Hermione had had where she and Severus were concerned. But since Severus wasn't there, Hermione spent her time with Albert at the local wizarding hospital, working with the other local Potions masters and mistresses, and their apprentices, as they sought to brainstorm ideas.

Hermione and Albert updated everyone on all the efforts going on in Great Britain and Western Europe, and what had failed, while the Indian masters and mistresses shared their own list of failures.

Privately, Hermione already shared her dream of Severus with Albert and wondered if lava or some extreme heat might help with breaking the ice pox. Of course, the Indian Potion masters and mistresses had already tried variations of potions using dragon peppers and other sweat- and fever-inducing ingredients, but there was no breakthrough on that front.

All day Sunday and Monday was spent trying various potions – some old, some new and experimental.

It was Tuesday when news broke that in South Africa, Hawaii, and Finland, all three places had independently and simultaneously developed similar treatments for curing the disease over the weekend. It wasn't so much a cure as it was hastening the prolonged healing process along by breaking the ice fever. There was no real cure yet, but those who had been suffering from it for weeks could now, if they were strong enough, go through the process by dropping their body temperature to very low levels, thereby breaking the icy fever.

Hermione's heart soared at the news, and – upon hearing that Hawaii was one of the places listed – wondered if Severus was part of the team that came up with this method of curing, and if he was already cured. As more news trickled out, she did see his name listed among those who came up with the chilling potions and ice bath regimen.

As Albert and Hermione returned to the hotel, chatting about her plans to visit Severus for a few days, Aunt Christine was waiting for them in the lobby.

"I have good news and bad news," Christine announced as they entered the hotel, waddling over to greet them.

Hermione looked to Albert, wondering which one to pick first.
"Give us the good news first," Albert prompted her.

"The Portkey travel ban has been lifted," she said with a bittersweet smile.

"And the bad news?" Hermione asked, wondering what was so bad to make her aunt look that way.

Holding up her mobile phone, she said, "I got a call from Tim. Ron came over asking him to ring me immediately. You can't run off to Hawaii to join Severus. You have to go back to England immediately. Lavender has been put on mandatory bed rest, and the Healers at St. Mungo are threatening to hospitalize her if she doesn't stop working from home."

"Is the baby all right?" Hermione asked, beating Albert to the question.

"Lavender's fine, but she has been exhausting herself with this launch and doing everything since you and Albert had to take off to St. Mungo's last week. I've been trying to pace myself, which is why I wanted to rest a bit after the launch party before flying home tomorrow. My obstetrician thinks stress and working myself too hard last time is what might have contributed to my miscarriage."

"Hermione, why don't you go pack your bags and Portkey back to London immediately," Albert suggested. And as if reading the concerns on Hermione's mind, he added, "Christine, I hope you don't mind if I stick around until tomorrow to see you off. I don't want you to over-exert yourself, and it will be easier for you as a Muggle if you have a wizard around in this part of town."

Though Muggles were welcomed at the hotel, it was a bit inconvenient for Christine to take care of some things that normally a witch could do herself with a wand. Christine was heavily reliant upon the witch valet for her room for even the slightest task, and Christine was getting the feeling the staff was getting rather tired of doing everything for her, including the simple task of lighting candles and oil lamps.

"You are a dear, Albert," Christine said gratefully. "That would be lovely."

Albert promised Hermione to Portkey himself back to England once he was sure Christine was on her plane back home.

Christine had already sent a note to the Malfoys, who were still ensconced in their room, about the
Portkey travel ban being lifted. They also were going to leave the next day, deciding to spend one more night there, given it was already the late afternoon by the time the news spread.

After Hermione said farewell to her aunt, Albert, and the Malfoys, who decided to leave their room to say goodbye to her, she hopped into one of the magical rickshaws offered by the hotel to transport her back to the Indian Ministry of Magic building on the other side of the city.

While the rickshaw was stopped while waiting for a wedding procession to cross in front of her, Hermione watched intently, as if hypnotized by the scene before her, like some richly colored romantic dream pulled from the recesses of her mind. The bridegroom was riding atop a white yali – a part-lion, part-elephant, and part-horse beast. He looked grand in his wedding dhoti sherwani suit, surrounded by his family, as a boisterous band of musicians proceeded him. He was a young wizard, long and lean with flowing, straight black hair and a neatly trimmed beard, with a striking profile and angular features. Hermione could almost imagine if Severus had some Indian heritage in his background, he may have looked similar to the groom.

Suddenly, Hermione imagined herself dressed in a red and gold sari, standing in front of an officiant with Severus by her side in a formal all-black version of a sherwani jacket, which wasn't that different from the black frock coats he used to wear.

Hermione was so lost in the daydream she barely noticed that she had arrived at the Portkey office.

Back in the reality of the moment, Hermione thanked the driver and tipped him well. Then she went inside to wait in the long line with others who had heard the good news that the travel ban was lifted, and were trying to get home as soon a possible, like her.

On Tuesday, Severus decided to close up shop by five o'clock. Draco and Ginny were still not back, and all tutoring was canceled until next Monday, even with the cure. This would give all his students a chance to recuperate and rest before resuming their studies. Even opening at noon, after helping Rainbow and Ranjit cure more people from ice pox that morning, business was extremely slow.

Depressed, Severus headed to Bongo’s after work for one, or possibly several, drinks. It was early October, but Bongo already had Halloween decorations up.

Supposedly in Malu Palekaiko, the children went trick-or-treating on Halloween, a custom Mounga started some years back. Instead of dressing up as vampires, witches, and other "monsters," the children on the island dressed up as Muggles in various occupations that were strange and a little frightening to them. It seemed dressing up as a dentist was a favorite, since the idea of drilling
someone's teeth and sticking needles in their mouth was quite a terror-inducer to young imaginations. Iakona said one year he dressed up as a sewer worker, because he said the idea of having to walk around a small smelly tunnel underground knee-deep in "raw sewage" sounded pretty terrifying and disgusting to him. Akela went as an accountant one year as she said working at a job that boring for the rest of her life seemed scary in its own way. Kaimi had already told her Uncle Severus this year she was going to be a veterinarian, after hearing a few tales from her father when he spent a few years living amongst Muggles as a teenager.

Severus had asked Mounaga about those years, but his friend said he'd talk about them one day, just not yet. From Mounaga's tone in his answer, Severus knew there was something more behind that story then just some study of Muggle culture before he had pursued law.

As Bongo served up Severus his third Scotch, the place was empty except for Jerry banging away on the piano. His lover, Arnold, had finally come down with ice pox himself and was recuperating after having the ice bath and potion treatment done to him earlier that morning, with Severus in attendance. Jerry needed to unwind a bit, and playing Muggle tunes on the piano was his way of relaxing. He was tinkering around until he found a melancholy melody that he began to sing.

"They're writing songs of love but not for me
A lucky star's above but not for me
With love to lead the way I've found more clouds of gray
Than any Russian play could guarantee...

I was a fool to fall and get that way
Hi-ho, alas, and also lack-a-day
Although I can't dismiss the memory of her kiss
I guess she's not for me..."

Jerry continued to warble out his bittersweet tune until the song petered out, and he started playing something else equally maudlin in a different key.

Severus was even more depressed now, thanks to the alcohol and Jerry's choice of songs. On top of that, his skin was even more terrible looking and it was beginning to itch, even with the alcohol starting to numb him.

As he absentmindedly scratched near his collarbone, he looked down at his hand and noticed large clumps of grayish skin clinging to his nails.

Startled that his skin was falling off, Severus nearly fell off his bar stool. Stumbling off to the men's
loo, he looked in the mirror and noticed patches of dead skin were peeling away near his neck. Grabbing the edge of the dead skin, he pulled – and a large sheet of dead skin began peeling away revealing fresh, smooth, pink skin underneath.

Severus was touching the newly-revealed skin, noting its smoothness and vibrancy. The lumpiness was gone, as if it was nothing more than a bad sunburn peeling away. Looking down at a spot on his arm that he'd scratched at unconscious in his sleep during his case of the ice pox, he noticed those small areas had scabbed over. It would take time to see if those would heal just as smoothly, or if there would be some scarring.

The fact he would not have gray lumpy skin for the rest of his life was one less worry for him now.

Relieved that this was actually a good sign, Severus saddled up to the bar for yet another drink. He might have left the bar to go eat something, but most of the town was still shut down and Bongo's was one of the few places currently open. At least the grocery store and general store were still open, and he was able to buy groceries on Sunday.

As Severus nursed his fourth drink while Jerry sang about being "in a New York state of mind," he heard a familiar voice from over his shoulder.

"Figures you'd be here drowning your troubles. If I was denied being reunited with the love of my life, I'd be getting pissed too."

Severus turned around to spy Draco and Ginny coming into the bar.

Severus was so thrilled to see his friends, he jumped off his bar stool and hugged Draco. Turning to Ginny, he would let her decide if she wanted to be touched by someone who was recently recovered from a contagious disease. Ginny knew Severus was most probably not contagious by this point, so she walked over and gave him a hug, adding an extra squeeze saying that one was from Hermione.

"When did you get back?" Severus asked, amazed at their return. The travel ban had been lifted a day, but no one was Portkeying on or off the island unless it was necessary.

"Just now," Draco said as he and Ginny each grabbed a stool to join Severus. "We got the news Tuesday, and left Wednesday, staying an extra day once the travel ban was lifted." In crossing so many time zones, they had gained a day upon their return.
Ginny looked a bit somber when she added, "Hermione was planning to come herself for a few days, but her Aunt Christine received a telephone call that Lavender is now on ordered bed rest. Hermione had to get back to London as soon as possible."

Severus frowned at his drink. Yet something else the Fates had thrown at them to keep them apart longer.

"But, she gave me another roll of parchment and a memory to give to you." Ginny placed the vial and scroll on the bar countertop. "Oh, and we picked up a souvenir for you from the trip."

Draco pulled out a small flat box and placed it in front of Severus. "Ginny will not rest until she sees you open this. She dragged me around half the wizarding quarter looking for just the right one."

Severus wondered what Ginny had gone through all the bother to get for him. Looking at her sideways, he said, "Thank you."

"You can thank me after you open it up." Ginny was squirming in her seat, excited to watch Severus' reaction.

Jerry had stopped pounding away on the keys to come over and welcome back the Malfoys. "How was India?" he asked.

"Hot," she replied, fanning herself just at the recent memory of it. Ginny ordered some ice-cold pineapple juice to help her cool down, as she was still overheated from her trip.

Severus unwrapped the box. The paper was printed with an intricate paisley design in blue, red, green, pink, orange, and gold. After lifting the box lid, he peeled away the carefully folded tissue paper. In the box was a gold-plated picture frame with an intricate filigree design for the border in an Indian motif. In the frame was a picture of Hermione from the India launch party of The Lovely Lavender Company, looking elegant in her fuchsia sari, coiffure, make-up, and ornate jewelry. She was smiling and waving, and he could see the hint of sadness behind her eyes that she masked. He knew her well enough that he could see through her mask, just as she had over time seen through his.

Severus said, "Thank you," once more, but this time his voice was a bit more choked with emotion.
God, what Severus wouldn’t have done to see her looking so splendid in person and have the chance to kiss her.

"You're welcome, Severus. I figured you needed a photo of her for your office, since you have one at home," Ginny elaborated.

Jerry peered over Severus’ shoulder to see the photo of Hermione smiling and waving back. Whistling long and low, he said, "Wow, she's a looker. She's your girl, Severus?"

He merely nodded.

"You are one lucky bastard." Jerry patted Severus on the back in a show of sympathy, since he'd heard the news of why Severus was unable to see her.

As much as Severus was wallowing in a pity funk, Jerry did lift his spirits a bit. He'd made him realize that indeed he was a lucky bastard that someone as brilliant, kind, and beautiful as Hermione loved him, and she was waiting for him.

Severus sighed. "Yes, I guess I am."

Jerry went back to tinkering on the piano, sensing that the old friends wanted to catch up in private.

"So, Severus. Hermione told us about how she read your name along with Rainbow, Arnold, Ranjit and Janine's for the Hawaiian team that came up with the cure," Draco said, changing the topic. He reached over and pulled away Severus' collar a bit, looking at the peeling area a little more closely, "Looks more like you were sunburned than frozen in an ice shell."

"In the hallucinatory state I fell into, I was so cold, it felt like I was burning up in a desert with lava," he said, recalling his vision. Noticing the odd glances from his friends, he said, "She was there, wasn't she?"

Draco nodded. "She told Albert more detail, as she thought somehow if might have been a clue to how to create a cure, but as for Ginny and me, she merely said she saw you in a desert and you
both fell into lava. That's it."

Severus looked at the scroll of parchment on the bar top and knew Hermione would list every detail she remembered from her time on that ethereal plane together.

"How is it that on opposite sides of the world, you two have now shared two dreams together?" Ginny asked in wonder.

As strange and varied as the world of magic was, even this was quite fantastical to her, involving no incantation or charm to initiate.

"How is it that the power of a mother's love could save Harry Potter from the Dark Lord's Killing Curse?" he asked rhetorically.

Others had assumed Harry Potter defeated the Dark Lord the first time with the Killing Curse ricocheting back onto its caster; Harry's magic had not done that, but Lily's love. A force that was the most powerful magic in the universe, and yet few in the wizarding world understood it. There was even a door located in the Department of Mysteries that studied the concept of love. The locked door to that particular room could not be forced open, just as love cannot be forced.

The vision of Dumbledore back in his flat had tried to tell him about love and how powerful it truly was. It was only now that Severus was beginning to understand that love not only motivated people to act above and beyond what they thought themselves capable of, and selflessly, but moved the world and bent the universe to its whim when the love was strong enough.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Buried under a sea of parchments and scrolls, Hermione worked tirelessly until she was completely caught up on everything from her week away at St. Mungo's and her long weekend in India. It took her four days of working 18-hour days, but she was done in time for Albert to forcibly drag her off to the monthly Potions master booze-up at Niles's home. Even Albert knew if he didn't order Hermione to take a break, she'd push herself to the breaking point of exhaustion yet again.

Hermione didn't really want to go to another booze-up. Ever since her attack, she had been reluctant to drink such that she was not fully in control of herself. At the August gathering of Potions masters, she was able to get everyone so drunk on the "wipe-out" drink early enough in the evening that no one noticed she'd stayed mostly sober. At the September meeting, she brought vials of Sobering Solution to nip in the bathroom, while pretending to be drunk. It was because she was very muddled from exhaustion, too many potions, and drink at the July meeting that Alan was
able to get the drop on her and disarm Hermione. The only reason she was able to drink as much as she did during her night out drinking and dancing, after dinner at Ron and Lavender's, was the fact that she was surrounded by several friends that she trusted with her life, who would be there to protect her. Between Harry, Ron, Ginny, Draco, Lavender, Albert, and Zhubanysh, she felt safe enough to let herself relax and drink.

During her weekly meetings with James Hoover, her Muggle therapist who was helping her with her post-trauma recovery, he had helped her address her fears against letting herself relax. James had been dealing with soldiers of both genders who had recently returned from tours of duty abroad and the transition back to civilian life, in addition to some clients who had dealt with sexual assault. Hermione was having similar problems: hunkering into a familiar mentality of war once more, seeing dangers in the most innocuous of everyday items and the people she passed by on the street. She had been seeing the therapist for about two months personally, ever since the corset incident, and lately they had been making some progress.

When the topic of the upcoming Potions masters' booze-up came up, Hermione admitted her reluctance to drink heavily, stating that not all those in attendance at these meetings were to be trusted. She recounted a few of the pranks, but also Albert's concerns not to accept any drink unless it was from him, or she poured it herself, and why. James agreed that women, whether Muggle or witch, should be careful of their surroundings when lots of alcohol was present in mixed company, and that her caution was prudent. They both agreed it was sad that it was not a world where women could get drunk and be safe from such dangers. James asked her why she had allowed herself to get wasted at prior meetings, but not since her attack – except for that one time with her friends.

Hermione had to admit to herself that her trust for the world at large had been damaged, and it would take time before she could rebuild that trust.

Apparating to Niles' house, Albert and Hermione noticed the party was in full swing already. Niles was belting out the Russian romance song, "Ochi Chyornye," the same song she heard him sing her first time at his house. Singing that particular song usually didn't happen until he had a minimum of four drinks in him. Hermione joined in, since singing in other languages was one way to learn pronunciation, and she planned on learning Russian some day. The lyrics were easy enough to pick up; while she didn't understand most of them, her understanding of Greek helped a little. She did have Albert translate them for her once, though he professed his Russian was shamefully rusty. From then on she thought of a certain wizard whose dark eyes "implored her into faraway lands, where love reigns" whenever she sang it along with Niles.
Since her first monthly booze-up in February, Hermione had also learned the lyrics to the French drinking song, "Chevaliers De La Table Ronde," the Chinese drinking song whose title roughly translated into "The Booze Song," and many more songs where Hermione had only half-learned the foreign lyrics.

In turn, Hermione taught everyone at the gatherings over the summer a new drinking song in Greek called "Ouzo Otan Pieis." She had learned it from her many trips to that Greek restaurant with Neville.

Before coming to these gatherings, Hermione was not much of a singer. But with the alcohol loosening her inhibitions and with some practice between the meetings, her voice improved so it no longer was quite off-key on some high notes, and she sang with a bit more confidence.

That night, everyone seemed to be drinking more than usual. It was most likely a way to let off steam after fretting about the ice dragon pox. Hermione merely nursed her drink, trying to limit herself to two that whole night, wanting to stay in control. There was still not a true cure, other than the chilling potion and the ice bath treatment, but it was still cause to celebrate. A few of the Potions masters there that night had come down with the ice pox and had gone through the procedure to report that they felt so cold it felt like their skin was burning. Hermione said nothing, knowing she had joined Severus in his dream of searing heat and lava.

She did notice how the skin was starting to peel from a Potions master named John Leyster, who she knew only in passing from the few meetings he came to before. Leyster was about sixty years old, and prior to the ice pox had some acne scarring. Now that his skin was peeling, John looked a bit younger; his wrinkles were far less noticeable, and the acne scarring was reduced so much you could barely notice it anymore. She wondered how far Severus was along in the peeling process, since that was a common side effect. As she was talking to Leyster about his experience with ice pox, she overheard Chuff in the other room and his booming voice, an indication he was already fairly drunk.

"And that bastard, Severus Snape, I knew he'd finally do something good with himself," Hermione overheard Chuff exclaim to the small audience of other Potions masters he was bragging to. "Helped figure out a cure, though why they allowed that Muggle cunt to be included in that list of those who found a cure, I'll never understand."

Irritated beyond all belief that Chuff had never mentioned Severus by name until he could brag about him once being his apprentice, and that he referred to the nurse, Janine Watters, in such a derogatory way, Hermione rose from her seat.

"If you will excuse me, John," she said before walking over to the archway into the next room where Chuff was still bloviating.
"Snape was a good student, quite bright, actually," Chuff rambled on. "He would have gone onto greater things sooner if he didn't waste all those years teaching a bunch of dunderheads at Hogwarts. At least all the knowledge I imparted to him has finally come to something."

Hermione wanted to rip Chuff a new arsehole. All these months he would refer to stories about Severus in an anonymous third-person way, and only when his name was attached to one of the three teams that had found a treatment for ice pox did Chuff bother to acknowledge he'd even had Severus apprentice under him.

Licking her lips, ready to jump in when Chuff stopped to take a drink, she hesitated when the moment came.

How had Hermione been any different from Chuff, when one really looked at it?

She had hidden her relationship to Severus under the guise of his nom de guerre, Delgado, and even when Neville asked her who she had been seeing other than Ron, she hid that fact from him by telling him it was complicated. It took until she called out Severus' name during her long sylvan dream, after she was rescued from her attack, for Ron to learn who her lover was. Even with the cajoling from the twins, wondering who her "boyfriend" was when they gave her her birthday present, she was still too ashamed to admit to the rest of the world that Severus was her lover and that she loved him.

Hermione had been ready to give up her life in England and join him abroad when he fled, and if he asked her to marry him, she would gladly take his name. All these months she had been pushing herself to join him once more, upon finishing her apprenticeship, and live with him in a house that he had built for the both of them, and yet she was still hiding her love for him like some great secret shame. Well, had Hermione not cleared his name, it would have been a great scandal as no one would have known that Severus was working for the Order all along – and an affair between a Death Eater and a Muggle-born would have caused an even greater shock to the wizarding world, more so than her divorce from Ron – but she had cleared his name. Everyone now knew he was fully exonerated and he'd had a part in helping Harry Potter win the war.

Draco and Ginny had told her that in Hawaii, everyone was very curious about her, wondering who the witch was who'd stolen the heart of the most eligible bachelor in Malu Palekaiko. While Severus was a private man who did not brag about Hermione, it had eventually come out that he belonged to her, the woman who just happened to also clear his name.

Severus was in no way ashamed of being in love with her, nor had he denied being in love with her when asked about her, as Ginny recounted it to Hermione in India. It was time for Hermione to do
the same: to no longer be ashamed she was in love with Severus, and that he had been her lover.

As Chuff threw back another slug of Scotch, Hermione said with a hint of accusation, "I find it interesting that before Severus Snape helped discover this treatment, you could never dare to mention his name. Now you strut about like some peacock, fanning your tale about, boasting how he was once your apprentice and that somehow you should be credited for the cure merely by an association that ended years ago."

Hermione could not see Albert, but she could sense the restrained smile tug at the corner of his mouth as he sat in a chair behind her.

Chuff blinked back in shock that a witch, and one so young, had challenged him. "You impudent chit. Other than having to scrub cauldrons while under his tutelage at Hogwarts, what would you know of Severus Snape?"

"I know that when Severus Snape was your apprentice, you dragged him off to the North African desert, and you didn't warn him where you were taking him or to bring protection from the sun," Hermione began, citing chapter and verse, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "He wound up with a severe sunburn. You brought a hat for yourself and potions to protect from sunburn and windburn, but you did not give any to him, claiming it was his fault he didn't come prepared; nor did you allow him to conjure any protection. And how could he when you wouldn't tell him where you were going? He suffered for three days until you returned and he could finally brew something."

Heads swiveled and eyes looked to Chuff, watching for him to deny Hermione's claims. Many there sensed Hermione seemed to have a bit of a chip on her shoulder against Chuff from the very first meeting she came to, for some unknown reason. They were not willing to automatically believe her claim, though they knew she had no reason to come up with such a false story.

"Well, it was a lesson in learning to be prepared at all times," Chuff claimed in defense of himself.

There was a small collective gasp and murmur of groans that Chuff had admitted to doing such a thing to his former apprentice.

"Or what about that time you made him test the potency and length of a rash- and boil-inducing potion. Severus had to suffer for six hours until the potion waned while you leisurely recorded results, forbidding him from taking some pain-relieving potion of any sort. Not even willow bark tea." Hermione's eyes squinted in disgust at the Potions master.
"Any pain relief might have skewed the results," Chuff countered.

"That's a load of troll shit," Royston interjected into the argument. "You really are a bastard."

There as a gleam of triumph in Hermione's eyes when she saw the other Potions masters, and the few wives that came along that night, looked at Reginald Chuff with sudden distaste. Those stunts were pretty cruel, even for some of the more demanding and less sympathetic Potions masters.

Chuff knew Snape would never dare to share those private and humiliating stories with just any student of his. Going for the jugular, Chuff snorted, "And just how did you learn those little tales? Private tutoring on your back from the Head of Slytherin in his dungeon lair?"

There was a collective gasp, as many understood Chuff's improper insinuations.

The challenge was there, and Hermione was going to answer it. "Severus and I didn't become lovers until shortly before my divorce, years after I left Hogwarts, and years after the end of the war."

There was a crash of glass as Braxton dropped his glass of some unknown spirits, having lost his grip in shock of Hermione's confession. Shards and amber liquid were scattered across the wooden floor.

Chuff blinked in shock, hoping his cutting insults would cause her to blush or stammer. Instead, she stood there proudly, freely admitting to her adulterous relationship with Snape. He was out of ammunition momentarily.

"You admit to having an affair with him?" Chuff asked, hardly able to believe she would freely confess to such a thing. Wizards had affairs all the time, but with witches society dictated that they weren't supposed to admit to such things for the sake of propriety.

"Yes, but not nearly as long as Ron was having an affair with Lavender. He and I can't fault each other, as we're both guilty." It was a bold stroke to admit that, as it could open her up for more scorn, should Chuff phrase his next barb carefully.
"That explains why you took your case to the Wizengamot to exonerate him and his lackey, Malfoy. Couldn't bear to stand the thought of people knowing you were screwing a war criminal and a Death Eater?" he threw back haughtily.

"An ex-Death Eater who regretted that foolish mistake he made as a boy for the rest of his life and spent nearly two decades working for Albus Dumbledore, risking life and limb, to rectify his error and help Harry Potter defeat Voldemort. Or did you miss that part of the transcript of the trial where it was recorded from Pensieve transcripts how Severus stopped several curses from hitting Harry Potter so that he could finally kill Voldemort."

Hermione was reciting from rote some of her arguments for Severus' exoneration in front of the Wizengamot. It did not miss her observation that Chuff, and most of the others intently observing their fight, shuddered at the mention of You-Know-Whose name.

Chuff's eyes narrowed as a sudden realization dawn on him. "You helped him escape."

It had become common knowledge during the trial, without it being stated directly, that Snape and Malfoy had fled England some months prior. Since Severus was publicly listed as living in Hawaii, and since Draco's visit in August, everyone now knew where the ex-Death Eaters were residing.

Heads swiveled to look at Hermione, breaths held waiting for her to admit or deny Chuff's accusation.

"Yes, I did." Hermione jutted her chin up in defiance that there was anything wrong with that.

"When Minister Bones learns–"

Hermione cut him off by stating, "Minister Bones, along with Head Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt, and I already sat down and had a nice little talk about that." She smirked at him in a way to let him know he had nothing with which to blackmail her.

After the "Hot Mic" Spell was performed, and it came out publicly that Calpurnia Fudge and Dolores Umbridge had engaged in election-rigging, Hermione, Harry, Lavender, and Kingsley Shacklebolt sat down with the newly-elected Minister of Magic, Susan Bones. They told her about how they had used Polyjuice Potion in a non-sanctioned manner to uncover a greater crime and make those crimes public knowledge. While Minister Bones was not exactly pleased about the way Dolores Umbridge was initially interrogated – with Draco's false impersonation as Calpurnia, the
liberal use of Veritaserum, and the use of an Obliviate – she was quick to overlook such measures when it resulted in the first non-rigged election in a while.

Minister Bones also took the opportunity to ask about how Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape had been able to escape England. Two ex-Death Eaters — while unjustly persecuted — had somehow evaded the system set up in place in order to prevent them from fleeing, so obviously the system had failed. Minister Bones gave Hermione a very pointed stare, since Hermione was in possession of two memories from Severus Snape during the trial, and therefore must have been in close contact with him in order to obtain them. The Minister prefaced her question with the disclaimer that anything said would be off the record, and possibly commended. Hermione confessed how she procured the ingredients for the Polyjuice though her position in the Department of S&F, and was met with a smile and an approving nod from the Minister at the end of her tale.

But of course, Hermione was not about to share the finer points of those details with Chuff or the crowd watching their argument.

With nothing left, Chuff merely sneered at her and said with disgust, "The Death Eater and the Mudblood fucking each other. Who would have thought? Wait until the Daily Prophet prints this little tale."

Hermione had crossed the room and had her wand pressed to Chuff's throat before the rest of the drunken guests finished blinking in shock of Chuff's slur against Hermione and his threat.

"Don't ever call me that again, you bigoted, arrogant, sadistic blowhard." The glint in Hermione's eyes made Chuff quail momentarily.

"An apprentice threatening a fully accredited master? This will not look good, should I report you to the accreditation board," he threatened as he tried to mask the fear on his face.

"Obliviate!"

Hermione staggered back in shock, turning her head to stare at the tip of Niles' wand. She saw the last wisping trails of the spell that came from it, erasing Reginald Chuff's memories of that night.

Sighing in exasperation, Niles merely said, "What an arse." Turning to Hermione, he said, "You restored the good name of a great Potions master who taught nearly a thousand students, including many who became our apprentices over the past two decades. In addition, you saved two people
who were unjustly persecuted, and Chuff was threatening to go to the papers to out your love affair with Snape in a salacious manner to shame you? I don't think so."

Looking around the room, Nile announced loudly, with great authority, "Hermione, while not a fully accredited Potions mistress yet, embodies the code of ethics, integrity, and brilliance we seek to foster in our field. Everything that has been heard and seen here tonight will go no further than this room. We protect our own, especially when those of us have acted nobly."

Glancing about the room once more, Niles asked, "Do I have everyone's word?"

Every witch and wizard held up their wand and made the vow, their wandtips glowing brightly to show their sincerity.

Chuff, who was lying on the floor passed out, started to come around.

Glaring down at the prone disgraced Potions master, Niles said, "Get that bigoted piece of shit out of my house. And erase any memory of our monthly meetings. I don't want him turning back up at our parties like a bad Knut."

Niles was disgusted that Chuff had not only called Hermione that name, but that he'd referred to the Muggle nurse, Janine Watters, as a cunt. He had read the official account about how she helped come up with the cure as part of the Hawaiian team, and Chuff was no doubt bitter he didn't think of it before a Muggle.

Royston and Braxton eagerly came over and cast a Mobilicorpus spell to lift Chuff up off the floor, not being careful to not bump his head against doorjambs and walls on the way to the front door. They both Side-Along Apparated him away to his home, and finished with another Obliviate before returning to the party.

Standing in the kitchen trying to come down off an adrenaline rush, Hermione almost jumped out of her skin when Niles came up to her and placed a friendly hand on her shoulder.

"I never would have guessed about you and Severus. But I'm happy for the both of you – that is, if you're still together," Niles amended, not knowing the current status of their relationship.

"Yes, we're still together, though having a long-distance relationship is quite stressful at times."
Hermione heaved a sigh. "He was supposed to meet me in India last week, but he came down with ice pox just before he was supposed to Portkey."

Niles furrowed his brow as he poured himself another drink, his own adrenaline pumping quickly through his veins. "Why didn't you have Severus take you on as his apprentice? You'd be together now."

"Originally, I wasn't going to go with him, and he helped set me up with Albert. But by the time he asked me to go with him, I decided I had to stay behind and clear his name. He said he didn't care about being cleared of charges, but I insisted, telling him that even though he would be free of the Death Eater Decree, he still wouldn't be truly free." Hermione left out the part about trying to join Severus at the last minute and dropping the only source of Ron's hair for the Polyjuice Potion.

Niles stood there for a moment, studying his drink before asking, "I heard about Lavender's announcement of Draco Malfoy being the new Director of Advertising and Marketing for the Asia Pacific region. Is that a hint of your plans of what you will do and where you intend to go once you complete your apprenticeship?"

Albert cleared his throat, making his presence known. "That is still a matter of proprietary knowledge until such time that The Lovely Lavender Company makes its formal announcement on the new President of the Asia Pacific Region for its new offices in Malu Palekaiko," he said as he stood in the doorway to the kitchen. He looked at Hermione and gave her an exaggerated wink.

"Well," Niles said knowingly with a smug grin, "when that announcement is finally made, I shall have to congratulate her, whoever she may be."

Niles raised his glass, and Albert and Hermione clinked glasses with him.

After she drained her glass, Niles offered to refill it for her, to which she hesitated.

Albert nodded his head to Niles to fill her glass once more for another toast.

Looking to Albert, Hermione's eyebrows were raised in question. Leaning over discreetly, her master said quietly, "You no longer have to worry about who you accept drinks from any more at these parties."
Hermione stood back, leaning against the counter, and understood the grave implication of Albert's remark. Having had Niles, Braxton, and Royston support her against Chuff, and everyone else there take a wand oath to remain silent about that night's events, Hermione felt her trust in the world strengthen a little bit more.

She accepted the drink from Niles, who said, "A toast. To love. May your apprenticeship finish quickly, and may you soon be reunited with Severus once again."

Hermione raised her glass and said, "Cheers."

Albert raised his glass and clinked it against Hermione and Niles' glasses, adding, "Salut."

"Nostrovia," Niles said before they all drank.

His choice of toast triggered something in her mind.

"Niles," Hermione began in a manner that indicated she was going to ask something of him, "you know that song, Dark Eyes?"

"Ochi Chyornyye?"

"Yes. I read the original poem, and I noticed it was different from the lyrics Albert translated for me when you've sung it."

Albert shook his head and said, "I think I got it mostly right. It's one of those languages I haven't used in a long while."

"There are about three or four variations of the lyrics for that song." Niles took another sip as he tried to think if there were any other versions he was aware of.

"I was wondering, could you help me with changing the words about for a new variation of that song?" she asked sweetly.
"Absolutely. And we can work on your pronunciation, while we're at it," Niles said, happy to help her.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Than you to my betas, JuneW and thegrey ladies

Chaat is a type of Indian street food consisting of small dishes, available for purchase from street vendors. Usually a vendor will sell one type of chaat at his or her cart, so you have to go to different carts to try different foods.

"But Not For Me" composed by George Gershwin, lyrics by Ira Gershwin.

"New York State of Mind" written by Billy Joel.

"Ochi Chyornyje" is the romantic Russian song based on a Ukrainian poem. In English, it is called "Dark Eyes."

"Chevaliers De La Table Ronde" is a French drinking song (Knights of the Round Table) I used to know, having learned it in French class in junior high school. Given today's "zero tolerance" policies, I doubt they are teaching French drinking songs in public school anymore.

"The Booze Song" is a newer song by a Chinese folk-rock bank called Shan ren. You can listen to them perform it here: http://youtu.be/WCMgdRdyQHw

You can listen to a performance of "Ouzo Otan Pieis" here: http://youtu.be/h03P_j-iWc8
"Stop Dragon My Heart Around"

Chapter Summary

Hermione finally has that business luncheon with the twins, and she is inspired to new levels of crudeness. Severus finally finds replacements for Draco who won't make him want to poison or hex them. Italian opera and French can-can dancing included, "Snowball" cocktails are not, but the recipe is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Ninety-Seven
"Stop Dragon My Heart Around"

Disclaimer: Yeah, alright, I know. Let's get this over with. The characters and concepts in this fanfic belong to J.K. Rowling, and various other franchises like Scholastic and Warner Bros. No financial gain is made from this, except if you count the wonderful reviews from my readers as legal tender.

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Since Severus was one of the first to recover from the ice pox, he was one of the first to discover the next stages of recovery, which Rainbow would help him document for the record over the next few weeks. The worst stage was when the skin under his beard and on his scalp was peeling around the hairs, as it itched like crazy. Severus was sorely tempted to shave his head and beard off in one go. At least when the palms of his hands peeled it was quick and mostly painless. All his calluses were gone, but he had built them over the past year. He could build them up again.

Draco noted it looked like Severus had lost at least a good five years off his face with the peeling. And with the peeling, Severus' skin had gone pale once more, which he countered with some potions to speed up the tanning process and avoid burning this time. Unfortunately, his Dark Mark remained, clear as ever. The white streak in Severus' hair remained as well, though it was still covered up with a spot dye job.

Now that the travel ban was over, interviews were rescheduled. Witches and wizards from all over came to Malu Palekaiko to interview for the position of Charms and Transfiguration tutor, with receptionist and office manager duties.
In between classes, tutoring, and private commissions, Severus and Draco fit half-hour appointments into their busy days to meet with the candidates, limiting themselves to three per day. Justina was happy she was getting a steady flow of guests at her hotel in the off-season, for some decided to stay overnight due to the time difference of where they Portkeyed in from, or to simply enjoy being in Hawaii.

The applicants all knew the job was dual-duty position and not very glamorous, but the beautiful weather and island scenery helped attract applicants. The smarter applicants had figured out that Snape was making money – not only from managing the export of rare Miniature Man-Eating Masdevallias, but from creating potions. They knew he had been on the Hawaii team that had helped find a treatment protocol for the ice pox. But being smart doesn't necessarily mean that one had social skills.

Over the months, Draco's list of students requiring tutoring had grown to the point where Severus had to take on some of the administrative duties Draco originally shouldered. The position was more than just a full time position between tutoring and administrative work, requiring someone who could easily switch hats between office manager and teacher, while working long hours. The job was far more demanding than many of the applicants assumed when they applied, which caused a slew of under-qualified and unprepared candidates to traipse through Severus' shop door.

As Severus and Draco sat there in the Potions master's office listening as another candidate, with an overly cheerful smile and sweaty palms, prattled on about their accomplishments and skills, both wizards wondered if finding someone competent was going to take as long as it had taken for Hermione to get all those Polyjuice Potion ingredients, once she agreed to help them.

"Transfigure this into something metallic," Draco said as he chucked a book suddenly at the wizard from California, growing restless and irritated with the slew of incompetent candidates who walked in.

The wizard was slow with his hands and his wand. The book wound up hitting the wizard on the side of the head, at which he apologized meekly for not catching it.

As the wizard bent down to fetch the book from the floor, Severus looked at Draco and shook his head. This wizard was spineless. Instead of getting angry with Draco for being so rude, the hunched-shouldered wizard merely conceded it was his fault. With someone like this, it would be no time flat before Severus would be snarling at him or walking all over him. While Severus didn't want someone overly aggressive either, having a co-worker who was a milquetoast was a recipe for disaster.

The candidate picked up the book and transfigured it into a frying pan.
"How imaginative," Draco drawled without concealing his boredom.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Wells," Severus said perfunctorily. "We will owl you over the coming weeks with our decision. Good day."

Severus no longer acknowledged the wizard sitting across from him as he put his head down to make some more marks in his ledger.

Not everyone was an incompetent wet blanket or an overly cheerful twat. There were a few who were very talented. It just happened that they also had a demanding and bossy demeanor, not understanding this was Severus' business and that this person would be not only his co-worker, but his employee, handling bookings, appointments and some of the transactions on behalf of Severus. Severus and all those candidates so far instantly abraded each other's nerves, their personalities clashing from the start of the interview.

After two weeks of interviews, Severus and Draco conceded that he may have to hire for two positions – someone to act as receptionist and office manager, and someone separate to do just tutoring, since finding someone capable in both capacities and tolerable was an insurmountable feat.

Even with the creation of two new positions, none of the prior candidates they had interviewed would have fit the job of just a tutor for Transfiguration and Charms, or just office manager. If they had the talent, Severus could not tolerate the witch or wizard personally.

In the next issue of the local *The Daily Times & Tides*, and other prominent papers in major U.S. cities, Severus put in an ad for an office manager/receptionist, in addition for another call for candidates for the position of Charms and Transfiguration tutor.

The following Monday, Severus and Draco had several interviews lined up. Both were already quite exasperated and hoped this wasn't going to be another two weeks of annoying gits and belligerent arses bumbling into Severus' shop looking for a job they were obviously not qualified for. They also hoped for someone that Severus would not try to poison after the first month of working together.

As the first candidate for office manager walked in at eight on the button, Severus looked up from his desk. There in the doorway to his office stood a middle-aged woman with snow in her salt-and-pepper hair, shucking off her cloak that was also lightly dusted with snow.
"Sorry I'm a bit late," the slightly overweight witch said.

Severus looked at his clock. She was punctual. "Actually, you're right on time."

Shaking her head, she admitted, "I wanted to be here a few minutes early, but Portkeys out of Chicago were delayed because of an early snowstorm for the season. Why snow would have an effect on the timely operation of Portkeys is beyond me, since it's all indoors, but I digress. I'm Pat Vallier, I'm here to interview for the position of receptionist and office manager."

Pat stood and offered her hand across Severus' desk to shake. Severus stood to shake her hand as he introduced himself, noticing Pat had discreetly spelled away all the snow and water she'd tracked in.

Just then, Draco came into Severus' office. "Sorry I'm late. Ginny kept me up half the night." Noticing the woman there, he stood back regarding her coolly. She had a bearing similar to Molly Weasley, which – given his relationship with his mother-in-law – made him a bit standoffish.

"Hi, I'm Pat Vallier," she said with a sincere smile, offering her hand to Draco, which he shook with some reluctance. "Ginny, is she your daughter?" she asked.

"My wife, second trimester," he corrected her, a little put-off for her forwardness.

"Ah, tossing and turning? Hips and back getting sore after lying on one side for too long?" she asked.

Draco furrowed his brow, but then smiled a bit. "Yes."

"If I may recommend, you might want to get your wife a body pillow that is about three-fourths her height, and about eighteen inches wide. I promise it will help with the hips and back, and help her and you sleep more soundly through the night – until her third trimester starts. But it's only a suggestion." Pat nodded with some authority indicating she knew what she was talking about.

"Thank you," Draco said, already warming up to this woman who had offered a very good piece of advice her first few moments there. She'd also left the final decision to Draco, unlike Molly who
had ordered her children around like pawns on a chess board.

Pat was there to interview for the position, looking for an opportunity to leave Chicago, unwilling to live another winter there, tired of the frigid, snowy winters and muggy, stagnant summers. It was only a week before Halloween and Chicago had its first major snowstorm of the season already. It was a little early for so much snowfall, a sign of a potentially long and harsh winter ahead.

She had brought her resume and letters of references, all giving glowing reports of her organizational skills, and her personable and professional demeanor. Even her current employer, who said they were sad to lose such a valuable asset due to her intent to move to a warmer climate, gave her high praises and strong recommendations.

Draco asked Pat about her office skills, to which she listed off some skills that impressed even Draco. While Draco was fairly competent about his bookkeeping, Pat also was well versed in Muggle and wizarding federal and state business taxes, something Draco had yet to acquaint himself with. Severus had not bothered to look into hiring a Certified Wizard Accountant for taxes yet either. Having an office manager familiar with business taxes would certainly be helpful to Severus.

Severus asked her a few questions of his own during the interview. Her personality was pleasant, yet not overly cheerful. She was professional, but not overbearing. She seemed to have the right personality with which to not annoy Severus. In many ways, she reminded Severus of Minerva, if Minerva smiled a bit more and had a bit more padding.

At the end of the interview, Pat thanked them for their time.

"Are you staying in town?" Severus asked, thinking he might give her an offer before she Portkeyed back home.

"No, within the next few hours I have to Portkey to Phoenix for another interview I have later today," she said as she looked at the watch on her wrist that buzzed, whirred and hummed, telling her many things besides just the time. "Then it's back to the office tomorrow morning to finish training my replacement. I promised to stay on board to train my replacement so my employer is not left in the lurch with things hanging and unfinished. Even though I'm leaving them, I want to make sure the transition is smooth and they aren't inconvenienced."

Severus was sorely tempted to tell her to not bother Portkeying to Phoenix, as he sensed no deception, but just an honest work ethic in her demeanor. Instead he said, "After Mr. Malfoy and I talk, should we decide to make you an offer, what would be the best way to contact you?"
"You can send an owl or Floo-call me in the evenings."

Severus hated Floo calls, getting down on his knees while sticking his head in the fireplace, but that would be quicker than an albatross from Hawaii to Chicago. Also, should Draco agree she was the right candidate, he didn't want to miss an opportunity to offer her the position.

They shook hands once more before parting. As they watched Pat walk out the front door of Severus' shop, just as the door closed Draco said, "I think you just found your new office manager."

"Let's see how the rest of the candidates for office manager fare before the end of the day," he said, hedging his bet that they might find someone just as competent and compatible as Pat.

"Well, here's hoping that we can get someone to replace me within the next week or two for tutoring," Draco said with an exasperated sigh. "Lavender gave me the plans and monies to begin building the new facility. Once we have a new tutor, I can take the plans to the town council and building department for approval, and we can finally break ground. I'm just glad that I don't have to supervise the construction of the new school too."

When Lavender decided to build her new facility in Malu Palekaiko, one of the topics that came up was an available workforce. Many witches on the island only worked part-time since they stayed at home tutoring their children. To have workers available for hire, Lavender was willing to pay a substantial sum of money to help build Malu Palekaiko's first formal academic school. This deal helped her negotiate the price down on land that would house the Lovely Lavender manufacturing facility, and cut down on the usual permit and licensing fees associated with such a venture. The new school would free up many witches who could work full-time while their children were at school during the day. Of course, Draco and Ginny offered a large sum as well, seeing that their own children would probably be attending the school, if they chose to go there and should the academic standards prove to be as good as Hogwarts.

The plans for the new school were to be decided on by the local town council and the newly-formed school's Board of Governors. Severus had reluctantly agreed to be a board member, given his long academic career and experience as deputy headmaster. He understood the requirements of the facilities and curriculum needed for a proper classroom learning environment, especially the Potions classroom.

As Severus and Draco interviewed candidates for the tutor position, they did not share details of the new school since those plans were still fluid. However, the right tutor might be hired as a schoolteacher, something they kept in mind as they interviewed.
'Rise and shine,' the ghostly apparition of Remus crowed, hovering over Hermione's bed, his face nearly in hers.

Hermione groaned, rolling over and pulling the pillow back over her head. The sun wasn't due to rise for at least another hour and a half, yet the night before she'd asked visions of Remus and Hagrid to wake her up.

She still wasn't fully convinced that those two apparitions were ghosts, yet she wasn't entirely sure they were manifestations of her subconscious either. But she figured either way, ghosts or mental manifestations, she might as well make use of them, and waking her up was one way for them to be useful. Marf was usually too skittish to wake her up; on some mornings she was particularly grumpy, which is when Marf threatened to punish himself for waking her, though she had asked to be awakened by a certain time. At least with the visions of her old friends, no threat of self-inflicted corporal punishment would result.

The visions of Remus and Hagrid also had the good sense to know when to leave the room when she wanted to masturbate as well, nor did they make any comments about it afterwards. For "roommates," they were a fairly tolerable pair who kept her company and did ease some of the loneliness of being parted from Severus.

'You have a Floo meeting this morning with the owner of an apothecary chain in Iran in an hour,' Remus reminded her.

"Oh, fuck," she groaned to herself. She remembered it was on her calendar, but she was feeling a bit worn thin.

Hermione knew if she was only doing this job, she could handle it without a problem. The issue was that Hermione was also trying to be a full-time Potions apprentice and working on her Potions theory, learning her Code of Ethics book, revising for her Spanish exam she intended to take in early November, and working with Albert on the finalization of some of the new baby products they would be launching in the next month. Christine was going to handle all the press, advertising, marketing and sales of this new product line launch, but Hermione had to handle everything else all by herself.

There were visits to Ron and Lavender's to give her boss updates daily, but the blonde witch was under orders by St. Mungo's staff to keep it to a brief fifteen minutes, unless she wanted to risk a miscarriage.
Lavender was getting bigger every day. Hermione asked if she was carrying twins, and Lavender said she hadn't asked the staff at St. Mungo's whether she was or not. Since witches tended to have trouble-free pregnancies, except when they over-exhausted themselves with too much work like Lavender had, witches didn't need to go to St. Mungo's for prenatal check-ups like Muggle women did. Witches craved what the babies needed and they ate accordingly. Birth defects and complications during pregnancy were uncommon, and the only "birth defect" witches and wizards were ever really aware of was if a child was born a Squib.

After her morning Floo meeting with the Iranian wizard, Hermione had an inventory check to perform, and orders for supplies to fill out and owl. Then there was checking the progress of production, a check of the warehouse to make sure there were enough items in stock for all upcoming shipments, plus building up stock of various products in time for the upcoming Christmas shopping season.

It seemed there were enough wizards who gave their wives a jar of wart removal cream to warrant building up a supply for the Christmas crush. Hermione surmised there must be a few wizards who gave their wives such a present, and then must have made the trip to St. Mungo's Christmas morning to get a sizable lump of coal removed from their arses. The coal – or other sharp object – had been placed there by their wives, who had hoped for something under the tree that was a bit more romantic and less critical of their appearance.

Just thinking about the upcoming Christmas season reminded Hermione she had three more things to do in addition to running Lavender's company and working on her apprenticeship. She had to meet with the Weasley twins for a brainstorming lunch, have dinner with Viktor and Anne, and go shopping for a present for Severus in time to have it shipped via owl or Portkeyed to Hawaii.

Hermione had trouble thinking about what Severus would need, that she could buy him. He had enough money to buy anything he wanted now, including books. She remembered the Pensieve tour of his home – their home – and remembered that the Potions lab was stocked with every conceivable tool needed, and his kitchen was fully stocked as well, from what she could tell. She had no idea what books Severus had bought since giving that memory to her, so there was no way to tell if she would be giving him a duplicate book or not, if a book was what she was going to give him. Maybe a stroll along Diagon Alley or one of the smaller side streets would present a source of inspiration.

The twins were also looking towards the upcoming Christmas shopping season as well. They were quite eager to sit down and get a witch's perspective for items to sell, preferably from one as creative as Hermione.

In order to save time, as her schedule was rather full, Hermione asked the twins to come to her office where the company house-elves would serve lunch. Since the weather was getting cooler, she had the house-elves fix a slightly heartier fare for lunch.
As Fred and George sat down to the luncheon service set up in Lavender's office, shaking out their napkins before laying them across their laps, George cooed, "Quite the spread, Hermione. Are you sure you're not trying to butter us up for something you want from us instead of us pilfering you for ideas, with a cut of the royalties, of course?"

"No, nothing of the sort. Just trying to be a good host. And considering how long I've put off this luncheon, I figured I should make a good effort to make up for the delay," Hermione merely noted as she took a sip of sparkling pumpkin juice. She wished she could have a glass of wine instead, but knew if she did, she would probably want to nap on the couch that afternoon instead of talking with the goblin accountant about the increase in supply costs. There was still a lot work to be done after lunch.

The twins were drinking red wine, given that Hermione had ordered the house-elves to make shepherd's pie made with ground lamb, onions, carrots, peas, and a rich lamb stock gravy. She remembered shepherd's pie was a particular favorite dish of the twins, and she decided to use lamb, since Severus preferred lamb to beef in the dish.

"So, as we were saying, we're fine on the joke gifts and all, but we really need something new to add to The Sirens' Secret store for the holidays. We have those portable rendezvous that we're making like crazy," Fred said. "There's the Tropical Paradise – you got the prototype. There is the Arabian Nights Splendor – Draco was able to go into great detail about it."

"No doubt a byproduct of Ginny's belly dancing," George added.

Fred continued on, "The Japanese Serenity Tea Garden, though where Draco got that idea, I'll never know."

"They have an authentic Japanese garden at their house in Malu Palekaiko," Hermione offered, explaining the inspiration of that idea without going into further details. Hermione smiled to herself, recalling the way Ginny told her about how Draco had once transformed his flat into a Japanese garden for her.

"Gin never mentioned that." George said, picking up where his brother left off. "There is the Italian Loggia that includes a small orange orchard; the Snowy Swiss Chalet – skis not included; the Fern Grotto with a waterfall similar to yours; the Indian Raja Palace; and the Grecian Temple with a virgin sacrifice altar," he said with an exaggerated lascivious look, indicating the only blood to be spilt on that altar was someone's maidenhead – if it hadn't already been taken long before.
"It would be better if you had the temple dedicated to Aphrodite or Eros," she said absentmindedly, remembering her final Greek Potion exam. "Actually, the Aztec were much more into the virgin sacrifice than the Greeks. It was Romans who were into orgies."

"Oh, there's a thought for a newly renovated version," Fred said in earnest.

"I meant to ask, if I plucked a flower from the tropical version you made for me, would a new flower grow in its place?" Hermione asked, having forgotten to owl the twins about it earlier.

Around a mouthful of mash and gravy, George answered, "Yes, but the flower, once plucked and outside the confines of the enclosure, will disappear. So if you pluck a flower and put the environment away, the flower will merely dissolve into nothingness."

Hermione nodded, impressed. Then, seeing the question about to be asked in their eyes, she said, "Yes, it was absolutely brilliant. I am positively stunned. What a masterpiece! I felt like I had gone somewhere lush and tropical, all while still in the confines of my own flat."

"Yes, but was it romantic? That was one of the stipulations of the order Draco told us from that 'unknown' person," Fred said with a waggle of his brows.

Hermione smiled and sighed wistfully. Closing her eyes, she recalled, "It was wonderfully romantic. I could almost imagine Severus there with me."

It was a very sudden way of revealing to the twins that Severus was her "boyfriend," but given how they liked to surprise people with their jokes, she figured they could deal with a little surprise of their own.

Fred and George both started laughing, which earned a stern glare from Hermione. "Sucks that your boyfriend has the same first name as that greasy git who taught us Potions at Hogwarts," Fred said as he gave Hermione a pitiful stare in return.

Picking up her sparkling pumpkin juice elegantly in one hand while studying the bubbles that trailed up the sides of the flute, she casually replied, "I hope you won't be making any disparaging remarks about his last name, since it's the same last name of that former professor you are belittling."
Hermione hadn't meant to time that bit of news when the twins were both taking a sip of wine, but she was pleased nonetheless when they both simultaneously choked on it.

"You and Snape?" Fred asked, his eyes nearly bugging out of his head.

"Oh man, if Ron ever finds out—" George began, but was cut off by Hermione.

"Ron knows. As long as I'm happy, and Severus loves me back equally, Ron is happy for me." Hermione took a sip and gave them both a meaningful look, daring them to continue ridiculing Severus.

George leaned forward with a conspiratorial look on his face. "So, I know you're not the type to kiss and tell, but..."

Hermione sat back and raised her brows questioningly, purposefully pretending to be obtuse. "Yes?"

"Well?" Fred prodded her. He tilted his head jerkily sideways to imply what he wasn't going to say for fear of getting hexed by her.

George was right. Hermione was not the type to kiss and tell. She coolly looked at them, trying to keep her face impassive. She wished Severus was there, for he always had an elegant and cutting retort to such a personal question. Ginny had told her about those who had tried to get him to reveal who he was secretly attached to. Eventually, half of Malu Palekaiko found out about Hermione, though Severus had tried to be discreet about it.

Instead, she stuck with the pat answer. In clipped tones, she replied, "It's none of your business."

"Worse than Ron? Wow, completely not surprised," Fred goaded her into revealing otherwise.

Hermione narrowed her eyes, knowing what they were trying to do. She could have said something to the effect that two Slytherins had stolen the wives away from two Gryffindor wizards, thus attesting to the lack of sexual prowess of Gryffindor men. However, she didn't want to disparage Harry, nor publicly admit that she and Ron were not sexually compatible.
The best she could muster for a diplomatic and tasteful answer off the top of her head was, "You can think whatever you want." She waited a beat before adding, "No matter how completely wrong your assumption is."

Of course she wasn't going to let the twins cast aspersions against Severus' talent as something other than an über sex god, so she did it as delicately as possible.

Fred coughed and George laughed before asking Hermione for new product ideas she could suggest herself, wanting to move onto a new topic. The twins were unwilling to entertain thoughts of Professor Snape fucking Hermione until lost in wild throes of passion, though they were the ones who had asked.

She suggested floating kissing balls of mistletoe that could be charmed to various settings: follow a particular person, seek and hover over a specific or random couple, or randomly hover about a room. Upon asking about the other portable rendezvous the twins had developed, they said they also offered, for additional costs, costumes to go with each getaway-in-a-box. Hermione suggested picnic hampers as an option, thinking about how that time she ate Moroccan food with Severus while blindfolded would have been even more romantic in the Arabian Nights themed portable rendezvous. Hermione knew Draco was definitely inspired by his wife's belly dancing to come up with that one, confirmed by George's comment, and finally understood Ginny's comment in India about him not minding wearing the turban.

Hermione came up with an idea for a variation of the edible body paint. Paint it on a wizard's cock and it becomes striped like a candy cane, in peppermint flavor. "What better way to entice a witch to suck on his candy cane," Fred exclaimed, liking Hermione's idea, but still having trouble imagining her giving Snape a blow job.

Of course, that product would fall under Potions, which meant that Hermione and Albert would have to work on the Potion together in time for Christmas sales. They would have to paint their own fingers to see if it actually worked instead of its final intended use.

The twins had already informed Hermione that they had a set of Christmas-themed vibrators, dildos, anal plugs, and other toys they were working on.

"We have one plug that is shaped like a Christmas tree..." said Fred.

"But it folds like a brolly for insertion," added George.
"Once it is in place..."

"It will slowly pop open!" they chorused together.

It was Hermione's turn to choke on her drink.

In response to the twins' lack of bounds for taste, she asked scoffingly, "What next? A full-sized animated Santa doll that when you pull his drawers down pisses champagne, or that Christmas 'Snowball' drink? And then what? It literally tosses you Christmas cookies out of its mouth?" Hermione suddenly realized that she remembered seeing a small table-top version of the pissing Santa drink dispenser; she was a child in a novelty shop on Carnaby Street, and was just as horrified back then as she was now that she just suggested it.

The twins just looked at each other, their eyes gleaming. They exclaimed simultaneously, "That's fucking brilliant!"

"What a great way to combine sex and jokes!" George praised her.

"Sublime, yet over the top!" Fred added.

"And please tell us about this drink called 'Snowball'," George added.

Hermione shook her head and figured if she was in for a Knut, she was in for a Galleon at this point. At least there would be Galleons as part of her royalties to make up for the shame of knowing she came up with that horrendous idea.

There were ideas bantered about that would require contracting a baker who was willing to do the work for anatomically correct strip-teasing gingerbread men and women, pulling off icing-made clothing. No longer caring about the bounds of decency, Hermione even suggested they could have the gingerbread cookies fuck for a confectionery sex show. Holiday theme flavored lubes were also discussed, which meant more Potions work for development, and the obligatory Christmas themed kinky costumes.

That topic made Hermione pause for a moment and delve into her own little fantasy. She was thinking of how Severus' physique had improved since moving to Hawaii. His body was a bit leaner and simultaneously a bit more muscular, as seen in the Pensieve memory he'd sent her.
"Where were you just now?" George asked, noticing Hermione getting a faraway look in her eye.

"Nothing," she flustered and dodged.

"C'mon," Fred cajoled her.

"Red leather pants," she hummed. Remembering Severus would probably rather drink a Potion brewed by Neville than be caught wearing a Gryffindor color, she amended her fantasy by saying, "Or tight green leather pants."

Just suddenly thinking of Severus in tight green or black leather pants was going to be fueling a lot of Hermione's fantasies during the next week.

As they wrapped up their productive lunch, Fred asked, "Just how old is Snape?"

"Forty-four."

"Wow, given how he looked, I thought he was already in his sixties," George replied.

"You'd look old and worn out too if you had to teach Potions yearly to nearly 300 students and grade their homework by day, then play spy and kiss Voldemort's hems against your will by night," she said quite somberly. "Not to mention, be Head of House to Slytherin," she added for good measure.

Fred's eyes went wide in remembrance of the bunch of prats, plus the strain of the war. "Yeah, when you put it that way, it would prematurely age anyone."

Hermione remembered the vision of Severus in the Pensieve from the last days of the war and how drawn and haggard he looked. He did look old for his relatively young age at the time. In the last days of the war, he wasn't even forty, yet he looked like he could have been fifty at the time. She wondered how Severus' skin was doing, given that most everyone who had gone through the treatment for ice pox he helped develop was peeling. They were winding up with slightly improved skin, much like the Muggle technique of a facial peel.
"Besides, Hawaii agrees with Severus," she said, waving her wand to Summon the photo of her lover that Ginny and Draco had given her. It was taken from their wedding, before he became trimmer and tanner.

Handing it over, Fred said in disbelief, "That's Snape? But he's smiling. And not maliciously?"

"He's in a floral print short-sleeved shirt? And those trousers aren't black. Obviously an impostor," George said. He scarcely believed this was the same wizard in the billowing black robes who had ruled the dungeons and Potions classroom.

"Believe what you will," Hermione said simply, not caring any longer what the twins may have thought. "When I'm done with my apprenticeship here, I'm packing up and heading off to Hawaii to join him. Lavender is opening a new facility for the Asia Pacific region. I'm going to run it, and Severus already built a house for the two of us to live in."

"What do dungeons in Hawaii look like anyway? A rack made with bamboo and coconuts?" George piped up cheekily.

Hermione threw a glare his way, knowing he was jesting, but eventually willing to give him a small laugh, as that did seem rather ridiculous. Then, becoming quite serious, she said, "No, I'm sure he used a nice sturdy hardwood like koa, and industrial grade jute for the ropes." She winked at Fred and George when they momentarily looked at her in shock, wondering if she was serious or not.

"So who else knows about you two?" Fred asked.

Hermione gave them a brief rundown of who else knew about her and Severus.

"And just how did you two meet up?" George asked this time. "Or should I ask, how did a Slytherin who once loathed you and most Gryffindors, despite working for the Order, get romantically entangled with you?"

Hermione was not about to delve into the sullied nature of their initial meetings and Severus' official daytime job at the time. She deflected by saying, "It's a very long story, and I have a lot of work to do. Maybe another time."
"Did that Delgado introduce you to him?" George asked.

Hermione thought that if she needed to come up with some palatable lie, versus the seamy truth, that might be a not-so-white lie to spin. But now was not the time to improvise a new lie when she had much work to do.

After bidding her former brothers-in-law good-bye, Hermione set her mind to work on her many, many tasks she had to complete by the end of the day.

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It was the Friday before Halloween. Severus had made the offer to Pat for the position the day after she was interviewed, and she accepted. Pat was going to move from Chicago over the weekend, staying at Justina's hotel until she could find an apartment. He'd been honest with her, explaining that there weren't that many apartments in Malu Palekaiko, or a house to rent or buy. She would be moving to Malu Palekaiko without her husband, as they had separated after their kids grew up, and he was currently living with mistress 3.0 in Boca Raton, Florida.

But even after a full week of interviewing over a dozen Charms and Transfiguration applicants, Severus and Draco were no closer to finding someone.

Business was busy for Severus once again. Commissions were up, tutoring was back in full swing, and Severus was experimenting with Miniature Man-Eating Masdevallia pods in a potion to erase the raised, scarred bumps from the ice pox, something that only happened if you scratched at the itchy lumps while suffering from the disease. Severus had a few spots on his arms and legs that he had scratched at while sick, and with his various experiments he tested to see if the new potion would erase the small, raised, scaly lumps that looked similar to a scabby wart.

Shipments of the Miniature Man-Eating Masdevallia pods were also up, as Severus wasn't the only Potions master out there who had the same idea. Blanche was able to raise the price, since demand was up. Severus was still helping her run her business and teaching Bailey how to harvest and manage the rare cluster of naturalized orchids. While Blanche and Bailey were both down with the ice pox, the orchids continued thriving, not caring that their caretakers were absent from tending to them for a whole week. Each member of the Condre family had their own small numbers of scars from the disease, and they let Severus have as many as he needed for his experiments. They were hoping he'd come up with a cure soon, since Blanche had a couple scars on her face she was quite self-conscious about, though she was not the only person who had some scarring in town.

As Friday drew to a close, some of his students who helped pay for lessons by doing menial work around his shop were finishing up.
"Did you scrub the toilets, clean the lavatories, and restock all the paper goods?" Severus asked Cyprien Jones, his new helper who had started that week. He was replacing one of Severus' original helpers, who had finally been accepted for Auror training in Seattle, thanks to Severus' instruction in Potions and a few practice duels.

"Yes, Mr. Snape," Cyprien replied, adding, "And the chandeliers have all been dusted, and had the wax scraped off and candles replaced. All floors are swept and main classroom mopped, trash bins emptied too."

"Cauldrons?" Severus prompted him.

"Thomas said he would do that while I took care of the other tasks."

Severus nodded. Thomas could be trusted to scrub a cauldron to Severus' level of satisfaction, stacking them in a way so they didn't tip over as well. Students had to clean their own cauldrons at the end of his brewing sessions, but often there were dregs that still clung to the cauldrons in the pores of the metal, or build-up that had to be thoroughly scrubbed away.

After checking over the young wizards' work, he dismissed Cyprien and Thomas, telling them to come in Monday afternoon since he had to change the schedule for an advanced brewing class they had signed up for due to the arrival of a highly perishable ingredient. Hoya seeds were viable for only a few days, and in some instances merely hours. The potion they were going to brew required the hoya seeds to be viable.

Knocking on the doorjamb to Draco's office, Severus asked, "Ready to lock up for the weekend?"

There were no appointments over the weekend. Severus would only come in to check on some long-term brewing potions, including a fresh batch of lacewing flies for his personal Polyjuice Potion stash, since he was getting low again. Pensieves and Polyjuice were a stop-gap measure to feed his need to see Hermione.

The rainstorm had just ended shortly before Severus locked up for the weekend. He and Draco walked two abreast on the damp sidewalk, discussing options for putting ads in foreign newspapers for the tutoring position, as they had only stuck with American newspapers so far. As they made their way to Bongo's, they heard yelling in the side alley right next to Flo & Eddie's Noodle Shop.
"Do you know the shit storm I'm in because of you?" a witch shrieked. Neither Draco nor Severus recognized the voice.

"Well, I don't know why you would be in trouble, considering I kept you out of it. You indicated you had no interest in helping me in the matter, so I did it all by myself!" a wizard yelled back. Severus and Draco recognized it as Jerry's voice, but never had they heard him raise his voice before. It was his strong, nasal New York accent when he was upset and excited that gave him away.

As the two wizards approached the mouth of the alley, Severus caught sight of the badge upon the short brunette witch's chest. It was a bright silver shield that said "Auror" that was pinned to the left lapel of her double-breasted Kelly-green tailored suit jacket with bright purple pinstripes.

"Well, because we were living together, up until the time you pulled that stunt then disappeared, they have cause to think I had something to do with it. Or did you not care at all? Not even a letter. What are you? A coward?" she grilled him, glaring daggers at him while she clutched her wand angrily, sparks starting to spit from the end of it.

Jerry casually slipped his hand into his pocket to palm his own wand. "Listen, babe. What was I supposed to do? Just sit there and let my father continue to get sent to the hospital time and time again? Not even my brother, Vince, could do anything. Last time he asked the precinct Captain for help, he got put on a shitty graveyard beat patrolling the Webster Projects." Jerry shook his head in defeat. "Captain was probably on the take. Blue wall of silence and all that shit. Pops told Vince not to risk his career with the NYPD, but I was willing to risk mine. And now I know my father is safe. Besides, weren't you the one who said you wanted us to take a break from each other for a while?"

"Yeah, but what about my career? I got stuck on administrative leave for two months." The Auror began to raise her wand.

"Is there a problem, Jerry?" Severus asked, having noticed Draco had run off to fetch Mounga from inside the bar. Severus already had his wand out and ready, given that this was an Auror he was dealing with.

The witch Auror looked Severus up and down. She could tell immediately he was a Potions master from the staining on the tips of his fingers and tops of his shoes. "I heard you shacked up with a guy. A Potions master. This him?" she asked caustically, raising her wand to point at Severus.

Severus cocked his head slowly to one side and carefully enunciated for emphasis, "Are you aware
of the protective magic of this sanctuary, Miss?"

Ignoring Severus, she turned her attention back to Jerry and snarled, "I can't believe you're fucking some limey faggot. I thought you were straight. I think I'm gonna throw up." She shook her head in disbelief that Jerry's sexuality wasn't strictly hetero as she had assumed.

Mounga came running down the sidewalk to the mouth of the alley, parting some of the other spectators who had joined Severus; he got through with the 'gentle guidance' of his large hands. "You must be Ari Strano." Mounga held his hands up to show he was unarmed. "I'm Mounga Finau, the town judge and a council member for Malu Palekaiko. I processed Jerry's request for sanctuary. Perhaps we can go to my judge's chambers and discuss this in a more amenable setting."

As Ari lowered her wand, so did Severus, finally putting his away once she put hers back in her holster that hung by the side of her hip. Like many Aurors, she had a second strap for the tip of the holster secured around her thigh.

It was then that Severus noticed that Arnold was nowhere to be seen. Usually the former Auror and the Japanese Potions master went everywhere together, including Friday nights at Bongo's. But tonight, even with Mounga coming from the bar, there was still no sign of Arnold.

Mounga, Jerry, and Ari walked off to the town hall, as there was sure to be a lot more yelling and private things to be discussed. This was no conversation to be had in a lively bar with a band playing songs in the corner. There should be no grievances aired for others to observe.

Now that the excitement was over, Severus and Draco followed in behind the rest of the crowd that filed back into the restaurants and bars open along the main street.

There was so much commotion and buzzing about the bar only Ginny and Rainbow noticed when Severus and Draco walked into the bar.

Bongo was so caught up in the gossip, he didn't even notice his regulars enter the bar or call out his usual "Aloha" to them. Bongo did remember to serve up Severus' usual old fashioned and Draco's gin and tonic, using his wand to slide them down to the other side of the bar where their group sat.

Severus looked about and asked, "Where's Arnold?"
Rainbow had that look on her face when she had a particularly juicy piece of gossip she wanted to share, but given how Severus had publicly chastised her for blabbing on, she decided to use a bit of discretion for once. "Trouble in paradise," was all she said on the matter, while raising her brows to indicate a possible lovers' tiff between Jerry and Arnold.

Severus could tell there was more she could divulge. She looked near to bursting to let it all out, but she kept pressing her lips together in a thin line in some valiant attempt to not open her mouth except to take another sip of her drink.

The band in the corner went back to playing music, a ragtime rendition of a classical Baroque piece. It was an interpretation Jerry brought the house down with a few weeks prior when he played it with more passion and virtuosity than the witch currently playing it.

Looking at the clock on the wall, Rainbow said, "I hope Mouna isn't going to take long. We have tickets in Honolulu tonight to see A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. Curtain is at eight."

"What was so hilarious that you had to buy tickets to observe a roadside incident?" Severus asked, wondering about her strange grammar usage.

Rainbow looked at Severus and blinked before she realized he didn't understand the meaning of her statement. Once her laughter died down, as she was the only one to find Severus' response humorous, she explained that that was the name of the Muggle musical theater production she and her husband were going to go see.

Turning to Draco, Ginny said, "Maybe we should go to the theater some time. We always wanted to go out to see some of the Muggle productions together in London, but couldn't."

Ginny and Rainbow, with Draco sitting there as a silent observer to their chatter, went on about the London theater district and productions. Severus didn't pay much attention to what they were discussing until he heard Hermione's name mentioned.

"My best friend back in England, Hermione, used to go with her parents when she was younger." Ginny stopped to take a sip of her grapefruit juice, which was the latest thing she was craving. "And for last Christmas, she got her parents tickets for a Muggle production called The Producers that opened in summer that she claimed they really loved."
Severus remembered how Hermione wished they could go to the theater during her birthday weekend, but they couldn't risk being spotted in public together. He could recall that black dress and how low it dipped on her back. Now that his name was cleared and she was divorced, he could take her out in public, and proudly walk with her arm tucked in his, promenading down the sidewalk together, no longer hiding. Severus wanted to take Hermione to the theater district in London, to have her dressed beautifully, to barely be able to concentrate on the production with her sitting next to him in that tempting black dress.

There was just one problem: Severus swore to himself never to go back to England ever again once he escaped. There was that promise to go back and end Potter's life, should he cause harm or trouble to befall Hermione regarding her helping him and Draco escape, and Potter did protect her as best as he could, though not quite adequately enough to Severus' liking. Besides, Severus had a business to run right now. He couldn't just up and go at the last moment.

Lost in fantasies of himself and Hermione dressed up stepping out on the town, Severus nearly jumped when Mounga placed a gentle hand on his friend's shoulder.

"You all right there, Severus?" the larger wizard asked.

"Yes, just contemplating a few things." It was the truth.

"Well, wish I could stick around and catch up with you, but I also made reservations for six o'clock at a Muggle restaurant near the theater." Looking up at the clock, he said as he put his hand on the small of his wife's back, "We'd better get going if we don't want to lose our reservation."

After they left, Severus made a point to remember to ask Mounga about how one went about making reservations at a Muggle restaurant. He wondered if it was something Naomi did, since she did a lot of work acting as a procurer and liaison in the Muggle world for witches and wizards. She even had a cell-you-lar telephone, though she said she had to Apparate to the Big Island to get any reception, something about a cell hall or tower and bars that were in the tower, or something of that sort.

Just as Severus finished draining his first old-fashioned of the night, Jerry dragged his sorry-looking ass into Bongo's.

"Aloha!" Bongo called out.
Jerry answered back weakly, looking like he had been put through the wringer. Bellying up to the bar, he called out, "Four fingers of bourbon topped with a shot of headache relief potion."

"That good?" Severus asked, glancing sideways at him.

"Worst fucking day in a long time." Jerry put his face in his hands and scrubbed it in exasperation.

Severus wasn't going to pry nor prompt Jerry to unburden himself any further. Clearly, Jerry didn't exactly feel like sharing his grief.

Once Bongo served Jerry his drink, the former Auror took a long swig and set it down before turning to Severus. "Please tell me you're still interviewing for that Transfiguration and Charms position. If you tell me no, then that would just be the perfect fucking hat-trick for today."

"Then you're in luck, for once." Severus caught Draco's attention and waved him to come over.

"What's up?" Draco asked, catching the look in Severus' eye.

"I want to interview as your replacement," Jerry replied.

"I thought you were helping Arnold with his Potions business?" Draco asked.

"You mean playing prep cook or plongeur to Arnold's executive chef?" Jerry shook his head. "I told Arnold I wanted to do something more than slice, chop, and pickle shit all day long. I told him about interviewing for your position today and he got all in a huff, going on about me owing him, and him expecting me to chip into the household. Which is silly because when I first moved in I offered, but he said no. So I offered to chip in and he still wasn't happy" He shook his head, trying to avoid going off on that unpleasant tangent and get back on track with his story, but not before taking another pull on his drink. "Arnold also views you as competition," Jerry admitted, looking at Severus.

"But you wouldn't be brewing Potions, you would be teaching Transfiguration and Charms," Draco pointed out.
"Exactly! But Arnold doesn't see it that way."

Severus wondered how wise it would be to hire a Charms and Transfiguration tutor who would be working in his own shop, yet living with his lover, Arnold, who was technically his competition, though there was very little competition for clientele. Jerry wouldn't be handling the office part, as Pat had been hired to do that, so Jerry would not be privy to what potions his clients ordered or how much he was charging. However, given the inherent secrecy of the craft, Severus was not so willing to consider interviewing Jerry.

Jerry surprised Severus by saying, "There were some things that came up during our argument – some relating to the position, some personal – but long story short, Arnold and I broke up today and I moved into Justina's hotel this afternoon. And I was going to head on over to your shop and see if that position was still open when I got yanked into the alley by my other ex."

Any reservations Severus had about interviewing Jerry had just evaporated with that revelation. There would be no risk of Jerry telling his lover about the confidential aspects of his business.

Draco stood up and behind Jerry's back gave Severus a meaningful look followed by the raising of one eyebrow. Severus gave a minute nod that it would be worth it to interview Jerry after all. One had to be fairly competent in both Charms and Transfiguration to become an Auror.

Lifting his hand up, Draco caught Bongo's attention. "Can you pass me a whole pineapple?"

Bongo used his wand to send one over to the other end of the bar.

Handing the pineapple over to Jerry, Draco said, "Transfigure this into something metallic."

Jerry held the pineapple in his hand, studying it for a moment, before lifting his head up and looking about the bar. "Hey Bongo, can I grab one more pineapple?" he asked.

With two pineapples placed on the bar, Jerry stepped back. Draco and Severus did the same, not knowing what Jerry had in mind.

With great flare, Jerry swung his wand about. The pineapples lifted up into the air and began to change, spiraling out into long threads or broad sheets of metal, affixing themselves to the walls around the bar. And on the other end of the bar top, a small anvil appeared.
The band in the corner had stopped playing and the bar patrons ceased their conversations to watch the ballet of movement above their heads.

When it was done, there as a small round of applause from the bar patrons. Severus said, "It looks interesting, but what is it?"

Jerry gave a sly smile and said, "I'm not quite done yet."

He then grabbed a handful of maraschino cherries from the bar top, He Transfigured them into metal balls before floating them up into the air into a slotted section that held the balls in place with a small swinging gate. At the other side of the bar near the anvil he'd Transfigured, he then positioned an empty bowl onto the counter, adjusting it minutely before being satisfied.

Turning to Ginny, who had come over to find out what was going on, he said, "Madam?" He extended his hand to invite her to set a row of metallic dominoes on the bar countertop into action.

Ginny pushed the first domino, which set off a chain reaction of movement. The dominoes fell, which then knocked the pendulum to swing back and forth. This action then set the gate to rise and fall, releasing the metallic balls in a set spaced pattern to glide along the metallic rails affixed to the walls. The balls moved down one side wall, then along the back wall and up the other wall towards the bar at the other end where the anvil and bowl sat. The entire rolling ball sculpture apparatus was configured in a U-shape around the perimeter of the bar, setting off whimsical vignettes.

Turning to the band in the corner, Jerry said, "Can I get a rousing rendition of the Anvil Chorus?"

Meanwhile, the balls were still running along the rails, in a series of vignettes prompting a metallic rooster that crowed, an alarm clock that trilled briefly, and a little row of colored flags that popped up.

Jerry held his arms aloft like a conductor, waiting for the right moment until he moved his arms, using his wand as a conductor's baton. The band struck up the main melody to Verdi's *Anvil Chorus* while Jerry sang.

As the balls reached their final destination, they fell off the end of the rails and onto a metallic anvil, bouncing off of it, before Transfiguring back into cherries in the bowl he set on the bar to
And with each strike of the metal ball on the anvil, Jerry sang in time.

"Chi del gitano i giorni abbella?
Chi del gitano i giorni abbella?"

All but two balls had made their way along the Rube Goldberg-esque contraptions Jerry had created. While waiting for them to come into position, he sang "Chi del gitano i giorni abbella?" one last time.

The last two balls fell as he sang, "La zingarella!" The last two balls struck in perfect time to the last two beats.

The walls of Bongo's nearly shook from the applause and cheers from the patrons. Even Severus was duly impressed and clapped, as Jerry had far exceeded his expectations. And what was most surprising is that despite Jerry's talent, he didn't brag about it, unlike some of the Gryffindors Severus had gone to school with who boasted and showed off their talent like a bunch of strutting roosters. Jerry merely nodded his head in thanks. This showed some sense of humility and reservedness, though Jerry liked to show off his musical talents at the piano as often as possible. The display was a bit of showing off, but Severus figured if Jerry wanted to make a good impression about his skills, he did just that.

Jerry finished transfiguring the pineapples back into their original state and thanked Bongo for the use of his fruit.

"Impressive," Severus conceded. "But how is your Charms work?"

Draco and Severus had been sorely disappointed with the efforts of some of their candidates to perform Charms in Severus' office. One of the spells the applicants were asked to cast was a Patronus Charm, and one candidate's raccoon Patronus had knocked over a jar of beetle wings. Severus called an end to that interview immediately. Some of the candidates couldn't even conjure a decent version of the spell, and it wound up sputtering out.

In order to finish the second request, Jerry walked over and asked the people sitting at the three tables along the back wall if he could borrow their tables and chairs for a moment. The people, wondering what Jerry would do next to thrill them, all got up eagerly and moved to the sides.
Lifting his wand, he said an incantation in French. The three tables and chairs rearranged themselves where the chairs moved on top of the tables. The cut-out scrollwork along the top rail of each chair morphed until it looked like a smile and twinkling cheerful eyes. The table-and-chair combo then stood up on two of the table legs, looking rather anthropomorphic. The table linens functioned as a skirt.

Turning to the band once more, he said, "Can I have you guys play Hell's Gallop?"

Once the band struck up the tune, often referred to as "The Can-Can Song," the table-chair figure began dancing a can-can on its own. The chair legs acted as arms, lifting the edge of the tablecloth as if lifting frilled skirts in a rapid display of high kicks in time to Jerry's wand movements. The bar clapped along to the dancing furniture until the end when the furniture turned around and bent over to flash its backside, flipping the tablecloths up.

Jerry ended the Charm and the patrons went back to their tables to finish their drinks, patting Jerry on the back, impressed by his skill. Walking back to the bar, Jerry looked to Draco and Severus, asking, "Well?"

Severus and Draco were fairly impressed, but had one last task. Draco said, "Can you cast a Patronus Charm?"

Jerry scoffed and said, "Yeah, of course. And?"

"May we see you cast it?" Severus said, wanting proof instead of taking him at his word; though by the skill Jerry had already displayed, it should be a simple feat for him.

Jerry looked down at the bar countertop and bit his lip.

"Is there a problem?" Severus asked a bit imperiously, sensing the former Auror's nervousness.

Jerry leaned over and whispered into Severus' ear, "I can do it, I just can't do it here or in town where anyone can see."

This piqued Severus' interest even more. Draco quirked a brow, wondering what Jerry had said to
cause Severus to look that puzzled.

"I know a place where we can go," Severus suggested.

Jerry nodded. Draco knew where the place Severus was thinking of, as he had been there recently. Severus drew a quick map on the bar countertop with his wand, casting a charm to prevent others from spying over their shoulders.

All three wizards walked out of the bar and into the middle of the street before Apparating away to Severus' small farm on the west side of the island.

It really wasn't a farm, it was still just a patch of wild tropical jungle that Severus had not gotten around to clearing yet. There were spots north and south of Severus' two acres that were plains of black lava sparsely dotted with low scrubby plants. Even though the lava flows were from a volcano eruption a mere hundred years ago, the land was still recovering. Before purchasing this piece of land, Severus was warned that this was an active part of the island where lava flows often reached the sea, as the island continued to build itself. Severus' farm would have plants that would be easily replaced, as he kept his rarer plants in his own home garden. Should there be a lava flow through his property, it would be easy to replant.

In the dark, Severus heard Jerry call out, "You over there?"

Severus held his wand alight and said, "Lumos."

Jerry found his way over to the clearing where Severus and Draco were waiting.

The waning gibbous moon had just risen in the east and cast its pale light on the three gathered. The nearest neighbor was a hermit a couple of miles away. There was little chance of anyone seeing Jerry cast his Patronus, he hoped.

"I need you both to make a wand oath you won't tell anyone what my Patronus is." Even in the pale moonlight, Jerry was looking quite grave.

Severus and Draco held their wands aloft and swore to not reveal it, no matter what it might be.
Jerry held his wand up and said with conviction, "Expecto Patronum!"

Out of the tip of Jerry's wand a bright light issued forth that grew larger and larger until revealing its final form.

"A dragon?" Draco said in shock.

There stood a silvery Swedish Short-Snout dragon Patronus, all twenty feet of it.

Draco staggered back and smiled, laughing, "Why on earth are you afraid to let anyone know? I mean, the former Headmaster of Hogwarts had a phoenix for a Patronus, and a real phoenix as a familiar."

In the bright silvery light of the dragon Patronus, Severus watched Jerry's face and understood. "You're an Animagus." The elaborate dragon tattoo on Jerry's arm made much more sense to him now.

Jerry dropped his wand and his Patronus dissolved into a silvery fog that dissipated. Spinning around, he held his wand up in a threatening manner and growled, "You can't tell anyone!"

"Does Mouna know?" Severus asked. Of course Mouna knew. Mouna gave Jerry Veritaserum while processing his request for sanctuary, and Jerry had spilled all his secrets to him.

"Yes." Jerry hung his head down.

Draco still didn't understand the gravity of the situation, but he could tell Severus was grasping it. "How did you know, Severus?" Draco asked.

"Because Animagi are rare enough, but an Animagus of a magical creature? Very rare." Severus knew immediately, because Minerva was an Animagus who transformed into a cat, which was also her Patronus. "What did they do to you?" Severus knew that there was some reason why Jerry was secretive about his Patronus. If it ever got out that Jerry was an Animagus as well, people would obviously make the connection, since an Animagus form and Patronuses always matched.
"The U.S. Department of Magic ordered me to transform, then snipped a little bit of everything from me: claw, scale, horn. Turns out that none of what they took from me had any of the magical properties they were hoping for. Just plain old human wizard bits. And when they weren't happy with that, they cut me open with not quite enough painkillers to take samples, *just to be sure* they claimed. I refused, but they said if I didn't cooperate in the name of 'research', I might not have the grades in order to finish Auror training. And I wanted to be a cop, just like my big brother, Vince, more than anything."

Jerry looked up at the starry night sky, tears nearly brimming his eyes, anger seething just beneath the surface. His voice slightly quivered when he added, "I could have stayed in New York and taken my lumps gladly for pulling that stunt on live TV to oust those corrupt Justice Department fuckers. I could have let them strip me of my badge, but I could not have them make me disappear so they could cast an Imperius on me again, force me to transform, and carve me up like some Thanksgiving turkey. Because they were so pissed, I don't doubt they'd have done that to me. That's why I came here for sanctuary. That's why I lost my career."

Severus held up his wand and said solemnly, "I swear to never reveal that you are an Animagus or that your Patronus is a dragon." Draco held his wand aloft and repeated the same words with equal conviction. Both their wands glowed and then dimmed a second time.

"Thanks, guys," Jerry said with relief, putting his wand away. "You are handling this a lot better than Arnold. That's another reason why we broke up. I made him take a wand oath today to not tell, then I told him. He said if I loved him, I would transform and he would just take a little bit for experimentation, saying that the people at the Department of Magical Creatures in New York didn't know how to test it properly." Shaking his head, he said with disgust, "Fucking slime-ball, piece of shit, manipulative, cock-sucking asshat, twat waffle. I should have known."

Draco stepped up to Jerry and clapped him on the back. "Well, it isn't a completely cocked-up day. You got the job."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to my betas, JuneW and Hope. You guys are awesome.

If you forget the photo that was taken from Draco and Ginny's wedding including Severus, here's the link to the "photo" from Chapter 75: http://atdlheabetz.tumblr.com/post/146318921950/anniversary-song-sung-by-david-cassel-the-ukulele
Art work by Deea: http://deevalov3.deviantart.com/art/Commission-estump-565122246
First snow for Chicago in 2004 was November 24th, but I wanted to drive the point that Pat wanted to get the fuck out of that town since it was before Halloween and snow had already fallen, October 30th being the average date for first snowfalls for Chicago. However, on September 25 in both 1928 and 1942, first seasonal snowfall has been recorded.

In England, a popular holiday cocktail from the 1970's was one called "Snowball." It supposedly has had a nostalgic resurgence in England. You can read about the recipe, which is lemonade mixed with Advocaat, and origins here: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-506196/Sales-advocaat-rise-40-cent-Nigella-declares-Snowballs-THE-drink-Christmas.html

In a plant catalog specializing in hoyas I had many years ago, the nursery owner wrote about the viability of hoya seeds being less than a week, and in some rare instances, less than a day. I'm sorry I don't have the catalog anymore, so I do not have the source of that information to share with you.

If you can't envision Baroque classical music played ragtime style, then I recommend you watch the YouTube video "Back Played in Lewd C Major" here: http://youtu.be/gPl_8tDkArM

In the 2004-2005 season A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum was playing at the Diamond Head Theater in Honolulu.

The Producers played at London's Drury Lane Theatre from 2004 to 2007.

A plongeur is a French kitchen term for a dishwasher/trash boy who might also help with some of the simple kitchen prep. But if you have seen the movie Ratatouille, you would know this.

If you want to see a performance of Verdi's Anvil Chorus, if you can't quite recall the tune, here is a Hungarian State Opera house production, complete with anvils on stage, set to start at the same point the band strikes up and Jerry sings, up until the 1:37 mark: http://youtu.be/yjMHCzoneuM?t=1m4s

"Chi del gitano i giorni abbella? 
La zingarella!"
Translation:
"Who turns the Gypsy's day from gloom to brightest sunshine?
His lovely Gypsy maid!"

If you want to see the sort of Rube Goldberg-inspired contraption Jerry Transfigured, you can get a similar feel with the one that they have out in front of The Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose. Here is a 1:30 minute video of it in action:
http://youtu.be/Jh3AG8Xlh_U
Chapter Ninety-Eight
"Facing Fears"

Disclaimer: Two stories diverged in written form,
And sorry I could not claim them both
And be one author, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in fandom AU;
Then read the other, as written by Rowling,
...
Two stories diverged in canon, and I –
I wrote the one less read by,
And that has made me no monies.

A/N: Disclaimer a parody of "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost.

Hermione got an urgent Floo call in the late morning on Halloween while over at Albert's doing her weekend apprentice work. Ron said he was taking Lavender to St. Mungo's since she was starting to get contractions. Having had several ex-sister-in-law's go through the same thing, Hermione figured she would have several hours before the baby arrived. It was quite a shock to both Hermione and Albert that Ron's head appeared in the fireplace while they broke for lunch, with the news Lavender had delivered a baby girl.

Albert promised to visit Lavender tomorrow. Hermione stated she would come over in a few hours as she had to finish helping Albert set the garden for a long winter's rest, trimming up the last of the brush and roses and raking up the last of the fallen leaves.
After swinging by her flat for a quick shower, as dragging garden dirt into St. Mungo's was just not good form, Hermione arrived and headed off to see the newest member of the Weasley clan. She brought some flowers which Marf had picked up while she was freshening up; Lavender was Marf's boss, too.

Hermione could hear them before she could see them. Rounding the corner, she saw many Weasley family members spilling out into the hallway, chatting excitedly. One of the staff was glaring daggers at them, shushing them as he passed by the sea of redheads.

When Hermione arrived, all the chatter in the hallway stopped. Charlie, who looked like he was fully recovered from the ice pox, was there with his wife, Angelina, and their children, along with Fred, his wife, Grace, and their three children. Percy and Penelope and their brood were there as well.

Fred came over and gave Hermione a hug, while Grace smiled and nodded, as she was rather busy wrangling their children. Charlie, Percy, and Penelope glared at Hermione, as if she was an unwanted interloper. Angelina held no grudge against Hermione and shrugged sheepishly, wanting to give her ex-sister-in-law a hug, but not wanting to get into yet another fight with her husband over the topic of Ron's divorce.

Fred put an arm around Hermione and guided her into Lavender's hospital room. Leaning over, he said quietly, "Your timing is perfect. You just missed Mum. Unfortunately, George had to leave, too."

"And was she all right today?" Hermione asking, her tone questioning her ex-mother-in-law's mental stability.

"Over the moon that Ron's 'real' wife has finally given him a child."

Hermione gave him an incredulous look. "Real? As if I was some imaginary or hallucination-induced wife she coerced her son to marry?"

"Right now we're all just a bit relieved she's finally come to accept Lavender is his wife, though she's still a bit twitchy at times," Fred confessed.

Hermione really didn't care what Molly thought any more, and she felt a bit of schadenfreude that Molly was still a bit unhinged.
Inside the room, she saw Bill, Fleur, and their gaggle of children surrounding Lavender's bed. She also saw George's wife, Florence, and their children who had stayed behind.

The new mother was sitting up in bed, her daughter in her arms. Ron, who was sitting in a chair, rose and gave Hermione a big hug.

"Congratulations, Ron. I'm so happy for you both," Hermione said with sincerity from the bottom of her heart. She handed Ron the bouquet of daisies, wood sorrel, and peach roses. The combination symbolized innocence, maternal tenderness, and joy; the roses' color was symbolic for 'congratulations.'

Ron was smiling down at Hermione, his eyes crinkling at the corners when he was just elated with joy. "Thank you. She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Bill gave Hermione a brief hug before making room for her to come sit by Lavender's bedside.

Lavender looked over at Hermione, a grin plastered to her face, looking quite exhausted, but thrilled. And still, despite just giving birth, she didn't have a single hair out of place, or her make-up smudged. Hermione wondered if she kept those beauty charms in place even while she slept.

Lavender reached out her one free hand that wasn't busy cradling Josephine in her arms and stretched it out towards Hermione. Hermione grabbed her friend's hand and squeezed. They both looked at each other and burst into tears.

"Would you like to hold her?" Lavender asked, once their tears died down and they laughed at the contagiousness of hormones permeating the room.

Even Ron wiped away a stray tear, moaning softly under his breath, "Bloody hell," before conjuring a vase for the flowers.

Hermione nodded and rose, taking Josephine into her arms with great care and settling her into her arms. "She's lovely, just like her mother."

That comment sent Lavender into a fresh wave of tears.
Compared to that time Hermione was at St. Mungo's when Fleur gave birth to her last child, Eric, the feeling was much different. It was not overbearing, nor did Hermione feel claustrophobic. Instead she felt at ease and without expectations. Without the pressure from Molly, she could relax and enjoy this moment instead of wanting to run away from it, dreading she might catch pregnancy as if it were an air-born communicable disease.

Hermione began to rock the babe in her arms. "Hello, Josephine. It's so very nice to finally meet you."

Josephine had the faintest hint of black hair on her head. Like many of the next generation of Weasley children, it would fall out and soon be replaced with red, blonde, or full dark locks.

The thought crossed her mind of herself maybe sitting in a hospital bed someday, cradling a small infant in her arms while Severus beamed with joy. Hermione suddenly didn't find the prospect of having children such a frightening and daunting prospect, if Severus was the father. Of course, they had never discussed children, much less marriage. She hoped maybe in time Severus would be open to the idea of children, if he currently wasn't. There was much they had to discuss regarding their future together, and talking about them in a one-sided Pensieve conversation or a lengthy letter was no way to broach such an important topic.

As much as Hermione said it would be very difficult to leave Severus, should she come to visit Malu Palekaiko before she was done with her apprenticeship, it was harder than not seeing him at all except in photos and Lavender's borrowed Pensieve. Perhaps in the spring, after Ginny had her baby, Hermione could visit. She would have to discuss it with Albert and Lavender at a much later time.

Hermione sat there rocking Josephine, who had fallen asleep in her arms, when Bill asked about her work and an update on her apprenticeship. Michael and Philippe were thrilled to see their auntie, and brought her up to speed on all the things they had learned and done since the last time she saw them, back on New Year's Eve. Michael was a natural garden de-gnomer, and five-year-old Philippe had displayed his first signs of magic.

Eventually, all the rest of the Weasley men and their families bid farewell to their littlest brother and his wife, congratulating them once again on the birth of Josephine. Once they were gone, it was just mother, father, daughter, and Hermione left in the room. Hermione heard one of the Healers walk by the room and sigh with exasperation, "Oh, thank God, they're finally gone."

There was a lengthy silence as Ron and Lavender watched Hermione cradle Josephine in her arms.
With great awkwardness, Ron began trying to put into words a question he never thought he'd ever ask. "So, you and Snape: Are you two planning on having kids one day?"

Ron's question was in no way delivered with the same pressure or harping his mother had done when they were married. It was just a question meant to satisfy his curiosity. There was nothing derogatory in the way he said it, as if Snape was just another common wizard. It was delivered with simple sincerity.

Suddenly, Hermione felt the tears brimming at her eyes. Hearing Ron ask the question changed it from some abstract thought she entertained into a burning need to know herself.

She had wanted to ask Severus that very same question for months now. There was still so much to say to each other. The gaping hole in her heart ripped open anew, feeling as fresh as the day Severus Portkeyed away out of her life.

Shaking her head, she held up Josephine for Ron to take from her, before she crumpled upon herself. Sobbing, she choked out, "I don't know. There were a lot of things we were supposed to talk about, but didn't." She didn't have to explain to them why things were left unsaid.

Lavender held out her hand once more, this time in support, tears falling in silent sympathy for her friend. Hermione took her hand gratefully, thankful there was someone who could understand her heartbreak.

"Maybe after I come back from maternity leave, we can arrange some time for you to go see him. It'll also give you a chance to check up on the construction and report back to me," Lavender offered.

Hermione lifted her head up. Through hopeful tear-streaked eyes, she said, "I was going to ask for the same thing, but I was going to wait until after you came back from maternity leave and things settled down. Maybe in the spring." Hermione laughed a bit over the fact they had both thought the same thing, and that now her heart didn't feel quite so heavy.

As long as the Fates didn't pull another cruel stunt, Hermione hoped to see Severus in April. If Hermione could survive a whole eleven months without Severus, though at times she thought she could not make it another night being parted from him, she could last five more months.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~
Severus finally had his old frock coat and trousers altered to fit him properly once again, given how he’d gained a little in the shoulder and chest with swimming, and lost a couple inches from his waist. It was a pity his first chance to wear them was for a funeral.

Matt, the surfing Muggle with the two-seater surrey bicycle – who had helped Severus go home after coming down with the ice pox – had passed away of a heart attack at the relatively young age of fifty-two.

Janine, who was once a nurse, was Side-Along Apparated over to the house by Lorraine, Matt’s wife. Janine had attempted CPR on him, but he did not respond. An emergency Portkey created by Halulu transported Matt over to a hospital in Honolulu. Unfortunately, the Muggle doctors could not revive him either.

Even in Sanctuary, some magical laws still applied. Using magic to heal Muggles was one law which could not be broken, even though there had been a few who came to Malu Palekaiko seeking sanctuary for breaking such a law.

Severus Apparated over to the cemetery on the west side of the island. It was located about four miles north of his farm. Ginny and Draco took a Portkey, since Ginny could not risk splinching herself in her condition.

A great number of Malu Palekaiko's residents had turned up for the funeral. Lorraine, Matt's widow, decided to hold the memorial service graveside.

While Matt was not a member of the town council, he was known by many, helpful, well-liked and one of the teachers at Muggle Camp. Many of his current and former students had shown up to his funeral to pay their respects to their beloved teacher. He was the only resident Muggle on the island who surfed, and was the very same surfer Severus saw surfing with Shark the first time he flew around the island Christmas Day.

Severus reflected on his own teaching career. He knew no former Hogwarts students, apart from Hermione, Draco, Ginny, and Lavender, would miss or mourn him if he had died.

As for the current students he tutored, he was treated and regarded much differently. His students here greeted him with a warm and respectful hello on the street, sometimes approaching him outside of his shop for a bit of advice to finish their homework on a part they were stuck on, then thanked him when he was done explaining. Even he noticed how much more patient he was with his students in Malu Palekaiko versus back at Hogwarts.
There was much to say about the environment affecting one's mood. Also, not being shackled to a position out of a debt to Dumbledore was a large factor. He tutored here out of choice, not obligation and guilt.

During one point in the service, some of Matt's students stood up and sang a Hawaiian song of farewell, sometimes performed at funerals. It brought a tear to Severus' eye, which he wiped away. The song was filled with the same sense of loss as that Scottish ballad that wizard in the ratty tartan and Tam o'shanter sang at the Hog's Head.

At the wake, there was a large selection of food, though people really didn't eat much. Grief is not conducive to a hearty appetite. Severus had brought a tray of Brie with assorted crackers.

There was a casserole Severus recognized as a donation from Tina and Manny. While Severus had been recovering from the ice pox, one of Tina's Muggle cousins – the same one he met at the wedding, with the chemical orange bouffant hairdo – delivered a casserole to his house, hoping to help provide him some food so he didn't have to cook that much while recuperating. It was the same chicken and green bean mishmash in some gloopy cream sauce he was given. No doubt, a family recipe. While he'd gratefully eaten the one given to him by Tina's cousin, too exhausted to cook while recovering from ice pox, he now avoided the beige and green melange at the wake.

Severus would have normally been happy to delve into the tray of lumpia or try some of the hummus with Afghan bread, but his appetite was lacking like the rest of the attendees.

The former spy had dealt with enough death during the war to fill too many lifetimes. Even after the war, so many of his former classmates and students, many of them Death Eaters, had wasted away in Azkaban, been given a Dementor's kiss, committed suicide, or starved to death; or were killed by Alan Parker's hand. Even those he knew who died and weren't Death Eaters, many of them died by the wand of a Death Eater, including his and Hermione's former co-worker, Marge Mallowton. All except Dumbledore, who passed away from old age, leaving this life to follow another grand adventure beyond the veil.

Sitting in the corner with a glass of cheap vinegary white wine in his hand, Severus was feeling quite pensive. There had been a great many things weighing on his mind as of late.

Since Jerry was hired, Draco had moved on and was now supervising the planning of the new Asia Pacific Headquarters of The Lovely Lavender Company. The blond wizard was exactly where he wanted to be in life. His name was cleared, he was living in a beautiful place, married to Ginny with a child on his way, and working at a job he was much happier at than tutoring. Everything was as it should be for him.
But Severus, though much happier and more fulfilled, was still not where he wanted to be. He was still torn between two places: his home in Malu Palekaiko and by Hermione's side, as she was still back in England.

The words of Jerry's former partner and girlfriend spoken in the alley still rung in his head.

'What are you? A coward?'

Severus was scared of going back to England. He had suffered and fought too long to escape. He thought he'd never have a reason to return, but when he made his vow, he didn't count on Hermione coming into his life and turning his head, heart, and life upside down, and for the better.

He was no coward. Not anymore.

With Hermione's near-death back in July, and with Matt's sudden death, Severus realized life was too short and precious to let some irrational fear keep him away from his love. Draco had gone back to England and had not been thrown into Azkaban. Draco had returned. Severus could go to England and no longer be in fear of his former prison.

He was not like Jerry, where the authorities would eviscerate him and chop him into little bits for vengeful experimentation if they got their hands on him. Jerry couldn't go back home to New York for fear of his life. Severus was in no such danger, especially since Alan Parker had been caught and convicted, thanks to Potter.

Hermione had said in her latest scroll she'd penned in India her therapist, James Hoover, was helping her confront her fears, to identify them, to overcome them. Severus decided it was time he did the same.

At Matt's wake, Severus made a vow to return to England to see Hermione before she finished her apprenticeship. Severus could not wait another year or more for Hermione to finish learning her last two languages, Japanese and Chinese, to see her in person.

Of course, mastering Latin first had made learning Spanish a whole lot easier. Hermione had aced all parts of her language test, written and spoken. The brewing portion and text interpretation with hidden hints went off without a hitch. Severus had told her, during their months together, about some aspects of the Spanish language in Potions, given it was a second language he grew up
She remembered these little slivers of information he would impart as they sat on the settee reading sections of books to each other, or while he sautéed and she chopped in the kitchen, or as they lay in bed after making love when the conversation moved from tender sweet nothings into something more academic. They were gems of information which applied not only to Spanish, but to other languages he knew, since many tips and tricks were shared across many languages.

Albert would have taken her out to dinner Sunday to celebrate, once she finished all her Spanish tests, but she had to take a raincheck. There was another meal with friends she promised that she had been putting off for a while. Since she had lunch with the twins, she figured it was time to make good on her other promise.

A quick trip home allowed Hermione to clean up and change into something more fashionable, but not too formal.

Apparating to the front garden gate, Hermione saw the formal ironwork matched the formal garden in the front yard. It was very classically English in the neatly clipped arrangement of boxwoods, yews, shrubs, and roses in geometric topiaries, borders, and hedges.

Knocking on the door, Hermione smiled when she saw her old friend. "Viktor, it is so good to see you."

"Come in, come in!" Viktor welcomed her, giving her a brief hug.

"Anne is in the kitchen, insisting she show off some of her cooking skills she has been trying to master," Viktor said in a way that was equal parts pride in his wife's efforts and part warning that Hermione should not expect anything to be very edible.

"No house-elves?" Hermione asked, half-jokingly.

"Ve pay them. Some of you did rub off on me after all." Viktor clearly remembered Hermione's work starting S.P.E.W. and his own reluctance to join. "But Anne gave them the night off so she would not be tempted to cheat and use them in a panic," Viktor confided in her.

"Well, I'm sure whatever she fixes will be wonderful," Hermione diplomatically replied, trying to
be a good guest and assuage his fears they'd be eating over-salted burnt mystery meat.

"Hermione!" Anne trilled from across the parlor. She had just removed her apron and glided across the room to give her husband's dear friend a warm welcome. "I'm so glad you could make time in your busy schedule and finally have dinner with us."

There were a good many reasons why Hermione had taken so long to come over for dinner. Many of them good, and some not so good. They didn't bother to list any of those reasons, for it would have been too obvious.

"Thank you. I got your flowers after I got home from St. Mungo's," Hermione said, acknowledging one of the reasons she had not come to dinner before that night.

Viktor said quite somberly, "Vee are both glad you are okay now. But tell us, vhat have you been up to recently?"

Hermione accepted the aperitif Anne offered her and sat down on the plush overstuffed couch in the grand parlor where Anne led her. Viktor also accepted a drink from his wife before she poured one for herself.

"I just took my Spanish test today and now officially have completed three of the five languages required to be a Potions mistress," she announced with some pride in her accomplishment.

"A toast! May the last two be easier than the first three," Viktor said.

"Hear, hear! Cheers," Anne chimed in, raising her own aperitif before they all took a sip. "So what two languages do you have left?"

"Chinese and Japanese." Hermione gave a great sigh, knowing these were going to be the most difficult to master. Greek, Latin, and Spanish all had Indo-European roots. Chinese and Japanese were language systems she was completely unfamiliar with; they would involve new grammatical rules and characters, and learning to read up and down instead of left to right.

"If you master Chinese, then it will be far easier for you to master Hungarian, should you learn that language eventually," Viktor volunteered.
"That's right," Hermione said. "The Mongol hordes did get that far, to the gates of Europe if I remember correctly."

"Yes, they did." Viktor leaned back in his seat, and began to reminisce. "A few of my classmates at Durmstrang were from Hungary. They taught me a few spells in Hungarian and some of their country's history."

They talked a little bit more about languages until Hermione said, "Oh, I almost forgot. Lavender just had her baby two weeks ago."

Hermione noticed that Anne's eyes darted away nervously for a moment before she composed herself. Hermione figured that the topic of children was possibly a contentious subject in the Krum household at the moment, and she dropped the subject to avoid any further possibility of discord.

There was a small chime off in the kitchen, and Anne excused herself, stating that dinner would be served up shortly.

Once she was gone from the room, Viktor slowly shook his head. "It is still so strange to me, this arrangement you have with Lavender. Is this something that is common with Muggles? An ex-wife and the new wife such good friends? One working for the other?"

"No Viktor, it is very uncommon, wizarding or Muggle world. It's just one of those things that worked out this way. But I am happy for Ron and Lavender," Hermione insisted. "Ron and I just were not meant to be. Also, Ron and Lavender seem quite suited for one another in a way Ron and I never were."

Glancing over her shoulder to the door where Anne had just disappeared, she asked, "And how are you and Anne doing with married life? Well suited?"

Viktor smiled dreamily. "Very well."

Anne returned and announced that dinner was served.

Hermione would not say that Anne was a terrible cook, but she was no three-star Michelin chef
either. Nothing was burnt or too salty, though the rabbit had far too much sage. Luckily the sauce helped cover that sin, but the sage still came through rather strong. The choice of wine did help wash down the flavor of sage which now permeated Hermione's sense of smell and taste. Having a trained nose made one especially sensitive to overused ingredients. But she was a gracious guest and smiled, complementing the cook on her efforts.

Conversation was pleasant, and Hermione wondered why she hadn't set aside a Sunday night earlier to have dinner with the Krums.

"So, Her-my-knee. Vhen you owled me back I vas surprised to learn you have moved," Viktor said.

"Yes, after my divorce with Ron, I moved into a fourth-floor flat in the Red Ginseng, on Le Soleil Levant Mews."

Hermione's and Viktor's heads snapped to look at Anne when she dropped her silverware. The silver clattered and clanged when it made contact with the fine china on which the Lapin a la moutarde was served.

After a faltering meek smile and an apology for her clumsiness, Anne picked up her silverware with as much aplomb as she could muster and asked, "Really. How is your new flat? Do you like it there?"

Hermione heard the slight quiver in Anne's voice. She guessed Anne was trying to mask the quiver by pretending to cough and clear her throat with a large swig of wine. Hermione not only recognized that habit of drinking wine to mask the truth, or to blunt it, but in her mind the rest of the pieces in the jigsaw puzzle now neatly fit together into a picture.

At the Krums' wedding Anne avoided the table where Lavender was seated. In fact, Lavender and Ron were seated in the corner as far away from the head table as possible. The way Anne looked away nervously when she mentioned Lavender having her baby. And just now when Hermione mentioned where her new apartment was.

It all made sense.

There was a flash of understanding that crossed Hermione's face for a fleeting moment. Anne's eyes went wide with panic, pleading with Hermione.
"If you'll excuse me for a moment," Hermione said as calmly as possible. "Where is the toilet?"

Viktor pointed the way, oblivious to the fact his wife had turned as pale as the ghost that haunted their garden shed behind the house.

Rising from her seat, Hermione forced her legs to move and not shake. Her knees felt weak and would buckle out from under her at any moment.

Once Hermione reached the door to the bathroom, she just leaned against the doorjamb, happy to find something to hold her up.

Anne smiled sweetly to her husband. "I think I'll make sure she can find it," she said to excuse herself from the table. Then she disappeared around the corner from sight and down the hall.

Hermione stood there, her mind a flurry of roiling emotions and jealousy. She felt sick to her stomach.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when Anne came up behind her and whispered, "Please don't tell Viktor."

Spinning around, Anne's face was fraught with worry her marriage to Viktor would be in jeopardy if he found out.

"When did you last see him?" Hermione asked, both knowing who she meant. Ginny had told Hermione that Draco had gotten rid of his shagging clients long ago, and Anne's reaction told her exactly who at the Red Ginseng she used to visit. It wasn't Blaise either.

"About a month before Viktor proposed, end of September. It was when I realized things were serious between Viktor and me that I stopped going."

Hermione wanted to run to the toilet and vomit back up the rabbit that –she now knew – was cooked by one of the witches Severus was fucking for money, at the same time he and Hermione were carrying on their affair.
Stumbling into the bathroom, Hermione sat down on the Louis XV chair upholstered to match the exquisite custom décor of the room. She tried to calm her stomach by will alone.

"You don't have to worry. I won't say a thing," Hermione assured her as she tried valiantly to make sure she didn't regurgitate her dinner all over Anne's designer shoes.

What could Hermione say without damning herself in the process. Anne already figured out they had some sort of shared experience through a mutual third party. The look on Hermione's face and her reaction told her as much.

"Thank you," Mrs. Krum breathed with relief as she came in and shut the door behind her. "Is that how you found him? Working for Lavender? When you arranged your apprenticeship with her and Albert? Are you and he living together?" Anne had selected his gigolo name of Bob and never knew Severus' real name.

Hermione shook her head. "He moved out before I moved in."

There was a taut thread of silence that stretched between them, neither sure what to say without giving away or assuming too much.

Anne confessed, "I went to him before I knew Viktor, because I was tired of dating guys who would then just go to the gossip rags and tell them everything, while getting paid to spill our most private bedroom secrets. I just wanted to have sex without worrying about some guy using me or blackmailing me again. This was why I saw him. I was the one in control and wouldn't have to worry about him saying anything to anyone. He couldn't hurt me."

Hearing why Anne went to Severus didn't make it any less painful. In fact, knowing Anne's sole purpose for seeing Severus was for sex made it hurt more. Severus had proclaimed with his most fervent sincerity that Hermione was the most beautiful person in the world to him, but how could she compare to Anne? Just visualizing Severus making love – no, fucking her perfect body – made the bile in her throat rise up.

"Towards the end, I think he was just getting bored with me, just like all the other guys who used me got bored with me before they hurt me. Maybe it was good I stopped seeing him before he could hurt me, though Lavender assured me discretion was guaranteed." Anne sighed and sat on the other chair that matched the one Hermione was sitting on across from her. "Something changed over that summer last year. He lost all interest. He pretended otherwise, but I could tell something changed."
Now Anne knew for certain that her Bob did not call her "my peony" that one time he shagged her rotten, but actually called out Hermione's name instead. She could have mentioned it, but correctly surmised hearing about the incident would not make her dinner guest feel any better.

Hermione's heart should have soared with the news Severus had lost interest in a witch like Lady Anne and her stunning beauty, preferring the company of a plain Gryffindor, but it was of little consolation knowing what Anne and Severus did now. Severus had tried to protect Hermione from the truth when she asked about the other witches he slept with, and now she fully understood why. The heartbreak and surge of jealousy was close to unbearable. Whatever jealousy Hermione felt towards Anne had ebbed somewhat with her confession Severus was growing bored with her before she stopped seeing him, but not entirely.

Something had changed over the summer for Severus, and that something was him falling in love with Hermione. She knew this.

"Did he hurt you?" Anne asked.

Hermione merely shook her head as she reached for a tissue that Anne offered her.

She wanted to tell Anne about how Severus was no longer a gigolo, that he was happy and free with his name cleared, that he owned a little Potions shop in Hawaii, and that they were madly in love with each other, but she couldn't share any of it with Anne.

Hermione could not let Anne know who her gigolo was. Severus always wore his mask for all his clients to hide his identity, but never for Hermione after that fateful night of her anniversary dinner with Ron. Hermione would keep his anonymity for him, even though it was likely Severus would never set foot in England again. She would not betray Severus and his secret.

"No, he was kind," Hermione said, wiping away her tears. "Uncommonly so, when I needed some kindness in my darkest hour." And that was all Hermione said on the matter.

Anne helped Hermione put herself back together, providing her with some Lovely Lavender's Puffy Poof Eye Creme to make the swelling and redness around her eyes go away.

Walking back, chatting cheerily between each other more for show, Anne said to her husband, "She got a bit lost along the way. Took a wrong turn," to explain their prolonged absence.
Viktor knew how witches were regarding bathrooms. He shook his head and figured they were engaging in talk that witches can only do when they go to the toilet together in packs.

At the end of the evening in the drawing room, as they sipped Rakia, the Bulgarian equivalent to America's Bourbon, Anne said, "It's been very lovely having you over for dinner, Hermione. I hope you can come over to dinner more often. I can see why Viktor has cherished you as a dear friend all these years now, given I've had a chance to get to know you more." Anne smiled sweetly at Hermione.

Viktor patted his wife's hand, pleased these two witches had gotten on so wonderfully, looking like they were going to become fast friends. Anne didn't have a lot of real friends in the wizarding world. Most of those who tried to ingratiate themselves into Lady Anne Battenberg's world and sought to gain her friendship were attracted to her only for her fame, money, and ties to the Muggle royal family or to her husband. Viktor knew Hermione didn't care about any of that, and knew if she offered her friendship, it would be an honest and earnest gift.

"Yes, that would be lovely," Hermione accepted, though given her schedule, it may be only once every few months she could come visit.

Who knew how many more dinners she would have before she would leave England, once she finished her apprenticeship. And in Hawaii, she would never invite the Krums to visit. She would not inflict that upon Severus or Anne.

Chapter End Notes

At the time of this posting, I've received word that my mom, who has been in and out of the ICU since mid-August, might only have hours left. So if I don't post the next chapter next week, be patient, shit/life is happening and I may be busy.
"Confessions: Free with a Slice of Pie"

Chapter Summary

It's Thanksgiving, so Severus gets to learn about turkey, stuffing, heaping spoonfuls of guilt and hefty portions of emotional manipulation, a traditional Finau family specialty. Plus, proof why Luna is so awesome.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Ninety-Nine
"Confessions: Free with a Slice of Pie"

Disclaimer: Ninety-nine stupid disclaimers I'll post,
Ninety-nine lame disclaimers
Rowling own this
I've mangled some bits
One-Hundred stupid disclaimers I'll post...

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Normally, Severus would have been invited over to the Finaus' home for Thanksgiving, but given that Mounga's father, brother, his brother's wife and their two kids were coming for the American holiday, he was on his own.

He wasn't going to spend it alone anyway. Draco and Ginny invited him over. As Jerry was living in a rented house for now and he didn't want to spend it alone either, the Malfoys invited him over for Thanksgiving as well.

Since Thanksgiving was a foreign concept to the British witch and wizards, Jerry promised to cook and prepare all the fixings and introduce his boss, Severus, and the Malfoys to a proper traditional Thanksgiving feast. The Malfoys offered their home for the celebration.

Severus was drinking something called a Brandy Alexander, made with vanilla ice cream. It was a rich drink for such a tropical climate, but Jerry insisted that they try all the traditional things he grew up with in New York. Given that Jerry was Muggle-born, they were going to get the full Muggle American experience. The former Auror still had some friends in the Auror division in Los
Angeles. Through them, Jerry was able to get a broadcast of a Muggle American football game to pipe in over one of the Wizarding Wireless stations. Jerry insisted it really needed to be experienced on a television to fully appreciate it. Severus and Draco didn't understand most of the terminology and had little desire to learn about it.

Ginny tried to help with the cooking, but Jerry only let her stay in the kitchen to observe. He insisted on doing all the cooking, since they were gracious enough to invite him. Even Draco took notes, since he had been continuing to expand his cooking repertoire.

Jerry had brought over a centerpiece he'd bought at the florist, since the Malfoys bought all the food, with a list given to them by the cook. The centerpiece was a pumpkin-tom turkey. A neck and head and tail feather arrangement were attached to the orange squash. The center of the pumpkin was carved out, and a flower arrangement of asters, mums, and carnations in autumn colors filled the display. Jerry charmed the turkey neck and head part of the centerpiece not to move like they were charmed to by the florist, since it wouldn't normally move in a Muggle household.

Around five o'clock Jerry announced dinner was ready. The table was laden with a bountiful spread. There was a beautifully roasted turkey with a dark golden hue indicating a crispy skin over succulent meat. There were mashed potatoes with gravy, sweet potatoes with tiny marshmallows dotting the top, stuffing with chestnuts, roasted small potatoes, roasted squash, glazed carrots, green bean casserole with a homemade mushroom sauce and almonds, roasted Brussels sprouts, jellied cranberry sauce, rolls and butter.

"My word. You eat this much every year?" Severus asked in astonishment, now understanding Lucius' remarks about Americans being so fat.

"No," Jerry said, "usually it's one or two starchy sides and one or two vegetable dishes. But since this is your first year, I thought I'd give you the chance to try all the classics, since I wasn't sure what you guys would like. Besides, there will be so many leftovers, you won't have to cook for a week," he added, looking over towards Ginny.

"That will be nice, thank you" Ginny replied.

"Please, sit," Jerry said.

Once seated, Ginny, Draco, and Severus started dishing up food, but noticed Jerry was waiting for something.
"Normally at this point, my family would say grace." Jerry knew that religion wasn't a big part of the wizarding community, but he grew up as a Catholic, and it was still part of his upbringing.

The three others stopped and folded their hands in their lap, willing to observe a traditional Thanksgiving the way Jerry experienced it.

Jerry folded his hand, bowed his head and closed his eyes. Out of rote, he recalled the words his mother used to say at every Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner growing up. "Bless us, oh Lord, and these Thy gifts for which we are about to receive through Thy gracious bounty." He paused and added, "And thank you for my father's safety, and the new home I have found here with good friends in Malu Palekaiko. Amen."

Ginny, Draco, and Severus could certainly agree with the last addition to Jerry's version of grace, and joined in with an "Amen" out of politeness.

"Dig in," he prompted his hosts and friends.

Like the community potlucks Severus had been to before, he took a little bit of everything that interested him and he still wound up with a teetering plate full of food. He would definitely have to swim his full mile tomorrow morning to work off all that he had eaten. Severus nearly groaned when Jerry announced there was pie as well, but he promised them all they could let dinner settle for a long while before it was served.

As they all sat in the living room, silently enjoying the view of the beautiful tranquil Japanese garden, pleasantly full from a wonderful dinner, Severus broke the calm by announcing, "I've decided I'm going to England to visit Hermione."

Draco looked shocked, more so than Ginny. "What?" he asked, his voice rising at the end. "But I thought you swore you'd never set foot there again, once we were free."

"You don't want me to go?" Severus asked, feeling a bit aggrieved as he frowned at his friend.

"No, no!" Draco corrected Severus' misinterpretation to his remark. "I think it's wonderful, I'm just surprised, that's all."
"When were you thinking of going?" Jerry asked.

"Leaving Christmas Eve and coming back right after the New Year."

Ginny was the one who now protested. "But you promised the Finaus you were coming over for Christmas dinner. Rainbow said the kids wanted to have a proper English Christmas dinner, and you already promised to make the plum pudding. The children will be so disappointed, but if that's when you want to go, Hermione will be thrilled to find you under her tree this year."

"I've already made the plum pudding, so I can just drop it by the week before Christmas. Besides, Ginny, you know how to properly unseat one from its mold and make a hard sauce. I have faith it will be perfectly authentic," he assured her.

Draco put his hand on the shoulder of his mentor and friend. "Severus, I am happy that you're going, but you can't go until Ginny and I deliver you your Christmas present. We've gone through a lot of work to schedule this to come in, and we had to make arrangements for it to be brought in from abroad. And unfortunately, it can't arrive before Christmas Eve."

"Well, I intend on leaving Christmas Eve morning, since it will already be Christmas Eve night in London by the time I arrive by Portkey. Maybe it can wait until after I come back, if it's not here by morning," Severus said, not wanting to change his plans. He had mustered up the courage to finally go back, he didn't want to be delayed and have Fate possibly step in and keep them apart longer.

"Severus, we promise, you will get to see Hermione Christmas Eve, but our present to you is perishable and won't keep. It should come in in the morning, before nine. Just wait until you get it before you take off, promise?" Ginny gave Severus that same look she used when she wanted something from Draco. Of course it didn't work on him in the slightest, but he promised.

"Fine. And when you drop it off, I can give your wedding anniversary present. I would have liked to have given it to you for your wedding, but it took some time to find it and also I had to send abroad for it. You can give me my present, and I can give you yours before I go," Severus said, summarizing the itinerary.

It was all settled.

Just as Jerry started to suggest maybe it was time for coffee and pie, there was a knock on the door.
Draco got up to answer the door. All Severus could hope for was that it wasn't going to be another hostile visit like the one he'd endured when Lavender suddenly showed up on the Malfoys' doorstep and slapped him.

"Hi, Draco," Severus heard Akela say from the foyer. "Can we come in?"

Draco showed all three of the Finau children into the living room. All of them were looking quite somber, and Severus could tell that Kaimi had been crying.

"I was just saying it's time for dessert. You guys want to join us?" Jerry offered.

All three children nodded and shuffled off to the dining room.

"Do your parents know you're here?" Severus asked.

"I left a note for Papa telling him where we'd be. It'll be a while before he notices we're gone, since when we took off Papa, Grandpa, and my uncle were still yelling at each other," Akela informed him.

Severus had rarely heard Mounga raise his voice except to sing, but given his size, his booming voice and the sense of authority he gave off, Severus did not want to be on the end of that wizard's ire.

"Papa gets weird when he's around my uncle and grandpa," Iakona volunteered. "He is not himself."

"Well, no one can push buttons quite like family," Jerry said philosophically. Even Severus could agree with that, remembering how his parents would make him act in ways quite uncharacteristic to how others knew him.

"Well, what type of pie would you like?" Ginny offered. "Jerry made pumpkin, pecan, and apple."
The girls each asked for pumpkin while Iakona asked for pecan. All three of them took theirs a la mode.

As Severus bit into his own slice of pecan pie, having never tried it before, he nodded, liking the taste of it, noting the hint of maple flavor complementing the flavor of the nuts.

Out of the blue, Akela said, "I swear, I don't see how our father can be related to Uncle Papahi and Grandpa. They're both such assholes. And our cousins, what spoiled rotten little shits."

"Language, young lady," Severus warned her sternly, sounding very much like his professorial self from his days at Hogwarts.

"Why should I watch my language when few other words accurately describe them," Akela snipped.

"Ah, but you're young," Draco said jovially, a twinkle in his eye. "There is a whole vocabulary you have yet to be introduced to."

"Such as," Iakona prompted him.

"Such as, 'He has the effervescent charms of a troll with gastric distress and the warmth of a lamprey,'" Draco said with dramatic flair.

All three children bust up laughing at Draco's choice of words. The fact he said it with his British accent made it all the more funny to them.

"Or, 'With family like this, is it any wonder why someone invented the Obliviate spell. Being related to you, I would want to forget such a thing as well.'" Severus jumped in with a detached air of haughtiness. He'd decided this sort of word-play would cheer up the children and teach them alternative ways to voice this displeasure rather than resorting to vulgarities.

Akela and Iakona groaned with delight, knowing what a viscous, low blow Severus had dealt with his choice of words. They relished it, now contemplating if they could lay that insult on either their uncle or grandfather and not be grounded for over two weeks. For Akela and Iakona, even being grounded for just a week with extra chores would be worth it to see the look on either of their unwelcomed relatives' faces.
The two older children bantered about a few choice phrases of their own, until Kaimi said with
great seriousness, "I wish Papa was an only child, and it was Grandpa that died, not Grandma." The
Finau children never knew their grandmother, and only knew of her through stories from their
father.

"I sometimes wish that too," Mounga said, suddenly appearing in the archway to the dining room.

There was a collective gasp as everyone suddenly noticed Mounga there, not knowing how long he
had been observing their conversation.

"I hope you don't mind that I let myself in, Draco. Akela's letter said she took her siblings and
herself over here," he explained for his barging in unannounced.

There was an awkward silence that was finally broken when Mounga walked into the dining room
and sat down. "Your grandfather is taking a Portkey back home to North Dakota this instant, and
Papahi and his family already went back to the hotel. They're leaving first thing in the morning."

There was a huge sigh of relief from all three of his children.

"Oh, thank God," Akela sighed dramatically with exasperation in a way only a teenager could.

Kaimi went over to her father and hugged him, and he hugged his youngest back. This only
prompted Kaimi to start quietly crying with her head buried against her father's chest.

Severus was feeling quite uneasy being an observer at this private family moment.

"As a matter of fact," Mounga added, "I don't think we're ever going to spend another holiday with
them ever again."

This was a source of great news to all three children. Akela and Iakona both rushed over to their
father and hugged him fiercely, Kaimi now buried under one of her siblings in a group hug.
"If I may ask," Draco spoke, breaking the moment once he sensed the hugging part was done, "if your father and brother bring such discord to your family, why do you bother to invite them, or visit them?"

"It's a long story," Mounga said. His eyes discreetly glanced down towards Kaimi, indicating this was something she was still a bit too young to hear and understand.

Ginny stood and held her hand out. "Kaimi, how about I finish fitting you for your new belly dancing outfit. And then you can help me with ideas for decorating the baby's nursery."

Kaimi gave her father one last hug and went off with Ginny to another part of the house.

Mounga decided that Iakona was old enough to hear the tale. Akela had already heard part of it after she had her own outburst back in April, when her hormones were making her irrational and she called Severus an asshole.

Jerry offered Mounga a cup of coffee before he begun his tale.

Cradling the fresh cup of coffee in his hands, Mounga said, "I was not exactly the most well behaved teenager." He cast his eyes down and bit his lip nervously as he gave a chuckle at the irony of it, given he was the town judge. "After my mother died when I was twelve, things got more tense in the house growing up. Papahi was the perfect child who could do no wrong in my father's eyes, and at times my brother blamed me for things he did, though my father wouldn't believe me. My father was town judge at the time. And had you guys come to Malu Palekaiko when my father ran things around here, you would have found it a far different place."

Akela butted in with her own commentary. "Yeah, I've heard Grandpa was real strict, and tried to keep the Muggles segregated from being involved in the community."

"Yes," Mounga confirmed her assessment, "and he wouldn't even let them run for town council, unlike now."

"You changed that rule?" Severus asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yes. My father ran this island more like a penal colony. And if you two had come here back then," he said, looking at Draco and Severus, "he would have assigned you each to a one-acre lot
on the far side of the island with a warning to not come into town unless you needed supplies. And you would have had to make your own shelter."

Ginny grabbed Draco's hand and squeezed it, suddenly realizing the island wasn't always the same warm and welcoming paradise that she and her husband had come to know.

Looking at Jerry, Mounga said, "And you, despite your noble and good intentions, would have been treated little better."

Mounga heaved a sigh. "Growing up here, there was little to do other than teenagers playing with potions to amuse themselves, lost in a fog of euphoria, or screw around. There used to be a lot of teenage pregnancies back then. And because there was no formal schooling, there was little chance to make something of one's self and get away. Just like some Muggle small towns, teenagers entertaining themselves with sex and drugs to fill the boredom of living in a town with little sense of community and nothing to do."

"Muggle camp, the festivals, summer Friday night movies – these were all your doing," Severus correctly surmised.

"Well, there has been an Oktoberfest and a Pele Festival around for decades, though both were much smaller and less inclusive, but yes. And admittance to all these community events for the underage population hinges now on if they behave, given that some kids need an incentive to keep on the straight and narrow."

"Something you, yourself, had trouble doing?" Draco asked succinctly.

Mounga rubbed his hand along the back of his meaty neck before taking a large sip of coffee. "Put it to you this way, if I'd had the opportunities to keep me busy and entertained, and incentives to keep my nose clean, I wouldn't have done half the shit I pulled as a teenager."

Now Severus was really interested in hearing the rest of the tale. Mounga was a pillar of the community who commanded a lot of respect, especially from the older inhabitants who had lived here a long time and most probably knew Mounga during his teenage years.

"Like," Jerry prodded, his own curiosity piqued.
Mounga looked at Iakona meaningfully before answering. "Like hopping on a broom at two in the morning and flying through the 24-hour drive through at Jack-in-the-Box fast-food restaurant in Honolulu, ordering a bunch of food over the intercom speaker and then watching the look on their faces when I pulled up to the drive-through window hovering on my broom."

Draco, Ginny, Iakona, and Akela burst into hysterics while Severus' eyes went wide with disbelief that Mounga was the sort of teenager to pull such a stunt.

Jerry's mouth fell open and his eyebrows furrowed, suddenly aggravated. "I hated doing clean-up when little shits pulled stunts like that back in New York. The violation of the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy, the Memory Charms, the paperwork. Punks like you made my life hell!"

Mounga took another sip of coffee, looking repentant. "Yeah. I was bored and I wanted the attention from my father. I was also fascinated by Muggle culture, given that my father tried to keep it from 'tainting' our community. Needless to say, he tended to ignore how one of his own grandfathers was a Muggle-born."

"I didn't know Grandpa was biased against Muggle-borns," Akela said with sudden disdain.

"Not biased, but let's just say he viewed the Secrecy Statute as a means to exclude Muggle culture from wizarding society and island life, given how most Muggles are not privy to us." Mounga looked deep in thought as he added with a shake of his head, "He would not have let Matt be buried on the island. He would have forced Lorraine to go find a Muggle plot on another island."

A somberness stole over the room as they remembered the surfing Muggle's recent funeral.

"So what finally inspired you to fly the straight and narrow?" Severus asked, wondering what the impetus was to make Mounga change from who he was as a teenager into the wizard he was today.

"I ran away when I was fifteen," he admitted as he gave his eldest daughter a meaningful look.

Severus saw the look between them. He wondered if, back in April, Mounga had told her about this since she did not seem shocked at all, but Iakona, his son, was.

"Underage and on the run. Your father must have had a fit," Jerry said plainly with little sympathy.
"For starters," Mounga said, nodding his head as he became more reflective. "I made an illegal Portkey, went to Los Angeles, worked a bunch of different Muggle-type jobs, which I didn't seem to hold for more than a week, considering how unfamiliar I was with Muggle culture. Plus, I had to take off after I'd do something stupid, and then Aurors had to come in and clean up some mess I'd left behind when things would happen, even without the use of my wand."

Jerry shook his head with disgust. "We had a term for kids like you in the Auror Department in New York: Teen Trolls. Barge in, break everything, and leave a mess for everyone else to clean up."

"Oh, I am not denying I behaved terribly when I was younger, but at the time I thought it was a far more constructive way to keep myself busy. It was better than knocking up some teenage witch or losing myself in an endless haze of potions and elixirs. I Apparated into movie theaters and concerts, since I didn't have the money to pay, because I was in between jobs all the time. I even got to see the first Star Wars movie in 70-millimeter when it came out in 1977," he said with sudden great fondness.

Jerry, who was of the same generation as Mounga, gave an empathetic sigh, while the cultural significance and collective experience of the film on the rest of the company was lost.

"That's why I have movie nights in the summer, Muggle Camp, and the bands come in to play at Oktoberfest. I don't want kids pulling the same stunts I did out of sheer curiosity to go to Muggle events and cause trouble, then the thrill of getting away with it. And I've been trying for years to get the films for the first three Star Wars movies to screen them here, but no luck so far." Mounga heaved a troubled sigh of disappointment.

"Does the rest of the island know about your exploits?" Severus asked, wondering why Mounga was volunteering all this rather embarrassing information about his youthful follies.

"Oh, when I came back when I was seventeen, broke and without my wand, my father didn't literally pillory me, but he might as well have," Mounga said with a grave look on his face, remembering that time of his life. "Everyone on the island knew chapter and verse all of my misdeeds, since he put me up as an example of what happens when you let witches and wizards dabble with Muggle culture."

"Even Mom?" Akela asked.
"Your mother knows everything, and so does the rest of the island. My father made me stand up on the stage of the community center, drink a vial of Veritaserum, and confess my crimes, so he could show the whole town that not even his own screw-up of a son was beyond justice. He was going to make an example of me." There was a smile that curled at the corner of Mounga's lips, indicating that there was an interesting turn of events.

Severus and Draco both picked up on his sly smirk.

"I'm sensing that you weren't exactly locked away in the island's equivalent of Azkaban," Draco guessed.

"Yep. I knew my father would do something like that, so at the end of my confession in front of the whole town, I then said that I was willing to knuckle down with my studies for the next year, and take my SATs. If I didn't pass to go on to study law so that I could become a judge myself someday, then I would submit to any punishment he saw fit for my crimes."

Iakona sat back and whistled. "Whoa, Papa. You said that to Grandpa?"

Mounga gave a very self-satisfied smile. "Yes, and I got the distinct impression he didn't like the fact that not only did I pass, I passed with one of the top ten scores in the Western SAT Testing Division."

"What about compared to Mid-West and Eastern Divisions?" Akela asked.

"I was in the top-twenty when compared to Mid-West and Eastern Division scores."

Severus had become familiar with the testing and ranking scores of the U.S. National SAT ranking of scores, since he had become part of the Board of Governors for the new school they were building on the island. He was duly impressed by Mounga's admission, since over a thousand students took those tests each year nationwide.

"If you were so brilliant, why didn't you apply your great talents towards your studies from the beginning?" Severus arched his brow sardonically.

"Because my father had already said my brother was the brilliant one in the family and that I was the screw-up. At first, I merely lived up to his expectations and proved him right. But when I came
back, I did everything I could to prove him wrong." Mounga pulled out his wand and Summoned the coffeepot so he could refill his cup before continuing.

Severus sat back and looked at Mounga in a slightly new light. Ever since his wife's death, Severus had tried to do everything to prove he was not the same stupid, foolish boy who had willingly taken the Dark Mark. "This is all very interesting. Very. But that still doesn't explain why you force your children to suffer the company of your father, brother and his family," Severus pointed out, trying to bring Mounga back to his original question.

"As I said, I did everything to prove my father wrong. And I did." Mounga smiled at his children, but it was bittersweet. "But despite me getting excellent test scores, going on to study law, do my time as a defense attorney and then a prosecutor, and finally coming back to Malu Palekaiko to become town judge, my father still wouldn't accept the fact I did turn my life around. He wouldn't admit that I could redeem myself, or that other people who came to this island after making mistakes in their life could redeem themselves and turn their lives around."

Iakona jumped in, understanding shining bright on his face, "Oh, so that explains why Grandpa said you turned this place into a freewheeling asylum run by the lunatics."

"Exactly. He thinks that once you have done wrong, you can't be redeemed."

Akela jumped in, "I still think you should have spiked Uncle Papahi's wine with Veritaserum, make him spill his guts about all the crap where he did things then blamed you."

"Yes, but at this point, what purpose would it serve, Akela?" Mounga reached across and put a large hand on his daughter's shoulder. "Sometimes we have to let go of the bitterness of the past. Besides, your grandfather would probably not acknowledge the misdeeds Papahi did. He would merely notice that I slipped my brother Veritaserum in order to embarrass him in front of his own family." Most everyone around the table snorted at the irony that Mounga was not spared that indignity with the berating he received from his own father in his own house, in front of his own family.

"To hold on to anger and resentment serves no one, not even those who have caused you your pain. They do not suffer, you do. That's part of my approach when people come here for sanctuary. Forgiveness, as long as they truly are sorry for whatever they have done to cause them to seek it here."

Sitting up and looking at Jerry, Mounga added, "Well, maybe not in your case Jerry. While you may have broken the law, I can fully back you up on your course of action since it was a rather last
resort, and it did seem there was nothing else you could do to protect your father. And having him run away and close shop, it just means that others who would have taken over his shop would have continued to be hurt."

Jerry nodded very somberly in agreement, since he had searched every option and was left with only one moral course of action to take.

Turning back to Severus, Mounga said, "I have tried to prove to my father time and time again that I have become the upstanding citizen and model to the community he always admonished me to become, but he still sees the boy seeking love and attention from an emotionally distant father who played favorites between children. I now see, after the way he and my brother behaved tonight, and especially to Rainbow and my own children, nothing can ever change their minds. I forgive them, but I won't forget what they've done. So no more contact with them, no more holiday dinners filled with screaming and tears, no more visits to or from them. I love them; they are family, and I will always love them, but I do not like them."

Jerry raised his coffee mug and said, "Amen. You can pick your friends, but you can't pick your family."

Severus, Draco, and Ginny could all empathize with Jerry's assessment of family versus friends.

Iakona lifted his half-full glass of milk and said, "To the family we choose to have, not obligated to by blood."

Severus thought that was a very astute and wise thing for such a young wizard to say, and he lifted his own cup of coffee, having been chosen by Mounga's family to become a part of theirs. "To the family of our own choosing."

Everyone lifted their glasses and mugs and clinked them.

The mood had lightened considerably until Akela said, "Uncle Severus?"

Severus turned to acknowledge her with a raised brow as his mouth was busy sipping his coffee.

"I remember the morning after Papa had granted you sanctuary. I distinctly remember sitting at the table having breakfast when you walked in looking dog-tired," she recalled, turning to look at her
father. "And you said, *There, but before the grace of God, go I.*" Turning back to Severus she said, with great care to be respectful, "I know it's none of my business why you came and I'm not supposed to ask, but was my father's experience similar to yours?"

Severus' face became calmly impassive. His face was a blank canvas, and Akela slightly recoiled at the sight of all warmth draining from him with her question, as if he was a book that had closed.

Mounga, knowing Severus' whole history and seeing the discomfort his friend was feeling towards his daughter's question, decided to answer her question while honoring his oath to reveal nothing. "Akela, you know that it is up to Severus if he chooses to share any part of his past or why he came here. You know that you should not prompt him, as that is discourteous, but I can understand your wanting to understand what I said in context." Mounga's eyes flitted towards Severus' briefly before he looked back at his daughter's.

"Each person's journey is unique despite all of us coming to the same destination," Mounga continued. "Some of us reach the bounds of extremes before returning towards a safer path. My journey went in such a way that I practically eschewed all wizarding life and culture. But just as easily, had I some of the same experiences as Severus, I could have easily been drawn in other directions. His experiences are his own; they make him who he is, just as Draco's and Ginny's are their own, as well as Jerry's. One day they may share, or they may never. But if one day you grow up and stay here and become a town council member, and process those who seek sanctuary, then you will have to listen without judgment just as I have done, and as do Halulu and Gary."

Draco reached out and patted Akela's hand. "There are things I have done I am not proud of, but the fact is, I made my own mistakes when I was young, and then I grew up and moved past them. I realized they were the wrong choices – though in some ways I didn't have much of a choice," he added in a sotto voce voice. "You don't have to know our pasts to appreciate the people that we are now."

Akela turned to Severus and said, "I'm sorry for being nosy like that, Uncle Severus. It's just that phrase sort of stuck in my mind all this time and has been bugging me."

He could not begrudge the girl wanting to know more about his past in relation to that phrase, but would have preferred it if she had brought it up in private, especially without her brother or Jerry in the room.

"The matter is settled. Let's talk about something pleasant, like this New Year's Eve Ball Draco mentioned earlier," Severus said to change the topic, even though he wouldn't be around to attend it, instead looking forward to ringing in the New Year with Hermione, with champagne and lots of kissing.
Severus could have said something to Akela about curiosity killing the cat to stem her inquisitiveness, but decided the cold look he'd given her was warning enough not to broach the subject again.

Thinking of cats, he would have to make sure he asked Jerry to pack up the roasted turkey giblets that didn't get incorporated into the gravy, so he would have a treat for the cat back home.

Coming back into the greenhouse with the loppers slung over her shoulder after she'd finished trimming the fruit trees and maples for the winter, Hermione spotted the couple in a tender moment.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I'll come back later," Hermione stammered. She tried to make a quick exit, embarrassed to have come across Neville and Luna snogging.

A few months after Hermione and Neville's regretful interlude, Neville and Luna had started dating again. There were a few times where the blatantly honest blonde witch had stopped by on Saturdays to bring her beau lunch and greeted Hermione, but Hermione still felt guilty over the moment of weakness in Neville's arms, and bed, and tried to remove herself from Luna's company as often as possible.

"Hermione, your timing is perfect. Neville and I were just about to go find you," Luna said with all the sincere sweetness that pervaded her personality.

"I was just going to drop off these loppers and then head home," she said, unable to look Luna in the eye.

"Hermione, there is nothing to be embarrassed about," Luna said plainly as she reached out to stop Hermione from practically throwing the loppers on the ground and bolting from their presence.

Hermione and Neville had been very professional with each other since that June evening, but the warmth and camaraderie that was once between them was lost, the void filled with a stilted awkwardness.

"I'm not embarrassed, though what I'm supposed to be embarrassed about, I'm not quite sure," she tried to say, but came out sounding more awkward.
Still holding onto Neville's hand, Luna grasped Hermione's with the other. "It's okay. Neville told me about you and him having sex last summer. And I'm fine with that. Neville and I were not together at the time, but Neville did tell me why he brought you into his bed."

Hermione had talked very openly about sex with Severus and even with Ginny somewhat, but Hermione was not exactly close to Luna, and here the blonde was discussing it with a frank manner as if it were a current event. In some ways, Luna's ability to talk about that which was difficult for others, including death and other somewhat taboo subjects with a clarity and unabashedness, is what made Hermione love Luna as a friend. She suddenly wished she spent more time to become better friends with Luna over the years, since she had an insight that was unparalleled and she was always honest.

Mustering the courage to get past his nervousness around Hermione, that had grown since that night together, Neville said, "Back in August I told Luna that I had tried to find something to fill the space in my heart left by her, and even though I tried to fill it with you, despite our friendship and what a lovely person you are, Hermione, you are still not her."

Luna squeezed Neville's hand and smiled up at him when she added, "So, in a way, if it wasn't for that time you were together, Neville would not have realized that he still loved me so deeply. Being a Gryffindor, he had the courage to come see me, and we had a long talk, even though I was the one to originally end our engagement."

Hermione didn't know what to say. Luna was saying that because Hermione and Neville fucked that they were now back together and that was supposed to be a good thing. Luna may have seen it as a good thing, but for Hermione, remembering sleeping with Neville only brought painful memories regarding herself and Severus, not to mention the tragedy of errors that came along afterwards tied to some assumptions and loose tongues.

"I don't know what to say," was all that Hermione could utter.

"Say you'll come to our wedding." Luna beamed brightly as she handed over an envelope with Hermione's name beautifully written on it.

Now Hermione felt truly awkward. Wasn't it bad form for past lovers to show up at a wedding? Though Hermione, Neville, and Luna had been friends for years, that one night had changed the dynamics of their friendship, at least in Hermione's eyes and Neville's.
"You want me there?" Hermione asked, still bewildered how Luna could be so cavalier about the fact that she had slept with her former and now again current fiancé.

"Even before, weren't we all good friends?" Luna asked as she stood between them, holding their hands once more, acting as a bridge between them, joining them all together. "All that we had been through together? School? The war? The rebuilding afterwards? You went to Ron's wedding after you divorced. Even Neville and I remained friends after I ended the engagement last time, but I've overcome some of my own fears and hesitations, realizing that they only stood in the way of my relationship with Neville. Don't let your own fears come between our friendship now, Hermione."

Hermione understood what Luna was saying and even wanted to embrace her philosophy, but still could not let go and put it entirely behind her. However, for Luna and Neville's happiness, she would try and put forth her best effort.

"Oh look, there's the Gumblesons," Luna said brightly as she pulled out another invitation from her patchwork satchel before trotting off and out of the greenhouse to deliver yet another wedding invitation by hand.

Left alone in the greenhouse together, the awkwardness between Hermione and Neville returned, but Neville's was far less than it was before, now that the air had been cleared.

Hermione decided that since this was a time for confessions, she should also clear the air a bit as well. "Ron knows about my own affair. He knows who it is."

Neville's face, which had been holding a nervous smile turned somber. "You said it was complicated. What were you waiting for before you could tell him?"

"I told him before I fixed that matter." Hermione kept her eyes fixed upon a small pile of overturned terracotta pots that had been stored away for the winter. It was better than looking at Neville who was studying her with great interest, as if she was some rare and exotic plant he was trying to understand.

"And what was the problem you needed to settle anyway, since it seemed to make little difference in the end in telling Ron?" Neville asked, his tone not quite so kind.

Hermione lifted her head and looked Neville in the eye squarely. "I had to clear his name in front of the Wizengamot."
Neville's face morphed from confusion to comprehension upon to whom she was referring to and then finally shock. "Him?" he whispered in a croak. He leaned against a potting bench for support, looking like he would have fallen over if he didn't have the greenhouse equipment to hold him up. "Why?"

Hermione should have been upset at the look of disgust that was beginning to make Neville's lip curl, but she could not blame him, given that he only knew Severus as a teacher who had made his life hell, and was the butt of Gryffindor boys' jokes.

"Because I love him," she said firmly, as if her tone could remove any doubt Neville had against her declarations, "and he loves me."

Just then, Luna came back into the greenhouse, humming softly to herself.

Neville lifted a finger and pointed it at Hermione, as if accusing her of a crime, and said with an edge of incredulous hysteria in his voice, "Did you know Hermione is in love with Snape?"

Luna merely blinked and looked at him, and without missing a beat said, "Well, I'm glad he's found someone to love him." Ignoring the stunned look on her fiancé's face, she turned to Hermione and asked very simply, "Does he feel the same way about you, Hermione?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And this is why we love Luna.

Thank you to my glorious betas for this chapter, JuneW and Hope.

Papahi is a Tongan boy's name meaning mischievous, smart.

In addition, shortly after I posted the last chapter my mother passed away. I want to thank everyone who posted words of kindness and support that were greatly needed and appreciated. My husband was far away for a very rare and extremely important client meeting for a product they had been working years on and was busy scrambling to fix things late into the night, and he was unable to be there for me until he flew home a few days later. Your words helped me greatly until my husband, my rock and best friend, returned and could be there for me. It is amazing the huge heart the fanfic community has, when I needed it most. Thank you for your warmth and love.
"Hell, High Water, or the End of the World"

Chapter Summary

Severus intends to go to England to visit Hermione for Christmas, meanwhile Albert drags Hermione off on a special surprise trip elsewhere.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter One-Hundred
"Hell, High Water, or the End of the World"

Disclaimer: There once was a fanfic author named Betz. She wrote a really fucking long fanfic and started running out of disclaimers, but valiantly she kept on disclaiming any ownership of the Harry Potter franchise, and that it was all entirely J.K. Rowling's baby. And Betz didn't get sued... yet. The End.

Severus awoke earlier than usual. He was too excited to sleep until his normal waking time. Rising, he stood at his sliding glass door and pushed its plantation shutters to the side along its track in the floor, and peered out at the now unobstructed view. Looking towards the east from the south-facing glass door, he could see the faintest hints of lightening sky on the horizon. The deep and endless blue of the Pacific was tinged with the deepest shades violet and streaked with pale orchid, signaling the coming of the sun.

Sunrise would be in an hour, shortly after seven, but there was still much he had to do.

Opening the back door, he was surprised to find that the cat was already up and waiting for him. The animal rubbed along Severus' ankles, purring contentedly, self-satisfied as it had killed another rat during the night. There was also a very threatening moth that was pollinating Severus' ginger in his garden. To the cat, that moth was attacking the flowers, and so it had to be dispatched thoroughly.

Severus served up some milk, but left enough for his own cup of tea, using up the last of it before his trip. After a strong cup, he went to the living room and surveyed everything he had laid out to pack the night before.
There was a rather large box that had arrived special delivery a week ago, with the delivery person coming all the way from England to drop it off. The delivery boy was quite skittish upon coming face-to-face with an ex-Death Eater, having heard tales of the dreaded former Hogwarts professor. The delivery was wrapped in Christmas-themed wrapping paper with a large gold bow and a tag saying it was from Hermione. Hermione's present to him was now sitting amongst his fine woolen cloaks, trousers, coats, vests, and shirts he'd had altered by the local tailor. He was bringing all his clothes he departed with a year ago back with him, so he would be properly dressed for winter in England. Laying next to Hermione's gift to him was a much smaller box: his present to her.

When Ginny and Draco learned of Severus' intention to go back to England to visit Hermione for Christmas, Ginny demanded to know what Severus was going to buy her as a present. Upon hearing what Severus had in mind, she shook her head and instructed Draco to take Severus out shopping for a proper present for Hermione. It was not as practical, but in the end, he trusted Ginny's judgment since the two witches knew each other so well. No doubt Ginny had gleaned more ideas over the years for preferred gifts than he had been able to ascertain during their short time together.

He looked at all he was taking with him – all his clothing, the two Christmas presents, toiletries, a rare tome he'd recently purchased still wrapped in brown paper, some other books he was planning on bringing along to share with Hermione that she could return to him at a later date in person, and other things he'd picked up for her. With a swish of his wand, all the items rose up into the air and neatly stacked themselves away into a trunk Severus had bought for himself recently. He was unwilling to use the handbag Hermione had given him to pack his belongings in a year ago.

With little to do but wait for his nine o'clock Portkey time, Severus donned his swim trunks, sandals, and a shirt, then threw a towel over his shoulder. He had a lot of nervous energy to work off.

The ocean was placid that morning, with partly cloudy skies that were colored in vivid oranges, scarlets, and golden hues as the sun raced toward the eastern horizon. Severus was so full of energy, he felt he could have swam all the way to England that morning, but he turned himself around at the half-mile marker to begin his swim back, sticking to swimming his usual morning mile.

As he came ashore, many of the fishermen had already come back with their morning catch. They were selling to restaurateurs who came in from the other Hawaiian islands, plus a few from the mainland, preferring to buy their fish from a fellow witch or wizard. Mario was there buying everything for his Christmas Eve menu that night at his restaurant.

Severus walked up the town's main street that was bedecked with garlands and wreaths of pine,
cedar, eucalyptus, magnolia leaves, poinsettias, and other tropical or evergreen greenery. Some of
the storefront windows were even temporarily painted with festive scenes of snowbound cabins,
 flying reindeer, Santa in an outrigger canoe or on a broom, and other holiday symbols. Severus
smiled at the scene of the cheery and quaint town looking so festive.

This past month had encapsulated the warmth and welcome he felt in his adopted home. Nearly all
of his students had given him some sort of token of their appreciation, presenting him with
cellophane bags, decorated tins, and boxes filled with all home-baked treats. He had home-made
macadamia nut brittle, cookies of all shapes, sizes and flavors, small loaves of sweet and
sometimes savory quick breads, candied tropical fruits dipped in chocolate, a couple of
coffeecakes, pecan pumpkin muffins, a cinnamon and walnut-swirled bundt cake, and even a
pumpkin cheesecake. A few of his students’ parents had orchid farms, in which case, he was given
spectacular specimens in full bloom to enjoy for the holiday season. Some of the blooms now
decorated the reception room of his shop, and a few he placed in his outdoor shower at home to
bask in the humid and bright diffused light location.

Severus had seen many of the baked goods given to him laid out at previous luaus or offered up for
sale by locals who sold pre-ordered Christmas baked good packages to be Portkeyed later on in the
year as a way of adding to their incomes. Nothing was bought from a store, and it meant more to
him that his students gave him these, since some he could tell were made by young and
inexperienced hands. Never in all his time at Hogwarts did any of his students give him any such
gifts, especially homemade ones.

At the big hula school luau recital in early December, he brought paella. Mingling amongst the
townsfolk during the large community event, he had felt like he had become one of them, ingrained
into its daily fabric. Severus had even been invited to a few Christmas parties, at which he
willingly mingled, conversing with those who only knew him as the respectable and well-liked
Potions master who came from England.

He truly felt at home in Malu Palekaiko, being amongst those who accepted and appreciated him
for who he was. Severus couldn’t wait for Hermione to finally come to Malu Palekaiko and
experience the place for herself.

Stopping by the bakery, Severus picked up his usual croissant.

"So you are leaving for England this morning?" Kosal asked with a beaming smile. The
Cambodian wizard baker remembered Severus made mention of it before.

"That's the plan. Hopefully, nothing will ruin this trip... this time," Severus said darkly.
He noted that the poi donuts with coconut glaze and chopped macadamia nuts, and the pineapple Danish, were already set out. He knew that Draco made a visit on Fridays out of habit to pick one of those for himself, plus whatever Ginny was craving that week. Friday-morning pastry habits were one of the few rituals that Draco had carried over from England to Hawaii, while Severus adopted it for every morning he went out for a swim.

"Ah!" Kosal groaned, itching at a spot on his arm.

"Did that cream I developed using the Miniature Man-Eating Masdevallias not take care of those pock marks on your arms where you just scratched?" Severus asked.

"No! No! It did. Just remembering ice pox makes it itch. Just a phantom feeling thinking about it," he assured the Potions master. "Hopefully nothing else like ice pox will stop you from going today."

"One can hope."

"Oh, here's some cheese Danish for your cat," Kosal said, as he gave Severus a little bag with half of one chopped up in cat-sized bites.

"Thank you," Severus said as he left the shop. The painted Santa and snowman on Kosal's shop window waved farewell to Severus.

Once he was back home, Severus took a long shower, giving himself a good wank. If anything, he would see Hermione within fifteen minutes of arriving in London, about eight-fifteen that evening, and both would be undressed by eight-thirty, Greenwich Mean Time. Severus even remembered to pack a few vials of lubrication potion and a few for his stamina as well. He wondered if she would be just as anxious and eager to join with him after their year apart, or would she need some gentle coaxing and wooing to disrobe before he ravished her once more.

Just knowing he would be making love to Hermione soon helped him come to a quick finish in the shower that morning.

Showered, dressed, and packed, Severus was ready to go with a whole hour until his Portkey time. He'd made arrangements for Ginny to feed the cat while he was gone. He could swing by the shop before he left, but Pat had everything under control, proving herself quite capable from her first day on the job. There were no potions to worry about while he was gone, and Jerry would continue
with tutoring for some of his struggling students while he was away.

He just hoped Draco and Ginny would show up with his Christmas present before nine o'clock. They made him repeatedly promise he would wait around before Portkeying off to London. He had their anniversary present wrapped and waiting by the door. Considering how much money and time he'd spent to give this to the couple, he supposed he could wait for them to unwrap it. He wondered what Draco's reaction would be to have his mother's silverware given to him after finding out it had been sold to some "out-of-country buyer" before his name was exonerated, and before all his possessions that the Ministry had taken from him were returned, at least those that weren't sold off in the interim.

At eight-thirty, there was a knock at the door.

"Oh good, they're here finally," Severus sighed, knowing he would at least make his nine o'clock Portkey without a hitch. Nothing was going to stop Severus from going to London that day.

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Her head bent over a stack of parchments, Hermione didn't hear the knock.

Lavender let herself into Hermione's office. "Hermione?" she called out softly, seeing her friend and vice president was deep in thought, and not wanting to startle her.

Hermione finally noticed and lifted her head. "Oh, Lavender," she noted, dragging her mind from her train of thought back to the moment. "I just wanted to finish up a few thoughts I had on new theories for some products I want to work on after I come back from my trip."

"Yes, speaking of which, if you don't hurry, you'll miss your seven-twenty evening Portkey. Besides, it's Christmas Eve. This can all wait until you come back from your field trip with Albert," Lavender assured her.

"Are you sure you want me to go?" Hermione asked. "You only just came back from maternity leave a week ago. And while I kept you up on everything while you were gone, I don't want you to exhaust yourself."

"Tut, tut," Lavender shushed her friend from fretting. "Ron is done with the Quidditch season, so he'll be helping take care of Josephine, and there are the house-elves and a cadre of in-laws to help us. Besides, everything drops off right after Christmas, and production and sales are always down for a bit until late January when people start thinking about Valentine's Day. I'll be fine. And
Calleo will nest here and be taken care of while you're away." Lavender patted her on the arm to assuage her concerns.

Hermione shook her head. "I still don't know where Albert is taking me."

"He knows you've been so busy helping run the company he didn't want you to be distracted with the little details," Lavender said trying to calm her down, noting how she was becoming slightly agitated. "Besides, he said he gave Marf a thorough list of everything you'll need for your trip, plus I also bought you a few things. Consider it as a sort of Christmas present."

Hermione looked up at Lavender and her face fell. "Oh, but I didn't get anything for you-" she began, but was stopped by Lavender.

"Hermione, you have run my company beautifully so I could rest without worry while I recuperated during my maternity leave. Peace of mind is a gift that cannot be underestimated in value. And you have, despite all that has passed between us with Ron in the past year and a half, become a dear friend. You're the only female friend I trust. Letting Ron and me have our happiness, with your blessing, is worth a great deal to me. Don't worry that you didn't go out and spend a few Galleons on a trinket. I have something far more valuable – an ex-wife who isn't bent on hexing and cursing me and Josephine."

Hermione and Lavender had read a few stories in the Daily Prophet about – given the recent rise in divorce rates – some ex-spouses making life hell for the ex-husband and new wife, or for the ex-wife and new husband. For the fact Lavender and Hermione were on such good terms was a blessing for the second Mrs. Ron Weasley.

Rising from her desk, Hermione gave Lavender a brief hug, but gave one more troubled sigh. "I still don't know why Albert is insistent on leaving on Christmas Eve. I would have liked to have spent Christmas with my parents, but Albert says something about the timing of certain plants in bloom and the full moon on the 26th." She gave one more sigh, this one expressing more exhaustion than aggravation. "Oh well, the life of an apprentice, I suppose. At least I saw my parents last weekend, as Albert suggested."

"I think you'll have a grand time, even if you're away from family for Christmas."

"No hints?" Hermione asked one last time.
"What, and risk ruining the surprise?"

Hermione's brow furrowed. All she could think of was Severus' surprise apprenticeship trip to the North African desert and being unprepared, resulting in being sunburnt and miserable, but Albert was a good master and made sure she would have everything needed for her trip.

Looking at the clock on her office wall, Hermione said, "I suppose I'd better get going."

She walked with Lavender over to her office so Hermione could say goodbye to Josephine, who was awake. After pressing a kiss to her cheek and bidding her a soft farewell, inhaling the sweet smell, Hermione set her back down in her crib in the nursery set off of Lavender's office. She then gave her boss a hug goodbye with a promise to tell her everything about her trip when she returned.

Albert had already said goodbye to Josephine and Lavender, and was waiting for his apprentice downstairs in the lobby of The Lovely Lavender Company. They Floo'ed directly to the Ministry, since time was short and it was almost time for their Portkey to parts unknown.

Hermione didn't like the fact that Albert wanted to make the surprise all that more special by blindfolding Hermione during their Portkey. He held her arm to keep her steady and from falling over. The blindfold made her stomach even more uneasy than during the usual Portkey trips she took with Albert on short weekend excursions to collect flora and fauna.

As they landed, Albert insisted that she keep her blindfold in place just a bit longer, since they weren't at their final destination yet.

"This person is going to help Side-Along Apparate you to the final destination," Albert said as they landed. He assisted removing Hermione's cloak since it was warmer.

Hermione felt a large hand gently hold her by the upper arm and Side-Along Apparate with her.

Once at her hopefully final destination, she heard an additional popping noise, that was probably Albert arriving behind her.

She heard a knock on a door, which was so close it sounded like she was standing just in front of the door.
"May I finally take my blindfold off?" Hermione asked with a huff of impatience.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Severus walked over and thought he heard Ginny say something through the other side of the door, which he didn't catch.

Opening the door, he saw Draco and Ginny as he expected, but there was Hermione, blinking the sun from her eyes as Draco had just removed her blindfold before stuffing it in his pocket.

"Hermione?" He could hardly believe she was here on his front porch.

Hermione blinked a few more times, adjusting to the sudden bright light. "Severus?" she questioned with equal astonishment.
She flew into his arms as he reached out to scoop her up.

"How— " he blurted out as he held her tight, stunned by her sudden appearance.

"I had no idea— " she started to say, but stopped as she pulled her head away from his chest to look upon his face.

Each moved a hand to cup each other's cheek, their eyes roving over faces seen only in Pensieves and memories of late, memorizing the changes wrought since the last Pensieve memory they had of each other. Hermione smoothed a hand over his beard, finally feeling it with her own hands, noting that it felt softer than she anticipated.

All awareness that Draco, Ginny, and Albert were next to them had evaporated. The whole world at that moment only existed in each other's arms.
Hermione looked into his face; she had never before seen him so unmasked and emotionally open to her. There was nothing concealed in his features, just surprise at her arrival and love plainly written on his face. He'd never looked so handsome to her, even if the beard did take a little getting used to in person.

Severus, lost in the moment, pulled Hermione into a deep and passionate kiss unwilling to let another moment pass without his lips on hers. How he'd missed her kisses, her sweet and delirium-inducing kisses that could make his heart sing.

Hermione's heart felt like it would burst. Severus was kissing her with such passion and want, and she kissed him back with all the longing she had pent up for him this past very long and lonely year. Her head spun as her body and mind were overwhelmed.

Only when they finally pulled apart from their long impassioned kiss did they notice that they were being watched, but at this point, Severus and Hermione no longer cared.

Draco cleared his throat and rhetorically asked with joviality, "Now, what was that about nothing – not even hell, high water, or the end of the world – was going to stop you from going to England this morning?"

Hermione's face changed from elated love to quizzical surprise as she turned to regard Draco. "You planned this?" Turning to look at Albert, she added, "And you, too?"

Albert stepped forward and tilted his head to the side a bit in contemplation. "Well, after Severus didn't make it to India, Draco and I conspired together."

As much as Hermione and Severus never wanted to let go of each other ever again, they parted. Hermione went to embrace Albert, her master and mentor, while Severus gave Draco a hearty hug of thanks.

"I can't tell you how much this means to me," Hermione sighed as she gave Albert an embrace filled with gratitude.

Hermione and Severus swapped places, and Severus gave his old friend and fellow Potions master a firm handshake while Draco was given a near rib-cracking hug by Hermione. "Thank you," she said with her head pressed against Draco's chest, as the tears began to fall.
Severus pulled Hermione into his arms once more as she began to cry from sheer happiness.

Ginny, who had already started to cry, laughed through her tears. "I helped, too!" Hermione pulled Ginny into her embrace with Severus. Well, as much as they could hug Ginny considering her midsection had grown rather large since she had entered her sixth month of pregnancy.

Suddenly realizing they were all standing out on his front porch, Severus remembered his manners and said eagerly, "Come in, please, come in."

He rarely had guests, so it was quite a surprise. Fortunately, he had enough seating for everyone in his living room, where his packed trunk was waiting. Albert levitated Hermione's trunk in and set it down next to Severus'.

Her arm firmly latched into Severus', unwilling to let go of him, they walked into the living room. Hermione turned her head to look at her Master and asked Albert, "And you had this planned with Lavender the whole time too?"

Albert sat himself down at the same time as everyone else. Ginny took the most comfortable straight-backed chair that was kind to her back, and Hermione and Severus sat side-by-side on the couch — a couch that looked suspiciously similar to the one Hermione used to transfigure the settee into she noted silently. Draco stood behind his wife and softly rubbed her shoulders.

"Yes, which is why Lavender ended her maternity leave a week before today. That gave her time to get back into the swing of things so she would be back up to speed by the time I whisked you away to Severus'..." Albert stopped and looked around, suddenly admiring the architecture before finishing his thought. "...tropical hideaway."

Hermione blushed, suddenly realizing that Albert knew exactly what she and Severus would be getting up to for the next week. She turned and buried her face in Severus' shoulder. It was almost like talking about sex frankly with one's parents.

Draco and Ginny both had a small laugh of their own, remembering how they were rather inspired by the exotic setting and Justina's honeymoon suite at her hotel those first several weeks. Ginny squeezed Draco's hand and smiled up at him as she absentmindedly stroked her abdomen.

There was a small clatter in the kitchen, which made Severus let go of Hermione's hand and pull his wand out, nearly leaping off the couch.
"That would be the delivery elves," Draco said. Severus gave him a quizzical look, so Draco further explained, "Since you probably whittled your pantry and perishables down for your planned week away, Ginny and I arranged for the delivery of groceries to keep you stocked for the week since you'll be here instead. Unless you plan on still making that Portkey to London at nine o'clock."

Hermione looked at Severus, stunned by Draco's words. "Severus? Were you going to come to England to see me?" She had been so dazed by the surprise of suddenly finding herself in Malu Palekaiko, and in Severus' company, she had missed Draco's earlier joke about him leaving for England.

"That was the plan," he said rather dryly, now giving Draco a very pointed look. "And you couldn't have let me know sooner?"

"Well, it wouldn't have been much of a Christmas present had you known beforehand," Draco said, matching Severus' tone. "Besides, it takes a lot to surprise you. It was worth it to see the look on your face."

"I wish I had a photo of that moment. That was priceless," Ginny added.

"Speaking of presents," Severus said, pulling out his wand. He levitated the Malfoys' anniversary present by the front door over to float across the room and settle on the floor next to them. It was a bit too large and heavy to set in Ginny's ever-shrinking lap.

"Happy first wedding anniversary." Severus held his hand out toward the large box wrapped in silver and white. He had paid Naomi to wrap it beautifully for him.

Draco knelt down and began to unwrap it while Ginny sat in the chair observing.

Upon revealing the wood lid and silver plate engraved on the top, Draco gave a small gasp of surprise.

"You're not the only one capable of surprising people," Severus said lightly.
"My mother's silver," Draco choked out in a hoarse whisper as he reverently lifted up the lid. "But how? I thought it was gone."

Severus ran a thumb back and forth across the top of Hermione's hand as he said, "Naomi ran another errand for me when I sent her off to London to order Hermione's flowers last summer."

Upon the mention of that, Hermione grasped Severus' hand a bit tighter, willing all the bad memories of that mix-up to go away. She would only bring forth the memories of the vase of flowers that was presented to her when Draco and Ginny returned to England.

Draco's head hung down, and it did not escape anyone's notice that his hand went up to wipe away a tear. The young wizard rose and walked over to Severus.

Severus rose and let his friend clap him hard in a tight embrace.

"Thank you," Draco croaked, overcome with emotions.

He clapped Draco on the back. "It seems we have given each other something precious and irreplaceable this Christmas."

Ginny was wiping away tears herself, overcome by the emotion of the moment yet again. She knew how much Draco's mother's silverware meant to him from a purely sentimental worth. It was the best anniversary present Severus could have given them.

Sitting back down, Severus turned to Hermione. "How long are you here?"

"A week," Albert answered for her. "And she is under orders to do no work, but to relax today and Christmas," he said with a waggle of his finger. "But starting Boxing Day, she will have work to do the rest of her stay. Namely, checking up on the construction of the new facilities and the new school being built since Lavender is a large benefactor, plus writing scrolls on local plants and animals and their use. Perhaps with Blanche's permission, Hermione can get a tour of the Miniature Man-Eating Masdevallia reserve?"

"We'll see if Blanche will agree to that, but with no indicators in the final scrolls of where the reserve is located," Severus amended.
"But of course," Hermione said, knowing the location was held under a Fidelius Charm.

"And she is to work on her Japanese while she is here," Albert reminded her.

Since taking her Spanish test, Hermione had had little time to devote to learning her fourth language, given how busy she was running the company and doing her apprenticeship work.

"Excellent, I'm learning it myself so we can study together," Severus offered. Hermione squeezed his hand, thrilled at the prospect of learning something alongside Severus, both students for once.

"Anything else?" Hermione asked Albert.

"Attendance at the New Year's Eve Ball," Ginny said, as she pulled out an envelope holding two tickets from her pocket.

"Oh!" Hermione said, suddenly sitting upright. "I don't know if I have anything packed for a ball."

Albert sat back and chuckled. "I told you I would have Marf pack everything you would need for this trip, and I meant everything. You have all your formal dresses and various shoes and accessories," he said, flitting his fingers about to imply all the lingerie that went with each outfit as well without naming it specifically.

Hermione smiled and placed her hand over her heart, touched that Albert had thought of everything, as well as Draco and Ginny. And suddenly remembering Lavender's words, she knew Lavender had bought something for her for this trip.

"Now if you will pardon me for a moment, this house needs a bit of decorating," Ginny said. She opened a small pouch she pulled from the pocket of her cool and billowy tank maternity dress. Hauling herself up out of her seat, she opened the pouch and Summoned a large evergreen tree with her wand that expanded to its full size as it came forth.

While Ginny was busy decorating the Christmas tree, ensuring Severus and Hermione had a tree of their own to celebrate the holiday, Hermione asked Albert, "So are you staying in Malu Palekaiko for the week, as well?"
"No," Albert said, smoothing a hand over the front of his striped waistcoat. "One of my daughters and her family decided to go to New Zealand for Christmas, as I have a few distant relatives there I've been in contact with over the decades. So once I'm done handing you off into the hands of another very capable master for the week, I'll be Portkeying onward to Auckland." It didn't escape Albert's attention that the hand-holding between Hermione and Severus was getting more urgent and restive, as if they were making a conscious effort to not go at it in front of guests, while trying to play the good hosts who didn't kick their guests out too quickly.

Looking over at the clock on Severus' mantle, he said a bit more dramatically than necessary, "Well, I would love to stay and chat the day away, but I have a Portkey to take soon." Turning to Draco and Ginny, he said, "Could you please walk with me back to the Portkey Office? I would like a local's tour and get to see a few of the sights before I leave." It was a very polite way to prompt the Malfoys that it was time to leave. Even they understood the urgency simmering beneath the polite facade Severus and Hermione were trying to project.

Hand-in-hand, Severus and Hermione walked Albert and the Malfoys to the door. The delivery elves that restocked Severus' kitchen were long gone.

"I'll see you bright and early, January 3rd, back in the office," Albert said to Hermione with a twinkle in his eye as he stood on Severus' porch once more. Turning to Severus, he added, "And I expect you to take good care of my apprentice. Though, I don't think I have to worry about that at all. Make sure she doesn't push herself to yet another bout of nearly collapsing from sheer exhaustion. This trip is meant to recharge herself, besides check up on construction, since she's in the habit of pushing herself too hard at times."

"I push myself so I can finish my apprenticeship faster so I can be back by Severus' side faster," she reminded him of why she worked herself so hard.

Severus slipped his arm around her waist and chastely kissed the top of her head. "I'll make sure she gets the proper amount of rest."

Hermione was tempted to give him a wicked smile and say she didn't want to be too well rested. Instead, she refrained from making a comment filled with sexual innuendo since that was not her style in front of others, nor did she want to embarrass Severus.

Draco and Ginny exited the door, ready to walk Albert back down through the town since all of them, except Ginny, had Apparated directly there from the Portkey Office.
Ginny gave Hermione one last hug and kiss upon the cheek. "Since Severus is not going to be in England, we expect to see you both over at the Finaus' for Christmas dinner." She patted Severus on the arm, giving him a knowing look.

Severus had already dropped off the plum pudding the week before over at Mounga and Rainbow's house, but at the time he had no idea he would be there to enjoy it with them as well.

Looking at Hermione, Ginny said, suddenly remembering, "Oh, Marf was supposed to pack Christmas crackers, so be sure to remember those." She then turned to Albert. "You did get those, right?"

Albert assured Ginny that *everything* had been packed.

Draco gave Severus a pat on the shoulder. "And I will see you tomorrow as well. Mounga said to be there around two o'clock."

"Which means around three o'clock Hawaiian time," Severus amended, knowing that punctuality was not high on the priority of the locals, though they did learn to observe time in regards to appointments at Severus' shop for consultations and tutoring.

Draco was just about to leave when he stopped and reached into the pouch Ginny had earlier. "Oh, and one more thing from Ginny and me. You'll be needing this," he said with a knowing smirk upon his lips.

Severus looked at the wooden box Draco handed him and immediately recognized it. It was a special order Draco had paid to have Severus fulfill, saying it was going to be a Christmas present for a friend. Severus had filled every vial in that box, which consisted of an equal number of the natural lubrication potion and Sequoia, the male enhancement potion. Severus had brewed his own present from Draco, which Draco had paid for.

And stopping one last time, half-way down the stairs of Severus' front porch, Draco looked over his shoulder and added, "Oh, and Mounga said you could have use of the hot springs today, all day up until dawn. That's his and Rainbow's little gift to you and Hermione."

Draco, Ginny, and Albert really did plan for everything to make this the perfect week.
Hermione and Severus stood side-by-side, waving to their friends as they walked down the garden path towards the front gate.

Severus closed the door of his home. No sooner than he had closed it than he had Hermione pressed up against it, shoving his tongue down her throat, which she greedily devoured.

When they parted to finally catch their breath, she said through gasping pants, "I thought they'd never leave."

"Same here," Severus agreed, and went back to kissing Hermione with desperation, one arm cradling the box of potions they would make good use of for the next week.

"Bed, now," Hermione moaned, wishing Severus would put the box down, not knowing what was in it.

Severus would have picked her up and carried her off to his – their bed, but it was tricky business to carry someone in your arms and a wooden box at the same time.

They practically ran upstairs and into the bedroom, Hermione familiar with the layout from her many revisits to Severus' house in Lavender's Pensieve.

After placing their wands on the bedside table, Severus carefully placed the box next to them and opened the lid while Hermione surveyed her surroundings.

"Mosquito netting," she mused, "how romantic."

"More functional than romantic," he assured her as he plucked one vial from the set of thirty vials.

"What's in the box Draco gave you?" Hermione asked, curious as to why Severus was very careful while handling it.

"Something you're very familiar with," Severus said and held up the vial.
"You didn't brew this?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, I did, but Draco indicated it was for someone else when he ordered it, sneaky bastard."

Tipping the vial back, Hermione felt its effects, not realizing how much she missed that sensation, knowing what would come next. Her body reacted to the Lubrication Potion just as it had many times before.

Hermione carefully slipped the empty vial back in its slot. Then she took off the necklace Harry had given her for her safety. She would not need it here, as she knew that while she was with Severus she would be safe. The pendant was set on the bedside table, next to the dried lemon and photo of her younger self, before she turned her attention back to Severus.

"Are you still--" Severus began, but his question was finished by Hermione.

"Yes, I'm still on contraceptives."

There was a lot to talk about regarding that particular subject, but they could talk later. Right now they just needed to be with joined with one another as soon as possible.

There was a moment where they just held each other, one of Hermione's hands stroking the back of his neck, the other resting upon his shoulder. Severus held one arm around her waist, the other wrapped around her back. They were both scarcely able to believe they were finally together again, and this was no surreal meeting on some strange ethereal plane.

Severus and Hermione finally began to tear at each other's clothing, kissing each other with a raw hunger. Hermione's fingers worked furiously to unbutton the white long-sleeved shirt he was wearing, yanking the tails from his black light woolen trousers he had worn in anticipation of traveling to England.

Severus' hands were busy unbuttoning Hermione's blouse and trying to find the zipper to her skirt. He was unfamiliar with this particular garment, and blindly hunted for a zipper on the back. He finally found it on the side, unwilling to stop kissing Hermione to find it quicker.

Hermione nearly popped his last button off in her haste to divest Severus of his shirt, but found the last one in time. Her hands pushed the sleeves down, working against Severus' own attempts to use
his hands to undress her simultaneously. He finally relented and stopped for a half-second to yank
the sleeves off and left the shirt fall carelessly to the floor.

All the while they kissed, hardly able to keep their eyes open, yet longing to look forever upon the
other, having been deprived of the sight of each other for so long. Severus felt his erection grind up
against Hermione's hip and she ground back against it, wanting to feel its hardness and length
against her body with equal want, desperate to have him fill her as soon as possible.

"God, I've missed you" Hermione said in a near sob, her voice thick with emotion.

Severus stopped kissing Hermione for a moment to look upon her face. Her eyes shone bright with
unshed tears, smiling at him with pure happiness radiating from her face.

"I didn't think it was possible to miss you as much as I did," he confessed, still awestruck by the
fact she was finally in his arms again. His hand cupped her cheek, and the pad of his thumb wiped
away the tears that began to fall.

Hermione kissed him again, this time with near desperation. "I need you," she said against his
mouth.

Severus kissed her back, his tongue battling with hers, as they both rapaciously consumed each
other.

Hermione's skirt was finally unzipped, and Severus yanked it down past her hips. As she stepped
out of her skirt, she also toed off her shoes. While Hermione pulled off her tights, Severus finished
divesting himself of his trousers, boots, and socks.

Severus rarely remembered being so anxious and eager to make love. Even compared to their first
time, he could not recall feeling this much anticipation.

Now dressed in only his underpants, he watched as Hermione, clad in her bra and knickers, crawled
up onto the bed. She finally found her way underneath the mosquito netting and coyly beckoned
him with a crook of her finger; a lustful come-hither look in her eye.

Hermione saw the way Severus approached her through the netting, the raw need burning bright in
his eyes, as if his eyes could singe her flesh.
At the edge of the bed, he slowly lifted the netting, crawling underneath it.

This was their own little world, apart from the rest of reality. The outside world could be coming to an end, but they were not of it; they were in another dimension in that bed, finally together.

Severus roughly pulled Hermione into his arms, and they fell onto the bed. A tangle of arms and legs, both tussling about. Severus reached behind her and unclasped her bra, pulling the straps down from her shoulders.

Suddenly, he felt Hermione pull away from him and her arms cross in front of herself protectively. He anticipated this. This reminded him of their first time together and how she was so uncertain of her breasts back then.

Hermione began to cry, but not from joy this time. She didn't want Severus to see her scar, her hideous disfigurement inflicted by that monster Alan. Severus had once called her breasts perfect, but what would he think of them now with that grotesque souvenir of her attack marring them?

"Let me see," he asked, stroking her hair, trying to soothe her.

"It's so ugly," she wailed as she suddenly became overwhelmingly self-conscious, almost rolling away from Severus, wishing it was dark and he couldn't see the scar.

Severus pulled away from Hermione and knelt on the bed, holding his arms out for her inspection. "Look at me," he said.

Hermione rolled back over and looked at him. He looked so wonderful to her. His hair was longer, the beard made him look even more handsome, he looked like he was even trimmer with more muscle, and he had a nice tan. He looked perfect to her.

"Do you see my scars?" Severus asked.

It was then that Hermione did notice his scars. The one along his chest under his left nipple, and the other near his collarbone on the right. The one on his left was just as pronounced as the one Hermione now had. And then there was the significant scar on his leg that was longer than hers. "I
don't see them. I only see you and how wonderful you look to me," Hermione said.

"Then how is your scar any different from the many of mine? You choose not to see them. And why would you think that a scar would make you any less beautiful to me?" Severus asked, trying to bring Hermione out of her shell once more.

Severus sat back down on his heels. "If we are fortunate enough to grow old together, should your hair become the color of dull steel, and you start to sag and become wrinkled, would you be less lovely to me?" he asked while shaking his head. "And I am no paragon of comeliness, yet you have professed how handsome I am to you. Do you think me so shallow that one scar could affect my whole opinion of you? That it is only your looks that matter to me?"

Hermione understood what he was saying, and she believed him, but it still didn't stop her fears of how he would react upon seeing it. She shook her head. She knew Severus was never a shallow man, but her psychological scars still ran deep.

Slowly, Hermione let her arms down and pulled the cups of her brassiere away from her breasts. She reluctantly let the bra fall upon the bed, her arms laying limp by her side.

It was a significant scar, but Severus did not care. To him, she was still a vision of perfection and loveliness.

Pulling her tenderly into his arms, he stroked her face. "You still look just as beautiful as before. More so, because I've missed you so much."

His hand gently cupped her scarred breast. She turned her head aside and almost flinched from his touch.

"Does that hurt?" he asked, seeing her reaction.

Hermione shook her head. There was no pain except in her mind.

"Then I see nothing," he whispered with urgent sincerity. "This does not define you." Severus placed his hand upon her heart above her scar and said, "This is what defines you," then he moved his hand up to place a finger upon her temple, "and this. It is your heart and mind I fell in love with."
Severus had a whole speech planned out since October to tell Hermione how he loved her regardless of her scar, but it came out completely different from what he intended. But in the end, he got his sentiments across so that she understood.

Being so open and free to express his emotions, was unlike what he had done in the past. Normally, he would be fighting with himself to express his feelings, but he had learned in his lengthy time apart from Hermione that holding back only hurt himself. He regretted that he had not more plainly and simply stated what was in his heart.

Even the vision of Albus back in his London flat once said to him, *There is no regret in the experience of love, only when we deny ourselves the ability to love.* He finally understood what the apparition of the old Headmaster meant. Severus wanted no more regrets.

Wiping away the tears from her face, he said tenderly, "I love you, Hermione, and I have missed you terribly."

Hermione felt like her heart could hold no more love for him, but somehow she could feel her chest glow warm as if it was expanding. A rush of the intense feelings of love for him burned inside her, making her head spin and feel as if she was floating. She felt like she was falling in love with Severus all over again. And while he was the same Severus she first fell in love with, there was something different about him – less guarded, yet more intense. His earnest declarations that her scar meant nothing to him eased her fears, but his confession of why he had fallen in love with her made her happy beyond what she thought she was capable of feeling. There was no greater high, not even under the most potent formulations of the Irresistible Potion, that could compare to what she was currently experiencing, and it was all because of this love she felt for Severus and his love for her.

Kissing Severus' hair, she felt his mouth trail down her neck. The sensation of his beard seemed to almost heighten the feeling of his mouth as it dragged along her skin, nipping and licking in his anthropometry devoted solely to her.

Severus tenderly kissed the top of her left breast, looking up to watch for a reaction from her that he should stop and calm her fears once more. Her head was thrown back, mouth hung open, eyes shut, looking lost in the rapture of his touch. Moving onward, his mouth grazed along the slope of her breast, over the scar and finally down to her nipple. Her whole areola and nipple were taut and waiting for his touch. As his mouth engulfed her peak, Hermione let out a harsh cry, fisting his hair with one hand while wrapping a leg around his torso to draw him between her legs.

He laved both of her nipples with his tongue, giving both equal attention, cupping her breasts with
his hands and plucking at the nipple his mouth wasn't currently worrying and suckling. The gentle brushing of his silken hair along her sides was torture of the sweetest kind, making her shudder, arch, and sigh, which only caused him to suckle more earnestly. With one hand, he slipped Hermione's pale pink knickers off.

The ache between Hermione's legs was almost unbearable, feeling her core throb with each beat of her heart, feeling as if she would go mad from this primal need. When she felt his mouth leave her breasts and trail down her stomach, she could stand it no longer.

Lifting his head from her stomach with her hands, she begged, "I can't wait any longer. I need you now. Please," she added, her face pleading. She was unable to bear any more building anticipation as she yanked at Severus' underpants, using her feet to catch them and shove them down his legs quickly, wishing she had her wand to spell them away faster.

Severus stroked her thigh and slid up between her legs, encouraging her to raise and part them, which she did eagerly.

Holding himself above her with one arm, he held himself with his free hand and rubbed himself around her entrance, spreading some of her fluids around his head to ease penetration. It had been a very long time for either of them, and he didn't want to hurt her despite how badly she needed him.

Severus slid his head into her, and she gasped at the shock of the sensation, feeling she would nearly explode, but wanting more. He pulled out and slid a little deeper in the next stroke, which caused Hermione to arch her back and pull her knees up higher to spread herself wider for him. It took all of Severus' strength and willpower not to just sink himself into her in one swift stroke.

Her brow furrowed, arms thrown above her head. She clawed at the headboard for a place to hold on, as she screamed, "YES! More!"

Severus withdrew and slid back in all the way slowly.

Hermione screamed from the pleasure of it all, his length and width filling her, the friction of him entering her, his body atop hers, her flesh pressed against his, his hair sliding over his shoulder to caress her own. When Severus pulled back and filled her even deeper a third time, and she finally felt him settle as deep as possible in her, she shut her eyes tight and wailed.

Severus knew Hermione was at her limit. She was so tight. Even though he was buried in her to
the hilt, he knew if he spread her legs even wider and began pounding her harder, her body would not take it. He had to ease her body back into the ability to easily accept him once more, like she once had before. Severus wanted to consume her whole, right there and then, but forced himself to be patient, wanting to savor their rejoining. This was the sweetest of pleasures and joys, and he wanted it to last forever. His heart pounded with need to take Hermione completely and with his love for her as well.

They could hardly keep their eyes open. They were so lost in the all-consuming experience of being joined together, after being apart for so long. Hermione rock her hips in time to meet each of Severus' thrusts, each stroke of his met with a cry of fulfillment from her. It took all of Severus' willpower to not come right them. She was so snug, it was a vise-like grip, her tightness making it all the more deliriously sweet to be buried in his love as he slid in and out of her.

This is what they missed. The feeling of their flesh pressed and rubbing against one another, the softness of each other's hair in their hands, the wash of hot breaths caressing each other with each exulted sigh, the sight of love and rapture written on each other's faces, the heady scent of skin as a light sheen of sweat bespangling their face, chest and backs. No Pensieve or fantasy could compare to the reality of being with each other.

Hermione opened her eyes finally to see Severus staring down at her with the same intensity as their first time together. He was her dark angel, taking her to paradise. Severus was looking at her as if she was the most beautiful woman on earth and for that brief moment, she felt she was. She felt dizzy, drowning in a deluge of sensations and emotions. Riding on that intoxicating tide of euphoria, she moaned, "God, I love you so much, Severus."

Severus could bear it no more. He came, already enamored by the sight of her beneath him as he made love to her, pushed to the edge by Hermione's declaration of her love for him. His eyes shut tight and he fell forward, burying his head against her neck, grunting and moaning as his hips stilled.

Hermione clasped onto him, wrapping her legs around him, welcoming him to rest upon her, tightening her muscles around him as she felt him empty himself into her. Severus then gasped in surprise, overcome by the sudden squeezing sensation.

This was Hermione's little trick to make his orgasm feel even more intense. Given the intensity of this particular orgasm, having finally made love to her after months apart, he felt like his head would explode. How he'd missed this as well.

Laying atop of her, gasping for breath, he felt Hermione's hands lovingly stroked his back, her legs still wrapped around his waist. He could feel her chest rise and fall in a stilted manner. Severus could tell she was crying. Lifting his head, he knew that these were the sort of tears he wanted to
Hermione was so happy at that moment, she couldn't keep it in. She didn't want to cry, as she had cried too much over this past year with Severus gone, but she could not contain her joy.

"I couldn't wait. You are just so wonderful," Severus began, wishing he could have brought Hermione to her own completion before himself, but she only smiled more at him, the tears finally ebbing away.

"Shh. We have all week," she silenced him, placing a finger upon his lips before kissing his cheek and forehead.

Severus felt himself finally go soft enough that he slipped out of her, but he decided to seize the moment. Rolling off of her, he slid his hand down and slipped his fingers between her legs.

Hermione adjusted her legs and stroked Severus' hair, noting how much longer it was from when she last saw him. She closed her eyes and hummed as his fingers went to work on her.

Severus had spent enough time Polyjuiced as Hermione over the past year, he learned her body from a first-person perspective. As he started using new techniques he had developed, he heard Hermione gasp and her breath halt in her chest.

"Oh, God... Where... How..." All questions stopped, and she began a keening wail as Severus slipped two fingers into her while his thumb worried at her clit in just the right spot that sent her into fits. His other hand had also slipped between her legs, and one finger was slowly playing with the opening of her anus.

Severus looked to Hermione to gauge her expression. He saw that she was too lost in what he was doing to her body to notice him seeking quiet permission before he slipped a single slender finger in. Dipping his head while kneeling over her, he took the nipple closest to his mouth between his lips and started to suckle at it, working mostly on the nipple.

This was something a bit different and new for Hermione, and it was fantastic. The ache that was still left between her legs came back fiercely and began to grow in her abdomen. Throbbing and white hot, she could feel it build.
Severus timed his movements to her cries and how she moved her body in time to his hand, picking up the pace when he sensed she wanted more, quicker. He could feel himself harden once again, hearing and seeing Hermione undulating to his touch in his bed.

'This is so much better than masturbating in a Pensieve,' Hermione noted somewhere in the back of her mind. The two experiences could not even compare: Severus' very deft and increasingly talented fingers, versus her own. Hermione could feel her orgasm building. She thought she would literally set the mosquito netting and bed on fire, her body was so aflame. She threw her head back and opened her throat as she finally felt her orgasm take over her body, making her bellow and thrash about the bed like a mad woman in an attack of hysterical mania.

Severus felt her walls clamp down, quivering and pulsing around his fingers. He couldn't wait any longer. In the middle of her orgasm, he removed all his hands, and he slid back between Hermione's legs and back into her once more.

Hermione felt her orgasm stop momentarily, but it returned and with even greater intensity as Severus filled her once more. This time her body had become slightly accustomed to him, and she spread her legs wider. Feeling him sink into her, she felt her orgasm return and she clutched onto Severus, riding him from underneath as much as he was riding her.

Her orgasm finally waning, Hermione's screams morphed into soft whimpers of delight, feeling pleasantly exhausted. Severus' movements slowed and he finally rested between her legs, gently sliding back in and out of her until he finally stopped, his breath short and gasping, just like Hermione's.

Severus didn't orgasm a second time, yet, but he was glad to have helped Hermione finally have one of her own. He did not want to leave her unsatisfied at all, in any way.

Rolling off Hermione and onto his back, his face coated with more sweat, and thankful he swam to help keep up his physical stamina, he lay there on his back staring up at the ceiling through the netting. He could suddenly see the benefit of the ceiling fans Ginny and Draco installed in their home.

Hermione rolled over and curled up along Severus' side, playing with his chest hair and the tips of his longer raven locks.

Stroking her back lazily with one hand, Severus mused contently, "If I am dreaming, never let me wake. If I am awake, never let me sleep." Severus kissed the top of her head where it rested on his chest.
Hermione stifled a yawn. "I'm knackered. Oh, that reminds me."

Rising up, she started to reach across Severus for her wand, but suddenly stopped and ran off to the bathroom instead.

Severus chuckled to himself, feeling the familiarity of old habits from his former life appearing in his new life, like some ghost that had come back to life, becoming solid flesh and blood once more.

With her bodily needs taken care of, Hermione, completely nude to Severus' enjoyment, returned to the bed. She walked over to the bedside table to fetch her wand and Summon her trunk.

After setting it down by Severus' armoire, she opened it. She pulled open a few drawers before finally finding what she was looking for.

"Aha!" she said with some triumph. Then she came back to the bed while holding a small case.

"And what do you have here?" Severus asked, his own curiosity piqued since there was a glimmer of pride in her carriage as she walked back.

"Hopefully, a successful brewing of a Portkey lag potion I developed for my final apprenticeship potion." Hermione held the case out for Severus to inspect. It was a clear glass case featuring only two vials, each vial marked with hash marks and numbers along the side.

"And how does it work?" he asked, noting the numbers on each vial only went up to twelve. One vial was of a bright golden sunny hue, while the other had a dusky violet color to it, as if it was twilight captured in a glass.

"It helps reset the circadian rhythm to the new time zone," Hermione informed him.

"Yes, but that's what Invigoration Draughts and sleeping potions are for," he said not to be contrary, but to question how her potion might present a solution when other solutions were already available to the problem.
"Yes, but those potions don't reset the natural rhythm a body has when it says it's time to wake up, go to sleep, have a meal. While those other potions are a stop-gap measure, this helps avoid other problems when the body does eventually reset, such as sudden fatigue. I tried Invigoration Draughts and sleeping potions, when I came back from India, and I still found myself suddenly wanting to fall asleep face-first into my lunch of cottage pie up to a week later."

"Which vial would you take and how much?" he asked.

"That depends. If I want to stay awake for, say, eleven hours longer than my usual bedtime back in London, since there is an eleven-hour time difference, I drain this down to the eleven marked on the vial," she said pointing to the golden-hued elixir.

"And the other vial?"

"When I leave, it will be morning here, but night back in London. After arriving, I'll drain up to the eleventh mark on the vial, and it will set my body clock eleven hours faster towards sleep."

"And how much have you tested this before?" Severus asked, hoping Hermione wouldn't put herself accidentally into a Draught of Living Death-like coma, spending their week together with her passed out and him working on an antidote.

"I've done some small trips on the weekend with Albert when he's taken me on weekends a few hours across time zones, or when I need to get up pre-dawn for some ingredient-hunting task Albert has set for me, but nothing as much as eleven hours," she said as she opened the case, pulling out the sunny-colored potion.

Before Hermione imbibed, she told Severus about the ingredients and directions for brewing, plus where her notes could be found, should anything happen. Tilting the vial back, she felt the potion slide down her throat, invigorating her, erasing the feeling like she had already put in a full day's work, which she had.

Setting the nearly empty vial back in its case and on the bedside table, Hermione said with self-satisfaction of all her work, "I no longer feel sleepy."

Severus grabbed her and threw her back on the bed. "Good," he growled playfully as he palmed one breast, "because for each of those lubrication potions I brewed is a vial of Sequoia to match, and I have yet to take mine," he reminded her as she grinned eagerly at him.
A/N: Yeah, they're back together again and shagging like horny nifflers once more!

As always, thank you to my wonderful betas, JuneW and thegreyladies for your wonderful work.

Angel-soma has done a commission for me of Hermione and Severus seeing each other on his front porch, right after she takes off the blindfold and he opens the door. You can view it on my Tumblr page here: http://atdlheabetz.tumblr.com/image/152283855200
Or on Angel-soma's DeviantArt page here: http://angelsoma.deviantart.com/art/Commission-Estump-573883870
Chapter Summary

Summary: Severus and Hermione enjoy a tossed salad for lunch, a romantic Christmas Eve dinner at Mario's, followed by another tossed salad.

Chapter Notes

CAUTION: NSFW fan art embedded into chapter, most of the way down. Features frontal nudity. R-rated/Mature.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter One Hundred One
"Kiss Me Once and Kiss Me Twice, Then Kiss Me Once Again"

Disclaimer: Harry (lemons) Potter is the (lemons) property of J (lemons) K Rowling and (lemons) associates. No (lemons) copyright infringement (lemons) intended. (Lemons!)

A/N: Can you tell that now Hermione and Severus are back together that there will be a lot of sex?

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The pleasantly exhausted lovers dragged themselves out to the kitchen to eat a very late lunch. Hermione was quite sore in the most delicious way, and Severus was feeling every bit of his forty-four years. Even with a nap, once they worked through the entire effects of the Sequoia Potion that was thoroughly used up to the very end, they were still worn out.

Hermione decided to don Severus' shirt she had divested him of that morning while Severus threw on his dressing gown, since he had conveniently forgotten to pack it. They had yet to unpack either of their trunks.

Checking his pantry and larder, Severus could tell that the Malfoys definitely stocked everything he and Hermione would need, and then some. The bottle of Fairy Brandy, and the pitcher of freshly-squeezed passion fruit placed front and center in his chilled ice box, did not escape his notice. No doubt this was a repayment in kind for what Severus did for them as a wedding present.
Severus offered to make lunch, though he was tempted to see if Mario’s was open that night since he wasn't sure he'd still be living come dinner time, much less have the energy to cook, unless Hermione was willing to. From the wiped-out and gratifyingly satisfied look on her face as she sat at the table, he wasn't sure she would be up to the task of cooking that night either.

"What's for lunch, my glorious sex god." Hermione sighed with a broad grin as she propped her cheek on her hand, her elbow on the table for support. She was quite thankful Severus’ lab was thoroughly stocked and he had something to soothe her with by making a salve. Otherwise, she wouldn't be sitting so comfortably at the moment, having been fucked until she was nearly raw.

It had been a long, long time since either of them had been sexually active, and not even toys did an adequate job of keeping Hermione "in shape."

Glancing over his shoulder, wearing a prideful smirk as he was busy chopping vegetables, he noted, "I am a sex god now? Absence has made the heart grow fonder."

"I always thought you were a sex god, Severus," she freely admitted, smiling even more dreamily. "I just didn't think you wanted to hear something so overly effusive without you deriding it as hormone-driven sentimental drivel. Though I could make the same claim when today you called me your beloved inamorata, your dulcinea, 'su tesorito,' your--"

"Silence, my saucy wench," he demanded playfully.

Even Severus could not deny he was caught up willingly in the magnificent throes of love and all the effusive things it would make him uncharacteristically say. Even if he meant every single declaration of his love, it was still a little awkward to hear back to his own ears. Though having Hermione confess her own romantic confessions was ever so fulfilling to his heart.

Hermione missed this, the playful banter between them. It was nice to know they could pick up where they'd left off despite their lengthy time apart.

"Yes, my darling cardimelech," she crooned sweetly at him.

Severus stopped his preparation of lunch and walked over to Hermione. He tipped her head up and leaned down to give her a gentle kiss. "You also are a vital force that makes my heart work," he said softly to her. "A sentiment that sweet and obscure deserves a kiss as a reward."
Diving into their hard-earned lunch, Hermione groaned with nearly the same lustful appreciation of the simple tossed salad Severus had made for them, as during their love-making earlier in the day.

Hermione loved the combination of chopped lettuces, tomatoes, cucumbers, radishes, avocado, papaya, and Asian pear, all tossed with a light citrus vinaigrette Severus whipped together.

Severus wished he hadn't given away all the ripe produce out of his garden, but at least Draco and Ginny had ordered plenty to replace what he gave to them and his neighbors in preparation for his trip that never came to be.

"After lunch, I'd like to get a tour of the rest of the house and unpack. That is, if you'll give me half a chance," she teased him.

"I was not the one who initiated another round of love-making when we were in the shower that took the last of our strength before our nap," he reminded her, giving her a leer in return.

"Oh, but that outdoor shower," she sighed effusively with a roll of her eyes. "Your body glistening in the sun, water sluicing off of your back and hair. That's one of those fantasy, hedonistic-type showers all women dream of, to have some fantastic sexual romp in with some chiseled stud." Her eyes raked over Severus possessively, definitely thinking Hawaii was not only good for his peace of mind, but his body as well.

"It's just some rock and wood with a shower head," he casually replied, pleased Hermione appreciated his body even more. Severus had had many a fantasy of having Hermione in that shower as he finally did that afternoon, but he wanted to draw out her opinion of it, since he did design the house with her in mind.

"But the aesthetic of it, Severus. It's simple, yet romantic. And those small ferns clinging to some of those rock ledges. The lovely potted orchids in bloom. And the placement of some of those rock and wooden ledges, if I didn't know better, you designed that shower for us to be able to easily make love in it." Some of those ledges were the perfect height for her to perch her arse on while Severus plowed into her, with a quick cushioning charm cast so as not to scrape her back against the lava rock.

Severus speared his salad and smiled to himself, pleased Hermione had noticed and liked the end result, even though the ferns grew there naturally without any help from him as the spores germinated and thrived in the well-shaded damp corners. "Well, remember," he reminded her, "this
is our house. I built this for the both of us."

Hermione stopped eating her salad and placed her fork down to reach across the table and take hold of Severus' hand. Looking about the kitchen and dining room, she choked out, "I sometimes forget this is not just your home, but ours. Being stuck back in England, the reality of it seems so far away."

"But you will not be there forever," Severus reminded her and squeezed her hand back. "You will finish your apprenticeship. One day, hopefully soon, you'll move all your belongings here, and this will truly be our house. Our home."

"Then after lunch, can I get a tour of 'our' home and unpack?" she asked once more.

"Better unpack first. Should you be inspired to attack me in the other rooms, we've never get unpacked. And should we go out to dinner tonight, you'll need something to wear other than your warm English clothing or my fine linen shirt," he said. His eyes glanced down her front as his shirt gaped and bloused on her, revealing fleeting glances of her breasts to him.

Their trunks side-by-side, they twirled and waved their wands to unpack. Severus made room in his armoire for all of Hermione's clothes, pleased that Marf had packed all her formal dresses as well.

"Oh, it did come," Hermione exclaimed as Severus unpacked her Christmas present to him.

"I would have thought that the proprietors would have presented proof of receipt, given you probably paid handsomely for Portkey delivery all the way here," he surmised.

"They did, but I didn't notice it in the living room earlier."

"That's because I packed it in hopes of opening it with you Christmas morning back at your flat."

Hermione hugged Severus once again, still touched he had made the effort to come all the way to England to see her, especially as he did originally promise never to return. She did notice the smaller box he floated along her present to him as he moved them to the living room to place under the tree, and the tag indicating it was meant for her.
There was her own small pile of presents Hermione had to move from her trunk to under the tree, as it seemed Marf had packed some presents from Lavender and the twins. There were maybe half a dozen boxes from Lavender. They were all in the same very recognizable gold-foil-wrapped flat boxes she remembered from Madame Maurelle Mandel's House of Haute Couture. Probably some sexy lingerie for Hermione to put on only to be quickly taken off by Severus.

As for what the twins gave her, she could not guess. Hermione was thankful for the Undetectable Extension Charm that was included with the purchase of her new trunk, as one of the presents from the twins was larger than the trunk itself. The gift was about five-feet tall and two-and-a-half-feet wide and deep. There were a few other presents from the twins as well and she hoped none of them were too unseemly, for even they pushed the bounds of tastelessness to new levels. Still, Hermione certainly didn't mind making Galleons from products that they both profited from – products birthed from her most crude, crass, and lewd ideas voiced during her moments of resignation and desperation while enduring the twins' brainstorming sessions.

Hermione set Severus' birthday present to her by the side of the bed, eager to show him the portable paradise he'd given her. She had hoped to show it to him in India, but at least Marf had packed it for this trip.

Putting her dresses away, she noted Severus had a large number of short-sleeved shirts and few long-sleeved ones. Given Severus' reluctance to show his Dark Mark back in England, she surmised that the social taboos and the stigma attached to such a mark must not exist in Malu Palekaiko, for Severus to wear clothing that allowed his Mark to be seen openly.

Severus changed into clothing to run a quick errand, and Hermione was amazed Severus would wear a short-sleeved Hawaiian shirt, a pair of shorts, and sandals so casually and with ease. She mostly knew him buttoned up in his long frock coats. Sometimes during the summer he had dressed only in a long-sleeved shirt, devoid of a waistcoat or coat. And even then, he'd always worn trousers. This was some other tropical version of Severus she would have to get used to, just like the beard and less emotionally-reserved Severus she was now just acquainted with.

Changing from Severus' shirt into a cool cotton sun-dress from her summer wardrobe, Hermione felt much better, understanding how Severus could adapt to the native wardrobe. She still cast a cooling charm in the bedroom since she was finding the warmth of Hawaii a bit much, given the cold climate she just came from.

Hermione finished unpacking the last of her toiletries when Severus returned with news they had secured the last table at Mario's for Christmas Eve dinner.
Sidling up to him, she demurely played with the skin along his collarbone and neck. "I so longed to go out to dinner with you back in London. I'm glad I can finally walk out in public with you now, neither of us having to hide any longer."

Severus was not one to brag, and he had even been reluctant to tell others about Hermione, but now he could not wait to walk down the main street tonight with Hermione on his arm for anyone and everyone to see.

This would be their official debut as a couple together in public as themselves, not pretending to be an ordinary Muggle couple going by Hermione's maiden name, Granger.

No more hiding.

"Will you help me pick what dress to wear?" she asked. "You know the local fashion better than I."

Severus was no couture doyen. He could have told her that given the island's lax fashion standards she could have shown up in a simple pareo and rubber flip-flop sandals and fit right in with the clientèle at Mario's. Instead, he decided to ease her fears, remembering his own concerns about dressing appropriately during his first days of sanctuary.

Pulling the backless black number aside in the armoire, sliding it along the rod, he said, "If you wear this, we're never making it out the door." Pulling out the plum-colored two-piece dress robe outfit to glance at it, he said, "Too warm and more appropriate for business."

Looking at the red one and the matching cloak, he clearly recalled seeing Hermione in it the night she came to him after her anniversary dinner. A flood of conflicting memories came back to him as he studied it. It was the night she had said she wanted him, then ran away, leaving him misunderstanding her words. As wonderful as that color was on her, he could not bear to see her wear that dress again.

Hermione noticed how he was lost in thought while looking at it and stepped in. "I had no idea Marf packed that. I wouldn't have brought it. I have my own mixed feelings about this dress. I think I may just give it away since I'll never wear it again." That dress was her death shroud for her first marriage. It was a cursed garment for them both.

The only two dresses left were the purple one she'd worn to Viktor and Anne's wedding and the blue halter dress from the Ministry Halloween ball. "Leave the blue one for the New Year's Eve
Ball, since I wanted to dance with you when last I saw you wear this," he said fondly.

Now that everything was packed away, Severus took her on yet another tour of the house, this one in person instead of a memory viewed through a Pensieve.

Severus showed off his new Pensieve, having bought it after his memory for her was made. She complimented him on his choice and oohed and ahhed over it, noting the depiction of Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory in bas-relief around the base made of white marble.

He stood behind her and wrapped his arms about her waist as she admired it. "Lavender told me that you spend quite a bit of time using her Pensieve in your office Friday nights, based on reports from the house-elves," he murmured into her hair, which had become even wilder with the tropical humidity.

There was nothing she could keep secret from house-elves. She even noted that Marf cleaned her sex toys that kept her unsatisfactorily satisfied, much to her embarrassment and chagrin, before she had a chance to clean them herself sometimes. She wanted to tell the helpful creature he didn't have to do that, that she could wash her own sex toys, but was too mortified to broach the subject with him. And even when she cleaned her own, she noticed that they were more carefully arranged when she went back into the drawer she stored them in than when she originally put them away. Even when unpacking, Hermione found her stash of sex toys included in a discreet drawer and her emergency escape box. She was tired of toys and was ready for the real thing once more, but Hermione decided to leave them in the trunk for the time being, unless Severus wanted to incorporate them into their brief time together.

"Don't tell me that until you got this Pensieve of your own, your only fulfillment were fantasies and a calloused hand?" she asked, knowing Severus was far more inventive than he gave himself credit for in that regard.

"Well," he began, but felt slightly embarrassed, not sure how she would take to the news of his taking Polyjuice Potion and blending it with the hair she gave him a year ago. He gave a short sigh of exasperation and merely said, "I made do."

Hermione knew there was more. She decided this one time to prod him, hoping he could be as open and honest with her as he had been earlier in the day with his emotions.

Sliding out of his embrace and changing positions to stand behind, she wrapped her arms around him. Gliding one hand down his front to stroke his length through his cotton twill shorts, she purred against his back, "Severus, you know my little secret, though it seems it isn't much of a
"Secret if Lavender and the house-elves know about it."

Severus shut his eyes, enjoying the friction of her hand along his slowly stiffening length.

"Tell me. Please," she asked sweetly.

"You did give me a fair amount of hair for the Polyjuice Potion last year," he reluctantly admitted, as he began to roll his hips in time to her hand movements.

Hermione's hand stopped. "You've Polyjuiced into me more than once?" she asked.

Severus' eyes opened, noticing the sudden cessation of Hermione's attention. 'I hope she's not upset.'

Hermione didn't know what to think. She knew he'd changed into her in order to flee the country, but to willingly change into her for sexual gratification? Maybe that was where he learned that new technique to stroke her clit and labia just so in that new way she'd enjoyed earlier, having spent time in her own body.

Her hand began to slowly stroke Severus through his shorts once again, this time more slowly. "What inspired you to do that?" She didn't sound upset nor disgusted, but merely curious.

"The first week we were here, I knocked up Draco and Ginny. Ginny opened the door of the honeymoon suite, or should I say, Draco Polyjuiced as Ginny answered the door and told me to come back several hours later. The smell on his breath was unmistakable."

Thoughts raced through Hermione's mind, and she didn't realize it, but her breath had become more labored and her grasp of Severus through his shorts firmer. Images of herself turned into Severus fucking herself filled her mind. She wondered what it would feel like as a man to have an orgasm, and for Severus to experience that sweet sensation of being filled as he entered her, and knowing what joys and pleasures she felt making love with him.

Severus said nothing, waiting for her response.
"Do you think that maybe..." Hermione began, but stopped, unable to say it since the concept was so new to her.

"You want to try Polyjuice Potion and trade places?" Severus asked, a slightly bemused lilt in his voice, sensing Hermione was quite turned on by the idea, but was too embarrassed to outright ask.

"Yes." She exhaled, her sigh full of lust, feeling herself get turned on by the idea alone. Her hand unzipped the front of his shorts and slipped into his underpants to grasp his cock. Inspired, she rocked her hips into Severus bottom, giving him a feeling of what it was like to have someone grinding against him from behind, despite her lack of equipment.

"You almost seem eager to try it right now," Severus said. He wondered himself how it would feel to be inserted by something other than his own fingers for once.

"If we didn't have those dinner reservations tonight, I would say why not."

Hermione steered Severus over toward a nearby bench with her hands guiding him, pushing his hips and waist where she wanted him to go. She spun him around and dropped to her knees as she finished yanking his shorts and underpants down far enough. Looking up at him, as her hand stroked his now rigid length, she said, "I can't wait to see what it feels like if you were to do this to me." She closed her eyes and engulfed him entirely in her mouth in one slow fluid motion.

Severus threw his head back and groaned loudly, his hands gripping the edges of the bench.

"See," Hermione said, stroking his cock with one hand, letting the tip of his cock rest against her lower lip as she talked, "I want to know how that feels for you." Her other hand began to cup his sac, gently playing with the hairs.

Severus felt a thrill shoot through him when Hermione began to caress him there and goosebumps raced along his thighs and flanks, coupled with her taking him back into her warm and willing mouth.

His hand moved from the bench to her hair. He played with her wild mane and slowly entrenched his fingers into her curls.

Hermione knew what he would do next, and she relaxed her throat as he began to fuck her mouth.
His plaintive sighs, the way his eyes would close and he would be lost in the sensation – she loved it all, as she looked up at him adoringly. She loved giving him pleasure, for he surely gave her plenty as well. And as vulgar as it may have been for her to say it aloud, she loved to suck Severus' cock.

Just as Severus began to pick up the pace, he stopped and hauled her up from the floor. He placed her in front of the bench and silently instructed to have Hermione brace her hands on the bench top.

He then settled in behind Hermione, yanking her knickers down until they only hung about one ankle so she could spread her legs, and hitching her dress up above her hips. Severus ground his cock up against her bottom, rubbing his head between the cleft of her cheeks. She arched her back in response.

"While you were turned into me," she panted, "did you ever feel your body naturally arch?"

Severus did notice while transformed into her, his body did respond differently. "Yes."

"Interesting," she sighed as she presented her backside to him.

Severus obliged and used his hand to guide himself into her, sinking deeply into her warmth. "How so," he groaned.

Leaning forward, relishing the sensation of the front of Severus' thighs slapping against the backs of her as he started to rhythmically slide in and out of her, she said through wistful sighs, "That means that while Polyjuiced as someone of the opposite sex, your body will instinctively respond." She grunted softly as Severus picked up the pace, slamming into her with more force. "To arch your back, to present yourself to be impaled, to feel that innate need to spread yourself wide to accept that magnificent cock of yours."

Severus grabbed a firmer hold of her hips and leaned forward, pinning her against the bench. He growled into her hair, "And you'll know how it instinctively feels to want to pound this delicious body, to ram myself deeply into you," he said through belabored grunts. "To revel in the maddening need to fill you until you come. To feel you milk my cock as you quiver and tremble around me, making love to you until I see you lost in the throes of an orgasm," he said, every other word coming out as a pant.

He reached around and began to stroke her clit.
She shrieked in response to the additional stimulus of his fingers. With one hand, she played with her nipple, tugging at it through her cotton dress and brassiere, wanting to increase the building epicenter of her orgasm she could sense was coming.

"Oh God, I can't wait to fuck you so you can know how good you feel." Seduced by her own statement, Hermione came, her cries choking in the back of her throat.

Severus shuddered and placed his head in the middle of her back as he came. Each time his balls seized and another spurt filled her, he grunted, his strokes becoming slower and more languid until he stopped entirely.

Hermione leaned forward, letting the cool metal bench top chill her nipples through her bunched up sun-dress-. The cool metal on the side of her face was quite refreshing, given how the tropical heat was finally starting to get to her. She could feel Severus breathe deeply against her back as he clung to her, hugging her from behind as if she were a piece of driftwood in the wide open seas.

When he withdrew from her, Hermione hissed. "Oh, I think I need some more of that salve. The lubrication potion wore off long ago," she noted with some resignation.

As she remained there bent over on the lab bench, she finally noticed with some detached observation – while ignoring the fact her arse was still fully on view – how Severus had half the benches topped with wood, and the other half with slabs of various stones or metals.

Severus pulled up his clothing before going to the other side of his lab and coming back with a small jar.

Tenderly, he applied the salve to her more abused parts. "I'm sorry. I guess we both got caught up in the moment. Though I could have used spit if you were that dry and desperate."

Hermione gave a hum of relief as the ointment soothed her. "I was too turned on to notice at the time. And spit? I'd rather you have opened that bottle of safflower oil on the shelf above our heads, since spit dries quickly." Once taken care of, she bent over, pulled her knickers up, and smoothed her dress down.

"You, me, a bottle of oil, and a hundred-square-foot sheet of six mil plastic sheeting. That sounds like a date," Severus said, finally thinking of a use for the roll of polyethylene sheeting he saw for
Hermione stopped and looked at Severus, wondering where he picked up that particular Muggle terminology. "Six mil plastic sheeting?"

"There is a Muggle hardware section at the local general store, near the aisle where they sell paint," he explained upon seeing her regard him so curiously.

She shook her head, wondering just how much Muggle culture Severus had picked up in Malu Palekaiko. But first, they would finish the tour of their house together.

Showering once more without going at it yet again proved to be harder than they thought. Just as Hermione would soap Severus' back, her hand and the soap found other places to wash; this would distract Severus from the task of rinsing his hair, and resulted in a quick unfinished hand job. Hermione didn't protest either when Severus decided that he needed to spend at least five minutes to soap her breasts and lick the spray of water from her shoulder and neck. They decided that Severus would dress in the bedroom and Hermione would dress in the bathroom. Otherwise, they would definitely be late to dinner and never make it out the door, even with Hermione not wearing that little black backless dress Severus loved.

As he came into the bathroom to put on a small amount of cologne for her that night and brush his hair and beard one last time, he watched as Hermione finished pulling her hair up into an artfully arranged tangle of curls and tendrils.

"No, not quite right," he said absentmindedly to himself as he came over. With his finger, he pulled free one tendril and let it drape artfully down, halfway between the side and back on her neck so you could see it peeking out when viewed from the front. "There," he said with some satisfaction.

"I remember seeing you at Flourish and Blotts that sweltering night long ago. I noticed you observing me in the Potions aisle, and so I followed you to where I saw you reading up on family and marriage." Severus smiled to himself as he ran a finger along her neck, toying with the lock of her hair. "You had a tendril of hair on the back of your neck that refused to be tamed. And the more you played with it, the more I wanted to attach myself to your neck."

Hermione observed the look on Severus' face as he recounted that night, relishing in the light ministrations of his finger along her skin. She remembered that night too. "It was the scent of that cologne that made me stop to observe you. I caught the faintest hint of it and was going to ask whoever was wearing it what the name was. But then I saw you standing there in your black cloak
and remembered how you said if we met in public, we would be but strangers to one another. I didn't want the enchantment to end."

Spinning around, she trailed her nose along the edge of Severus' collar, her hands placed palms down on his chest. "And I can smell that you used that same cologne to Haunt me with memories of you once more."

Severus smirked at her obvious pun. He also noticed Hermione was exuding a rather unique smell of her own now that she was in close proximity.

"I should ask you, what deliriously intoxicating scent are you wearing tonight," he purred and lifted her hand up to kiss her palm, inhaling the perfume more deeply, feeling his own senses reel.

"Something Albert and I have been working on. A match for Haunt. It smells different on each witch, amplifying her natural scents," she explained as his mouth began to trail kisses up the inside of her forearm, making it harder for Hermione to speak. "What do you smell?" she asked with a plaintive sigh.

"Gardenia, amber, bergamot," Severus recited. His eyes closed as he inhaled deeply, trailing his nose along the inside crook of her arm before sweeping her fully into his arms. He buried his nose at the base of her neck, smelling where she'd applied the tiniest amount to her pulse points. "Ylang-ylang, tuberose, tarragon, rose, oakmoss, and..." He inhaled once more deeply, enfolded her in his arms, and stopped. "Orange blossom."

Severus let go of Hermione and stepped back from her for a moment. Orange blossom was a scent he associated with Gabrielle. His first meeting with her was at the altar, and the scent of her bridal crown was his strongest memory of that particular fragrance.

It was an infinitesimal amount in the blend Hermione wore, he noted. Still, just naming it brought back a flood of memories, like a ghost from the past haunting him in his own way, just as his own scent haunted Hermione.

Noting the sudden change in his demeanor and how he had gone a little pale, Hermione placed a hand on his chest. "Severus, what's wrong?"

"I..." Severus had hardly thought about Gabrielle since coming to Malu Palekaiko, his thoughts mostly fixating on Hermione instead, and if or when they would be together again. His dead wife
was like some apparition of the past reminding him of sins he had tried to absolve himself from for decades and put behind him with his new life. Severus had told Hermione about her. Surely, this was no time to be evasive with her. "Orange blossoms remind me of Gabrielle."

"I'm sorry if it brings back unpleasant memories. I'll just remove it," Hermione began, but was stopped when she reached for a tissue.

"No," Severus said as he gently grabbed her hand to stop her. "It's very minuscule and compliments the blending of other scents, plus the top note of lemon I also detect now. It smells divine on you. Leave it." He lifted her hand and tenderly kissed the inside of her wrist where she had placed a small drop earlier.

Orange blossoms were a part of Hermione and Gabrielle, just as they both had curious brown eyes, brown hair – Gabrielle's hair a light chestnut and Hermione's a dark chestnut, keen intelligence, and an insatiable quest for knowledge.

They also both had a certain air of righteous know-it-all common sense, the trait that caused Gabrielle to get herself killed. With Hermione, she'd used that particular trait to clear Severus' name and revoke the Death Eater Decree for him and Draco, in addition to ending a long string of election fraud. Severus could embrace that scent of orange blossoms on her, just as he embraced all those other traits that Hermione also happened to share with Gabrielle. It was a part of who she was that made him love her.

Severus was about to extend his arm to Hermione to begin escorting her to the restaurant, but was suddenly struck with another moment of inspiration.

"One moment," he said as he ducked off into the outdoor shower. Severus returned with a small spray of orchids.

Grabbing a spare hairpin Hermione had left on the counter, he began pinning it on the left side above her ear. "In Hawaii, a woman indicates if she is available or taken by the positioning of a flower behind her right or left ear," he explained.

Hermione was familiar with the custom, having read it in her tourist books, and understood the symbolism behind Severus placing it on her left side.

She admired the white orchids tipped with a vivid shade of purple that was a near match to her
dress. "It's lovely," she said, gazing upon the vision of her and Severus in the bathroom mirror together.

"Our table awaits," Severus said as he stepped back and bowed courteously, kissing Hermione's hand, his eyes never leaving hers.

Hermione was strongly reminded of their early courtship days and how he would bow to her, kiss her hand, and help her with her cloak, slowly seducing his way into her heart. This was Hawaii and there was no cloak to help her with, since cloaks were very rarely if ever worn locally. But in England, there were no orchids to pin in her hair. She could adapt, with pleasure.

Tucking her arm in his, they set out into the deepening twilight of night towards town.

Leisurely strolling through town, Severus pointed out the various shops along the way to Mario's.

"That's the general store where I bought my Pensieve. They can Owl-Order or Portkey in anything from around the world, which is a great help to those who can't leave the safety of sanctuary."

He pointed to the shop across the road, their feet making a soft hollow thumping noise on the wide wooden boardwalk. "And that's the bookstore, Paige Spien's. Though not as extensive as Flourish and Blotts, there is a fair selection, plus she also has an exchange with a number of booksellers in San Francisco, Portland, Lima, Sydney, Tokyo, Beijing, Manila, Seoul, Seattle, Mexico City, and others. So if you want a particular book, she can get it, but finding something new through browsing you won't be as satisfied as at Flourish and Blotts."

They walked past the grocer who was just closing up, staying open extra late for those last-minute Christmas preparations and the forgotten extra pound of butter needed for baking.

"Severus! Who is your friend?" Lucinda asked.

Severus turned and presented his companion. "This is Hermione. She's here visiting for the week. And this is Lucinda, the town grocer."

Lucinda extended her hand to shake it, but not before wiping in on her apron. "Pleased to meet you. Well, I've got to finish closing up and go home to finish up some baking for tomorrow. Mele Kalikimaka, you two."
"Mele Kalikimaka, Lucinda," Severus said, not tripping over the saying like he did a year ago.

"She seems nice," Hermione said. She smiled at the witch as Lucinda used her wand to put away her produce display stands for the night and holiday, moving them from the sidewalk to inside the store.

"A lot of the people in this town are nice," Severus said with no sarcasm.

Hermione patted his arm, noting Severus seemed to be happy amongst these townsfolk.

As they continued their walk towards Mario's, a familiar place came into view. Bongo's had its doors wide open, as usual. Inside were revelers having a cup of Christmas cheer on Christmas Eve.

Severus could hear the band merrily playing away, a bluesy-folk rendition of a Christmas hymn that was normally sung with great solemnity reinterpreted to be a bit more cheerful with a faster tempo. From the flourishes on the piano, he could tell Jerry was tickling the ivories that night.

Looking up, she saw the shingle hanging outside the bustling bar. "Is this the infamous Bongo's?" Hermione asked with great interest, stopping at the open doors to observe the scene.

"The one and only." Severus spied Jerry just as he suspected, along with Agnes. The old witch was strumming away, playing a guitar solo while Maurice was squeezing and bellowing his accordion with the basic melody. There were a few people with brass horns, and someone had brought their cello to the bar to join in the nightly impromptu jam session.

Jerry looked up and spotted Severus and Hermione standing out on the sidewalk, the light of the bar bathing them in the warm yellow and red glow of the tavern lights. The Charms and Transfiguration tutor who worked with Severus was glad to see that everything worked out, and Hermione did indeed make it to Hawaii as Draco informed him. It was strange to see Severus dressed so formally, as he was wearing a neatly pressed long-sleeved white shirt buttoned up to his neck, long black trousers, a smartly fitted and tailored waistcoat, and a very beautiful witch on his arm. And that Hermione looked just as stunning as the photo of her on Severus' desk back at the shop.

Wrapping up the song in short order, Jerry mumbled something to the band as Hermione and Severus looked on, the witch fascinated by the local flavor.
Catching Severus' eye, Jerry gave an exaggerated wink at him before launching into a new song.

The band joined in, familiar with the old standard, and Jerry began to croon.

"Kiss me once and kiss me twice  
Then kiss me once again  
It's been a long, long time  
Haven't felt like this, my dear  
Since I can't remember when  
It's been a long, long time..."

It was definitely sung for Severus' benefit and hers.

Hermione leaned against Severus, not missing the lyrics. She swayed back and forth a bit, suddenly remembering it had been over a year since they had danced together.

Severus encouraged Hermione continue on towards the restaurant, but once past the open doors of Bongo's where no one else could spy them, and noting the rest of the street was deserted, Severus pulled Hermione into his arms and began a slow foxtrot in time to the music.

Hermione threw her head back and laughed softly at the sudden spontaneity of Severus dancing with her out in public. They moved within the narrow confines of the sidewalk, keeping it simple. The song was shortly over, and Severus spun her once under his arm as the tune ended.

Tucking her arm back into his, she leaned slightly to the right, resting her head a little on Severus' shoulder as they finished walking the last few doors down to Mario's.

Severus opened the door to the restaurant and was greeted by Mario himself.

"Good evening, Severus. I can't tell you how pleased I was to learn you made reservations, and for two," the Italian wizard and chef said, drinking in the sight of Hermione on his arm.

Mario had come from Italy a couple decades prior, but still had a rather strong accent. He had sought sanctuary after his own dealings with the local mafia; he had enacted a bit of his own
justice before coming to Malu Palekaiko, similar to Jerry's story. Before Mario's arrival, there were no fine dining establishments in Malu Palekaiko, nor any decent European cuisine of note, other than dining privately in the home of someone who was originally from Europe.

"Mario, may I present Hermione," Severus said with some pride, his chest puffing out the tiniest bit.

Mario bowed and grasped Hermione's hand to kiss the top of it. "Piacere! Ah. Hai rotto il fiato."

"He says it's a pleasure to meet you, and that you take his breath away," Severus faithfully translated for her.

"Grazie, Mario. I look forward to dining here, since I've heard such good things about it from Severus and other friends," Hermione said, remembering how Lavender was thrilled with the food and service. The founder of The Lovely Lavender Company was fairly hard to impress, considering all the fine dining establishments she frequented all over the world.

"Prego," Mario said humbly. "See? She speaks Italian already and as beautifully as she looks. She is a keeper, Severus, my friend."

Severus shook his head, knowing that Hermione wasn't the only beautiful witch to be charmed by Mario's suave manners and welcoming hospitality. He remembered when he, Draco, and Ginny first came to this restaurant.

"Come. I have a nice table for you in the back where you won't be disturbed." Mario beckoned them to follow him with a subtle gesture of his hand. He had two menus and a wine list tucked under his other arm.

As Severus and Hermione walked through the long and narrow restaurant, other diners stopped their conversations to notice that one of the town's few Potions masters, and one of the top eligible bachelors, was in the company of a beautiful and unknown witch. It did not escape the couple's attentions how the other diners' eyes raked over Hermione, surveying her and noticing how formal Severus was dressed compared to his more local casual look. They were by far the most formally dressed couple in the entire restaurant. Many of the men were wearing merely clean and not too wrinkled Hawaiian shirts or T-shirts and a clean pair of shorts. The women were also in very cool and casual dresses, or Hawaiian shirt and matching short outfits. It also escaped no one's attention there was a spray of orchids carefully placed behind Hermione's left ear.
After Mario helped Hermione into her seat, they accepted their menus and Severus was handed the wine list before Mario wished them "Buon Appetito."

Looking at the menu with her eyes never leaving it, Hermione said casually, "I think we're now officially the talk of the town."

Hermione was sitting with her back to the long wall. Out of the left corner of her eye, she saw the other diners' heads bent together while casting curious glances their way. Severus had the full view, sitting to Hermione's immediate right. He could see the eyes dart their way and even noticed how the conversation in the restaurant jumped by a few decibels once the newly-arrived couple walked through the length of the packed restaurant.

"This island is a hotbed haven for gossip and speculative rumors, since there is little else to take up their free time in this quiet town," Severus remarked dryly, with a hint of bitterness. He did not like to be talked about in such fashion, nor did he want Hermione to be the center of town gossip.

Hermione had been the center of gossip back home for nearly a year. She was no longer fazed by it. First she was the witch who was dumped by her rising-star Quidditch-player husband for a beauty queen. Then she was the witch who started that "awful Muggle fad of divorce and broken engagements." Next she was heralded in the tabloids and papers throughout Great Britain as that Muggle-born who exonerated two ex-Death Eaters, though her fame for finally discovering Dumbledore's will took a back seat to the more lurid news of her work to clear Severus and Draco's name and the irony of it, given her Muggle heritage. And the latest was that she was that pitiful, divorced witch who worked for her ex-husband's new wife who had just had a baby. There was even rampant speculation that Ron had left her for Lavender because Hermione was infertile. In each reincarnation of the gossip that surrounded her, there was always a footnote about how she was friends with Harry Potter.

If anything, Hermione knew that once people's curiosity was satisfied, they moved on to something else to occupy it.

"I know how to stop them staring at us," Hermione said.

"What, cast a Disillusionment Charm?" he asked with some sarcasm, stating the obvious.

"No, this," she said as she set her menu down and craned her neck to the side. With her right hand, she cupped Severus' cheek and guided him into a spontaneous kiss.
It was not a kiss filled with burning passion, but with slow sensuality. Hermione did not consume Severus with her kiss as she did earlier in the day. Instead, she slowly caressed his lips with hers as the tip of her tongue teased the tip of his.

Severus was surprised by the suddenness of Hermione kissing him in public, but did not fight it. His hand gently stroked her neck, sensing the mood set by her kiss.

Hermione pulled away and smiled at him. Without looking over her shoulder, she said softly, "They aren't looking at us anymore, are they?"

Severus was so enraptured by her sudden and swift seduction of that simple kiss that he had to tear his eyes away from hers to look. Sure enough, just as she predicted, everyone was back to minding their own business, and the level of conversation in the restaurant was back down to a more restful drone.

"How did you know?" Severus asked, wondering what inspired her to that bit of insight.

"Everyone was curious. You could see it in their faces and hear it in their hushed whispers. Satisfy their curiosity, and they move on to something else to occupy their free time in this quiet town," she hearkened back to his earlier statement.

"So you put on a show of public affection for their amusement?"

"I wanted to kiss you regardless. But if it also served the purpose of letting us enjoy our meal in peace, then I was willing to let them watch. Besides, we don't have to hide anymore," she reminded him.

"No, we don't," Severus agreed, and reached out to hold her hand on top of the table.

The waiter eventually came over. Severus ordered for the both of them and chose a nice Campania white wine, made from grapes grown somewhere along the Amalfi Coast. Severus selected the traditional Italian Seven Fishes Christmas Eve dinner. Mario was a master at preparing the local seafood, and he wanted Hermione to have the best of everything during her first visit to Malu Palekaiko.

But first there was the aperitivo. Severus had ordered a split of champagne to go with the first
course of freshly shucked raw oysters, served with a shallot and champagne vinegar mignonette. Pouring the champagne, Severus tilted the glasses to keep the foam from bubbling over the edge.

"What shall we toast to?" Hermione asked, holding her glass up.

"To the best Christmas present ever given to me," he said, still amazed she was there with him, and Draco and Albert's scheming to bring her there to him.

"And best present to me as well," Hermione amended as they clinked.

The next course was salmon, marinated red pepper, and crème fraîche blended with artichoke, topped with a slice of Kalamata olive. It was Italian, but definitely had some French influence in the presentation.

The primo course was a traditional Linguine con le Vongole. Hermione marveled at how well the clams were done, not overcooked; and the broth was flavorful without being over-garlicky. Even during her previous trip to Italy – many of her trips lately were with Albert – the linguine with clams had a broth that was often too oily or too heavy-handed with the garlic. Mario's linguine course was sublime and light, and not too large, since there were still four more courses to go. Hermione appreciated the fact that the portions were small, since there were so many dishes she and Severus were going to be served.

For the secondo, or main entrée, Mario served up baked eel with lemon, olives, and capers, alongside braised squid with tomatoes, and sautéed scallops wrapped in basil leaves and topped with a light Alfredo sauce. There was a small and neatly arranged pile of freshly steamed spinach – drizzled lightly with olive oil, freshly cracked pepper, and nutmeg – served as the contorno, or side dish, alongside the trio of seafood.

In between each course, Hermione and Severus talked, able to have those languid conversations they once had as they sat by the fire, their lust sated and bellies full of good food and fine wine in Severus' flat. Hermione asked him more about his Potions shop and business, while he asked about her apprenticeship and her work with Lavender.

Just as one course was cleared away, there was a pause until the next course was served, timed to be a long and languid meal that makes one truly appreciate a fine dining experience. In those periods between courses, Hermione and Severus held hands, gazing deeply into each other's eyes highlighted by the ambient candlelight and the small votive on the table. Periodically, they were so lost in each other's eyes, they hardly noticed when the next course would suddenly appear on the table in front of them.
As much as Hermione loved the many wonderful and romantic dinners Severus had cooked for her, it was nice that they could forget about the kitchen and dishes, even though Marf helped a great deal. Both she and Severus were being catered to, pampered by the wonderful service, and served with superb seafood dishes.

Even Severus enjoyed the fact he didn't have to think about anything overcooking or busy steaming away in the kitchen, even if Marf could be there to attend to it. All of Severus' attention was on Hermione and Hermione alone.

The insalata came, which was a simple salad with small shrimp, lemon, olive oil, parsley, basil, oregano, pepper, and tender baby lettuces.

After the salad course, Hermione wasn't sure if she could eat any more. Granted, she and Severus only had a light salad for lunch, but there was much more protein she consumed during dinner. She wasn't sure she could eat anything else, and yet she still wanted dessert.

Even Severus was at his limit. And he was looking forward to Mario's cannoli, which he'd had on previous visits, but he wanted Hermione to try them herself.

When the plates disappeared back to the kitchen, Mario saw the diners didn't finish their salads. He came out of the kitchen.

"I sense that you've left no room for dessert," Mario correctly surmised.

"Once again, an excellent meal, good sir."

"Grazie," Mario bowed slightly toward Severus in recognition of his compliment.

"Yes, it was better than I could have hoped. Dinner was perfect, except that I can't face dessert," Hermione admitted. "Normally when we would dine together, we would have dessert at a much later time, after letting dinner settle for a while."

"Then let me pack it up to go for you, so that you may enjoy it later, after dinner has settled, as you say," Mario offered.
"Thank you, that would be appreciated." For once, Severus was able to pull out his money and pay, since the last time they dined in public, Hermione had to pay for everything with her credit card and Muggle money.

It really was nice to be free from the restrictions of the Death Eater Decree, able to treat Hermione like he had wanted to.

Severus left a generous tip for Mario for the wonderful meal, choice table location, and accommodating his request for a last-minute reservation on Christmas Eve.

As Hermione and Severus strolled arm-in-arm down the middle of the street, Hermione looked up and finally got a good look at the looming black silhouette of the volcano that rose up above the town. She could see the faintest red glow from the lip of the caldera, as the volcano had been active recently. The flow even reached the northwest side of the island, burning through some uninhabited forestland.

"I forget you live in the shadow of a volcano. Isn't there a risk of the town or people's houses being in the path of a lava flow?" she asked, having read about some homes on the Big Island being covered with lava periodically.

"As long as people are respectful of Pele and make their offerings, their homes and this town are safe," Severus said matter of factly.

Hermione stopped walking, which caused Severus to stop as well. Looking at him strangely and slightly shocked by Severus' statement, she said, "I didn't take you for a religious person, Severus."

"It's not religion based on faith when Pele exists," he said with a tone to indicate he was not joking, nor had he imbibed in the locals' own special brand of Kool-Aid. "It's her magic that gave me protection from being hauled back to England when Potter found me. Did Potter tell you what happened when he laid hands on Ginny our first day when he tracked us here?" Of course he did not want to mention his and Mounga's personal experience coming across Pele in real life, nor his spotting of her during the Pele Festival. It would sound too fantastical and delusional.

Hermione began walking once more alongside Severus, weighing his words and trying to remember. "No, Harry merely said that he found Ginny, that he'd known about you and me since the night of my anniversary dinner with Ron, since he saw me leaving your flat that night, and that he was willing to finally listen to my claims that you and Draco were always faithful to the Order.
That, and he was going away for a bit." She heaved a great sigh, remembering the day and all the sorrow and anxiety she went through.

"Well, Potter showed up in the late morning, while I was sleeping. He barged into Draco and Ginny's suite at Justina's hotel, just down the hall from my room. Halulu showed up and informed him that Ginny was under the protection of the island's magic, but Potter did not understand the finer implications of her statement. He grabbed Ginny in order to throw some clothes on her, or so he claimed, and he disappeared without her. They found him transported back in front of the Portkey office. He was lucky: some Aurors and bounty hunters have been transported to treetops, shark-infested lagoons, three miles out to sea, and on a rare occasion, the edge of the caldera if they attempt to take a person who has been granted sanctuary from this place."

Hermione laughed and shook her head. "No, Harry did not tell me about that. Neither did Draco or Ginny inform me of that, but I do remember from your memory of Dumbledore's own experience trying to bring back some of Grindel--"

"Shh!" Severus shushed her, not wanting to be overheard by anyone out late for a walk. "Since the Headmaster tried to bring some of his followers back, I'm not quite sure who still might have issues with the old Headmaster. Draco and I have avoided mentioning the Headmaster and his old war foe by name, to avoid those who might have issue with us being aligned with him."

Hermione could see the need to hide one's past. "Of your past, who knows about you and Draco here?"

"Mouna processed my request for sanctuary, Gary Fujitani processed Draco. Halulu processed Ginny and knows of us through our association with Ginny, but Mouna is the only one who knows all my secrets. Even ones I've never told you or Draco, and will never mention again," he said solemnly, his eyes cast down on the pavement in front of them as they wound their way back home.

Hermione had heard from Draco and Ginny about the use of Veritaserum in the granting-of-sanctuary interviews. She wondered, if she was forced to drink that much Veritaserum, would she remember things she had purposely put out of her mind and forgotten? She did not want to know first-hand.

Finally back at the house, Severus put the cannoli away.

"Stretching, Hermione asked as she headed towards the bedroom, "Care to make use of one more vial of Sequoia?"
"I was thinking we could make use of the Finaus' gift to us and visit the hot springs tonight. Otherwise we'll have to wait until my usual day, Wednesday," Severus countered.

"Can we do both?" she counter-offered. Hermione had had many fantasies of making love in one of those beautiful tropical pools she had seen in her tourism books. The fact that the twins' portable tropical paradise also had a mini-soaking pool with waterfall included only fueled her desire for an idealized romp in the water.

Considering all the wanking he had done in the hot springs thinking of Hermione, a visit there was only the natural next step considering she was finally there in the flesh. Severus guessed he wasn't going to let his muscles relax in the hot water after all, if he was going to put them to work some more that night.

Severus undressed quickly, changing into a pair of shorts, a plain black T-shirt Ginny once gave him as some joke, and some rubber flip-flop sandals. He then grabbed a couple towels.

"What are you doing?" Severus asked as he saw Hermione trying to shimmy into a one-piece bathing suit that Marf had packed for her.

"Getting changed for the hot springs, of course."

"You won't be needing that. Just something to throw over yourself for now, as we will undress there," he informed her, smiling with anticipation of more fantasies of his coming true shortly.

"What about other people?" she asked, not getting the finer points of Draco's comment that the Finaus' gave them use of the hot springs that night.

"We have it all to ourselves until sunrise. It's under a Fidelius Charm and no one else will show up, unless they want to risk losing their weekly privileges when it is clearly not their turn." Severus threw the towels over his shoulder while he waited for Hermione to get out of her swimsuit and find a pair of cotton knickers, a loose cotton dress, and sensible sandals, since she'd noted Severus' choice of footwear.

Side-Along Apparating there together, they waited for a moment while their eyes adjusted to the sudden darkness.
“Lumos.” Severus held his wand out in front of himself so he could see where he was walking and make his way from the Apparition platform up the stone stairs to the soaking pool. Hermione also cast the same charm and followed, watching where he was stepping.

As they reached the top of the short staircase, they ended the charm and let darkness surround them.

Hermione gasped in admiration as her eyes finally adjusted.

The waxing gibbous moon was near its zenith, bathing the entire hot spring in bright silvery light. The light of the moon was reflected off of the white flowers of the crepe ginger, white clock-vine, and the sprawling white and purple passiflora vine that scrambled along the edges of the pool.

A small waterfall cooled the magma-heated hot spring and created ripples in the water that caught the moonlight, giving it a banded texture of silvery white and blackest ebony across the surface of the water.

Hermione wanted to view this place in the daylight and see the vivid greens of the palm trees and bamboo that looked black when silhouetted against the starry moonlit sky.

Severus guided her over to a bench and a chopped-down, denuded tree that was merely a trunk with stumps where branches once grew. The stumps now served as places to hang clothing. There were holes drilled into the tree where you could store your wands.

They slipped out of their clothing and hung them on the old tree before Severus guided Hermione to an entrance point with steps, holding her hand so she did not slip.

"Oww," Hermione protested at the roughness of the porous lava stones beneath her feet.

"Your feet will toughen up a bit once you live here," he said as he restrained a small hiss of his own. Due to the ice pox, Severus' tolerance for extreme hot and cold temperatures was still not what it once was, but he was exposing himself gradually to more extreme temperatures to build it back up once more.
"Hah! Bit hot," Hermione complained.

"It's cooler over here," Severus said as he guided her closer to the waterfall, where a cool stream cascaded down the rock face.

They had already taken their doses of their respective potions back at the house. They were both feeling quite inspired by more than the elixirs they imbibed, feeling the effects of their surroundings more to enhance their mood.

Hermione dipped her head underwater and pulled her hair away from her face. She moved towards Severus in the moonlight.

Severus sat mid-chest deep in the water, having found one of the many custom seats that were built into the pool for people to sit on, and to better relax along the edge of the hot springs.

Hermione reached Severus and stood up, letting the water run in rivulets down her body, dripping off the tips of her breasts.
Watching her, he felt his heart beat faster. "You look like a water nymph in the moonlight," Severus said in awe of the sight of Hermione in the pale luminescence. Her body was bathed in the palest silvery blues, the water droplets clinging to her body sparkling like the twinkling of the stars. For a moment, she could have been the vision of an actual goddess to him.

She felt more confident and wanted to let Severus see her naked in the moonlight. "Were I Langia, that would make you Himeros, the Greek god of sexual desire," she lightly joked, recalling Severus' explanation for the magically arousing effects of Fairy Brandy. "I did mention earlier today you were a sex god."

Hermione went to straddle Severus, careful not to scrape her knees on the rough stone that lined the pool. With the Sequoia potion in effect, he was already hard when they Apparated to the hot springs. In the water, she felt him still erect in the hot water.
"I can't tell you how many nights I've fantasized about being with you in these hot springs, making love with you in the moonlight," she confessed. Hermione sighed as she guided Severus into her, feeling a bit more friction than usual as the water partially washed away the natural lubrication.

Severus, feeling Hermione nearly floating away from him and trying to impale herself further, helped by grabbing her hips and pulling her down onto him. This caused her to gasp as hot water was also pushed into her with the force of Severus’ cock, causing a momentary expansion of her vaginal walls.

Hermione remembered sex in the bath with Severus, but in the hot spring there was a lot more room to play around. She missed the sensation of friction and sex in the water, plus the way water would be pushed into her with each stroke, creating a fuller feeling.

"Oh, how I love you, Severus," she sighed as she let Severus guide the pace with the use of his hands.

The ripples on the surface of the water changed, becoming choppier with the addition of the ripples caused by Hermione riding Severus in one corner of the pool.

Hermione stifled her cries, not sure where the nearest neighbor was. Had she known it was at least a few miles away, she would have been more vocal.

Severus sighed and groaned with delight, hardly believing this was actually coming true. She was here and making love to him in the moonlight, confessing her love for him – and he was deliriously happy. He sat up straighter and grasped tightly onto her, wrapping his arms around her torso, pushing her down onto him as he thrust up from underneath. Her breasts were rubbing up against his upper chest and neck, so he took one nipple into his mouth and sucked as hard as he knew Hermione could tolerate.

She threw her head back and screamed, no longer caring if anyone heard them.

Unable to hold out any longer, Severus came, throwing his head back along the edge of the pool and shouting and swearing as he came.

Hermione slowed down as she sensed Severus soften momentarily, but she knew it would be a temporary situation since the Sequoia potion would make him hard quickly.
Climbing off him to sit next to him, she was about to sit down until Severus indicated he had other plans.

He reached up and patted the edge of the pool, indicating he wanted Hermione to instead sit along the edge of the pool and dangle her legs in the water. Initially she sat down, but then got up to fetch her wand to cast a cushioning charm along a large swath of the pool's edge. This would enable them to sit anywhere they pleased during their visit without the rocks scratching them.

Sitting back down once again, Hermione watched as Severus, looking like some mischievous satyr hoping to seduce her, moved towards her, parting her legs. Sometime during her visit, she would have to share the hallucination she had while taking her Greek exam, by watching the memory together with Severus in his Pensieve.

Hermione reclined back a bit, placing her hands on the ground behind her to brace herself as she observed Severus trail kisses up the inside of her thighs until his face was firmly planted at the apex of her thighs.

His tongue went to work licking, sucking, and nibbling, even using his nose to probe at her entrance. He chuckled when she spread her legs wider. Hermione was intrigued by the idea of Severus fucking her with that prominent nose of his. As he pressed his nose into her entrance, his tongue eventually darted out and licked at her anus.

During their time together, Severus had played with her arse periodically with his fingers, but he had never placed his tongue there before. Hermione was always a little bit uncomfortable and a whole lot of shy regarding Severus and the concept of rimming, but given the moment and the spontaneity of the moment, Hermione was not adverse to the idea for once.

"Yes," she sighed as she spread her thighs wider to allow him greater access.

Severus couldn't believe it. He had been wanting to give her pleasure in this way for a long time now, but he'd chosen to wait until she was more receptive. Now she was willing to let him try. To get better access, Severus asked her to flip over, laying her stomach and torso across the stones surrounding the pool, while her legs were in the pool, presenting her arse for his and her pleasure. He was thankful she'd thought to cast a cushioning charm.

Given her previous concerns regarding hygiene, Severus went for his own wand. He cast a specialized cleansing charm in Greek that he'd learned from an ancient Greek book on erotica, a
rare tome he once browsed in the Malfoy library.

Hermione felt a sensation that was warm then cool, as she listened to the charm in Greek, translating the combined words in her mind. It was actually quite arousing, feeling a slight tingling sensation around and just inside her anus. Severus had told her that it was another erogenous zone, and his finger-play in that area did indeed prove that it was one for her, but until now she wasn't ready to entertain the idea of Severus sticking his tongue down there.

Severus set his wand down and caressed Hermione's arse. He could tell from the tension in her legs she was a little nervous. To soothe her, he decided to begin with familiar territory. As his fingers rubbed at her clit lazily, making her back arch even more, this allowed him the opportunity to delve in and lap at her labia and entrance to her vagina.

He rarely feasted on her from behind, but she really liked it, especially the sensation of his beard against her thighs and outer labia. She could even feel his beard tickling her clit, adding more sensation to the act.

Sensing she was relaxed and more receptive, Severus moved his fingers to probe her while his tongue begun to work on Hermione's other entrance. He delicately ran his tongue around her outside on a slow circular motion, which caused Hermione to gasp with delight in that way when she was experiencing something new to her.

Hermione reached her hands behind and spread herself a little wider for Severus, indicating she was willing.

Her head spun in the delirium of hedonistic experimentation she had always considered taboo, but her own research and exploration of erotica she had read over the past year had expanded her horizons and opened a willingness to finally try this with Severus. There were books similar to the erotic Arabian tome Hermione had found and bought. She read it at night with her fingers frantically working away, making herself orgasm to the thoughts of Severus trying those other avenues of pleasure on her.

As his tongue slipped into her anus, she let out a shuddering sigh, feeling the thrill of all those untouched nerves being stimulated for the first time that way. It also helped that Severus' fingers were deftly working on her clit and G-spot simultaneously, manifesting in a burning heat building in her abdomen.

The pitch of her cries intensified as she rocked her hips against Severus' hands and mouth until she could bear the tension no longer. It was a strange sensation to be invaded by Severus' soft and
warm tongue, but it was also better than she'd anticipated.

Severus was tempted to replace his fingers with his cock, as Hermione often begged him to do in the past when he fingered her, but he resisted, even when he felt her flesh flutter and ripple around his digits. He let her crest through oral and manual manipulation, despite how his body demanded that he slip into her once more.

Panting heavily, Hermione slipped back down into the warm waters once more, blissfully relaxed from yet another orgasm. She had had so many that day that she had lost count.

Leaning her head back against the stones while gazing up at the stars above her head and the moon that was nearly blinding in its brightness, she sighed contentedly. "I think this tops my birthday and that weekend in Weybourne for most romantic day ever, Severus." She was blissfully tranquil.

Severus sat back down beside her and placed a hand on her thigh. "It could be one of many yet to come together." His stomach was tight with nervousness, but the romantic setting, the time, and Hermione's statement inspired him to seize the moment.

"When I'm done with my apprenticeship, I will return. And we can live together in our house."

Severus wanted more than just to share a house together, he wanted to share a life with Hermione that was a bit more than sharing a bed. He wanted much more, eventually, and he was willing to wait for her.

"When I left you, I gave you permission to move on with your life." He lifted his head up to gaze upon her face as she was still dreamily staring up at the stars and moon above. "I know I've mentioned this before, but I can't stress how much I regretted letting go of you. And when you go home, to your other home back in London, I don't want you to leave without there being a promise of sorts between us. That not only will you live with me, but that you'll be mine and mine alone, and I yours."

Hermione lifted her head to gaze at Severus, watching his brow, the high part of his cheek and nose highlighted by the moon while the rest of his face was cast into dark shadow. There was a very serious tone in his voice. She wanted to assure him that she was always his, but given their time apart, both knew the history of what had transpired, and both had regretted it.

"What are you saying specifically?" Hermione asked, knowing this was Severus' way of coming
around to something important he wanted to tell or ask her. The tightening feeling in her stomach sensed what he was going to say next.

"Marry me, Hermione."

Chapter End Notes


Thank you to my lovely betas, JuneW and Hope. You make fanfic so much better, especially mine.

Title taken from the song "It's Been a Long Long Time." Written by Jule Styne and Sammy Cahn.

Su tesorito: "your little treasure" in Spanish.

Piacere: Pleasure OR It’s a pleasure to meet you!

Hai rotto il fiato: You took my breath away.
"A Promise"

Chapter Summary

It's Christmas morning, let's see what Hermione and Severus will unwrap besides each other.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter One Hundred Two
"A Promise"

Disclaimer:
Sung to "Jingle Bells"

Disclaimers, disclaimers,
Disclaiming all the way
Oh, what fun it is to say
Rowling owns Potter, okay?

Disclaiming through this bit
In a one-hack written fic
Copyright, we know
I'm not infringing it
Warner Bros. and
Scholastic have some rights
To a billion-dollar franchise
The lawyers sleep tonight

A/N: Disclaimer a parody of "Jingle Bells."

"Marry me, Hermione," Severus said.

A laugh bubbled up from Hermione's throat. She didn't mean to laugh, but suddenly she felt quite overwhelmed.
Severus didn't know if she was laughing from relief that he'd finally asked her, laughing from joy that he'd asked her, or – the least likely of possibilities but still one – laughing at him.

"Oh, Severus! There is still so much we didn't talk about before you left. Things I wanted to talk with you about, but we didn't since you were going and I originally planned not to come with you," she said, her voice still punctuated with the occasional tension-filled titter.

Severus was relieved, but he sensed there was something else.

"One day, I would love to marry you, Severus, but right now I have an apprenticeship to finish up, and then I have to get the new operations here up and running. and get everything going here with work." The pitch in her voice was rising as if she was going to go into a full panic. "I don't know if I can deal with the pressure of an engagement on top of all that I have to do."

Now fully agitated, Hermione stood up out of the water and started pacing about the pool. All her feelings of euphoric relaxation were gone, now replaced with a building tension in her neck.

"I mean, I have just begun learning Japanese, and I hear that it can easily take six months to be barely proficient enough to pass just the written exam, not even passing the highly contextual Potions texts using subtle cultural clues as to the meaning of true ingredients hidden within the pseudonyms used for ingredients or directions," she railed on in a ceaseless patter, becoming more hysterical. "And then I have to move on to Chinese, and all this before Lavender hopes to start operations by summer? I'll never do it all in time." She was close to bursting into tears.

"Shh." Severus attempted to calm her, which only made her more vexed and aggravated.

"I don't know how I'm going to do it all," she wailed as she broke down into tears.

Severus understood the pressure she was under. He had heard from Ginny and Lavender about how Hermione had pushed herself nearly over the edge the summer before. Hermione was prone to over-exhausting herself by trying to do everything and then some.

"I'm sure we can work something out," he assured her, his voice becoming more business-like. With a firm tone to bring her back down from her near-hysterics, he asked, "How close are you to mastering your Code of Ethics?"
"I should be ready to have Albert test me on that by March."

"And you've taken you Anatomy and Potions Ingredients tests and passed those as well, correct?" he asked, to mentally check them off in his head.

"Yes," she replied, still feeling there was no solution in sight.

"And on this trip, you're testing your original potion that you developed yourself for your apprenticeship?"

"Yes, but that still doesn't include the Japanese and Chinese languages I have to master, which may mean another year or more!"

"True, true, but wait. You're almost done with your Herbology internship?" Severus asked.

Hermione turned her head away remembering that it was Neville with whom she had been serving her year-long Herbology internship, a flicker of shame flaring in her gut. "Yes, one more month and then I'm done." Her internship, which should have ended by New Year's Day, had been extended one month due to her taking a whole month in summer to recover from her attack and prepare for her trial in front of the Wizengamot to clear Severus and Draco's names.

"Then once you're done with taking your Code of Ethics test and Japanese test as well, you can study your Chinese language here. We have a lot of Chinese immigrants and bi-lingual descendants here on the island, and I'm already fluent in Chinese, so I can help you." Severus smiled, pleased with himself that he'd found a solution to help Hermione with her time conflict and bring her back to him faster.

"But what about my inability to change masters during my apprenticeship?" she asked, not wanting to ruin her standing in the community after putting in all that hard work.

"Some masters – not all, but some – will send their apprentices away for anywhere from two months to six months to the country in which they are to learn a language. During that time, they continue learning their Code of Ethics, broaden their exposure to Potions ingredients from other countries, get Herbology experience in a different climate, and continue studying anatomy. But considering you were already an ingredients expert before you even started your apprenticeship, and you had already been working on your anatomy studies for months as well, you are ahead of
the game. Most apprenticeships take three years. Because of your previous experience, you are whittling it down to around two years," Severus explained, trying to calm Hermione down. He was feeling that he was succeeding since she was no longer pacing about, but sitting down back in the warm waters to consider his second proposal of the night.

He continued his explanation. "You'll be doing your language immersive studies at the end of your apprenticeship, which makes it no less valid. You have already done all the theory work and other academic studies that require direct tutelage from your master, except for your Code of Ethics, which is still mostly learning from a book rather than oral instructions." Severus moved behind Hermione and began massaging her shoulders, trying to make the tension in her neck that he knew was growing there dissipate. "And often, a master will pass the apprentice into the hands of another master for supervision during some of his or her language studies."

"Is that more common when a master is unfamiliar with a language an apprentice is learning?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, so technically, you are not switching masters, which is what our fellow masters and mistresses frown upon. You are merely seeking the resource of another master to help you complete your studies, in an area which your current master is unable to do. And if I remember correctly, Albert's grasp of Chinese is not as good as mine, so I'm doing you a service. Plus, given that you have a full-time job that will be making full use of your Potions skills, in addition to running a Potions-based business, that also qualifies as work experience during your apprenticeship in the eyes of the qualification board."

"Of course, I will have to clear this with Albert," Hermione said, knowing her master would have the final word on the matter, but she had a feeling he would be very open to the idea. "No doubt, Lavender will be thrilled she can get me here sooner." Hermione was feeling a bit more relaxed, both mentally and physically, now that Severus had given her a solution to her problem and was still rubbing her shoulders.

"I still don't want to deal with the pressure of an engagement right now. When things have settled down, but not know," she clarified.

"Fine, it is not an engagement," Severus conceded, knowing now that Hermione did want to marry him, but wanted one less thing on her schedule to face. "It is a promise that at some point in the future, when things have quieted down, we'll eventually get engaged and then married."

"Ugh. I hate engagements. All that planning. Mothers-in-law," she groaned in disgust.
"You'll have no in-laws from my side of the family. There are none," he said flatly.

"You're the last one?" she asked. She knew Severus had never talked about his parents. "No cousins even?"

Severus shook his head. He had one or two distant cousins, but they were not even family in his mind. He was alone.

Hermione stroked his leg, then held his hand. The thought then brought up another topic she had eventually wanted to discuss with him, besides the marriage question which was now settled.

"We never even talked about if you wanted children or not," Hermione said, saying it aloud more to herself than to prompt Severus into a discussion.

Severus supposed that was a topic that was going to eventually come up, if not now, then over the years. It was better to settle the matter and know where each stood. Hermione had said on many occasions that the idea of children with Ron frightened her, but now that Weasley would no longer be the father, how would she react to him – the wizard who'd killed his own wife who had been pregnant with their child – as the father of their children?

For once, Severus was without some intelligent or thoughtful response. He stammered briefly then shut his mouth in order to avoid further embarrassing himself.

She could tell he was uncomfortable with the subject, and assumed he was trying to find some way to let her know he wasn't interested in children. "One day, I suppose, it would be nice to have children with you. That is, if you want kids. But if you don't--"

Severus shut her mouth with a kiss, thrilled Hermione was willing to have children with him despite his past; it was a sign that she did want to spend the rest of her days with him. Children would bind them together forever, until death parted them.

"Yes, some day," he said, feeling his chest glow warmly at the thought of having a family together with her, creating the life he should have had, but didn't. A wife of his own choice, a life of his own free will, children brought into this world out of love and not familial obligation.

Severus' sudden kiss and breathy eager response to her set her heart aflutter. There was an odd and
pleasant twisting sensation in her stomach from knowing that one day she would be going off of contraceptive potions and not dread getting pregnant, but some day would welcome the news. The stroking of Severus' hand along her abdomen made her realize this was something very real. One day she would be a mother and a wife, and Severus her husband and father to their children.

Something had changed between them. Just as something had changed when Severus finally removed his gigolo mask, when they first declared their love for one another, and when Severus asked her to come with him originally when he planned to flee England, their relationship had changed yet again. Their future was now certain, and all doubt about their feelings for one another was long gone, their uncertainty about their future was erased and replaced with a joy that one day they would have their own 'happily ever after' ending.

Feeling inspired by the moment, they made love once more, this time with slow and purposeful movements. There was no rush or fervent hunger to satiate. It was the sealing of a contract between their souls.

The old Gypsy woman's interpretation, based on face value of her statement, had come true finally. Even after Severus left her for Malu Palekaiko, Hermione did see him again. Maybe the old fortuneteller could not tell if Hermione's journey would eventually lead to marriage one day, but she was able to see this far enough into the future to this day. It was this day that sealed Hermione's and Severus' fate together.

Finally relaxed after soaking a bit longer after making love, they finally dragged their very limp and tired bodies out of the water, their strength sapped by the hot water and love-making. They helped each other dress, and Severus held Hermione's hand as they descended down to the Apparition platform.

Back at the house, Hermione beckoned Severus to snuggle with her on the couch. With a swish of her wand, she set the lights on the Christmas tree aglow.

They sat on the couch together staring at the festively colored lights on the tree, and the sparkling and glimmer of glass and glitter-covered ornaments; Ginny had decorated the tree well. Under the tree lay presents waiting to be unwrapped and treasured in the years to come.

"Our first Christmas tree together," Severus said, suddenly willing to let sentiment overtake him. It would be the first of many Christmases together to come, and that pleased him to know.
Hermione clasped his hand tighter and craned her neck up to kiss his jaw, feeling that his beard was still a bit damp. She was feeling quite sentimental as well, awash in the euphoria of love, and restful in the happy seasonal scene in their home together.

In the quiet that they enjoyed together, it wasn't long before it was disturbed by a familiar sound – well, familiar to Severus.

"Mrowr!"

"Damn, the cat."

"You have a cat?" Hermione asked.

"More like it has me." Severus patted Hermione's leg to indicate he wanted to stand up.

Together they walked into the kitchen. Hermione waved her wand to light some candles around the place while Severus went to open the back door.

"Well?" Severus said expectantly, as he opened the door and looked down at the animal that sauntered in.

"What's its name?" Hermione asked, as she squatted down and held out her hand in offer of some affection.

"Cat."

Hermione looked up at Severus with a look that he must be joking.

"It is a male or female?"

"You'll have to ask the cat. I don't pry into its business, and it doesn't pry into mine," Severus said, indicating his emotional detachment to the animal, though Hermione sensed he was more attached to the beast than he was willing to admit. She guessed the cat made a fine companion for Severus,
as it was not needy and fairly independent, just like him.

Hermione gave him a slight look of impatience.

"No doubt it is looking forward to its evening meal," Severus informed her as he pulled out a shallow bowl for milk and a plate. Reaching into the icebox, he pulled out some raw fish and minced it finely before placing it on a plate.

The cat went from greedily lapping at the milk to wolfing down the raw fish in no time flat.

Hermione knelt down and pet the cat.

"I fear I am feeding it too much. The cat is getting fat," Severus remarked.

Hermione knew cats well enough. She pet the cat along its sides, noting the frame around its shoulders. She lifted the cat's tail to confirm her suspicion.

Rising up and walking over to Severus, she placed her arms around his waist and looked up at him sweetly. Smiling, she announced, "Well, I was hoping to wait at least a few years before saying this, but you're going to be a father, Severus. Your cat is a female, and she's pregnant."

"What?" Severus' face fell as if Hermione had just told him she herself was pregnant. It certainly was unexpected.

"Your cat isn't fat, it's hungry because it has kittens on the way. Make sure you give her plenty to eat. She's probably going to have them in about a month or less, since gestation is about nine weeks and I can feel the swelling."

Well, if this was a test to see if he was ready for parenthood eventually, taking care of a cat and its kittens was certainly a start, Severus thought. "It seems like pregnancy is a communicable disease on this island, as it appears half of the married witches around here are pregnant," Severus said, remembering that Ginny, Halulu, and Akela's former best friend, Kiki, were among the dozen or more witches waddling around town.
"Maybe it's good I'm leaving at the end of the week then. One year, but not now," Hermione said as they watched the cat finish the last of the milk and then come to rub against Hermione's legs. Hermione guessed the cat was sensing the witch was going to be an important ally for her.

"What shall we name her?" he asked.

"Can't name her Calleo, as that's my owl's name. I do hope they get along," Hermione realized, suddenly thinking of compatibility between the two beasts.

"You named your owl Calleo?" Severus asked.

"Yes, and she's a very nice owl."

"Calleo is a boy's name," Severus reminded her.

"She doesn't mind, so why should I? Besides, I wanted to name her after someone I was fond of and 'Severus' was already taken." Hermione reached up and gave him a peck on the cheek, but she was too slow and Severus caught her mouth in a quick playful kiss.

Suddenly, Hermione yawned.

"Nice to know my kisses excite you so." He amusedly arched one brow.

Glancing at the clock, she said, "Oh good, my potion kept me awake, and it's about this time I go to bed. So I'm feeling tired at about the right time. If the other half of the potion works as well as this half, then that's one more thing I've completed towards my... apprenticeship."

Severus let the cat out before escorting Hermione to bed, the cannoli forgotten for now.

As they undressed, they didn't even bother with anything to wear. When sleeping together back in London, they had become accustomed to sleeping nude. They now readily embraced their old habit.
Had they not exhausted themselves earlier in the day, they would have stayed up half the night talking some more, but as it was, both dropped off quickly, unable to stay awake any longer.

For the first time in a long while, Hermione did not feel overwhelmed by loneliness or the need to cry before going to sleep. Severus was there in bed with her, and she could now reach out and feel his comforting presence there once more. As she drifted off to sleep, she heard his deep and even breaths. There would be no nightmares in the dark, and even if they did come, Severus would be there for her.

Severus could not remember sleeping so well in his life. So it was distressing that some of the best slumbering in the enthralling arms of Morpheus was disrupted by the murderous grumblings of Hermione.

"Why the hell is that cat mewling before the sun is even up?"

Cracking an eye open, he looked at the lovely sight of Hermione and her tangle of mussed hair in the bed next to him as the predawn light colored her hair with highlights of coral and peach. Her own eyes were still shut and a small stain on her pillow showed she had drooled during the night. If Severus was to have his sleep interrupted, seeing this vision he’d longed for in his bed for over a year was worth it.

"This is when I usually get up for a morning swim and she gets fed before I head out." Severus groaned slightly, feeling his thigh, abdominal and back muscles a little sore from yesterday's strenuous activities. "I'll feed her and come back to bed," he announced, indicating that Hermione should not get up, yet.

Throwing on a pair of cotton twill shorts, without underpants, he padded out to the kitchen barefoot and shirtless. Seeing the bag of chicken giblets in the ice box, thanks to Ginny and Draco's planning, Severus gave his cat an extra large helping with an extra deep dish of milk. Normally, he would wait until the cat finished to clean up the dishes before the animal would follow him down to the beach and "guard" his belongings while he swam, but he chose instead to go back to bed as promised. There would be no need for a swim to work off excess tension and sexual frustration, at least during the week while Hermione was there.

Shucking off his shorts, he crawled back into bed and snuggled up behind Hermione who had rolled over during his absence.
"Happy Christmas," he murmured sweetly into her hair.

Hermione's eyes popped open, suddenly awake. She rolled over, now excited with the realization it was Christmas and they were finally together for the holiday. Giving him a quick buss on the lips, she then threw a leg over his hip. "Happy Christmas, Severus."

"We need not bother getting out of bed to unwrap presents. I already got what I wanted for Christmas," Severus said playfully and pulled her body closer.

His intentions were made clear by the fact that they both slept the night before without any clothes on. Hermione could feel him rub his stiffening length along her thigh, then along her stomach as he became harder.

It amused her to see Severus in such a lighthearted mood, as it was a rarity that he cast off his threadbare yet sturdy cloak of somber pragmatism. But even she noted that since moving to Hawaii Severus was by far more happy and at peace with himself then he was back in England, seeing it for herself in person.

Eventually, the soft kisses turned into a leisurely roll in the hay. Finding the laziest possible position that required the least amount of effort for maximum friction, they made love. Low groans of pleasure and soft sighs of satisfaction punctuated their gentle climax.

As they lay in bed, limbs still entwined where they were still joined, Severus asked, "How did you sleep last night? Did your potion work as you expected?"

Smiling up at the ceiling, Hermione said, "I slept like the dead, but given how busy we were yesterday, that's to be expected. But as for feeling time lag this morning? None at all. But we'll see how I fare the rest of the week as it can take a few days for the full effects of Portkey lag to kick in."

Reluctantly, Hermione rose from the bed and went to take care of her bodily needs. Severus decided he might as well get up and got dressed for the morning.

Walking into the kitchen together, Hermione asked as she reached for a skillet, "What do you want for breakfast? Sausage? Eggs? Traditional fry-up for Christmas morning?"
Severus reached for the coffee, since he was out of tea. "You'll find in this warmer climate, you'll adjust better if you keep the morning meals light. A hearty breakfast will weigh you down and make you sweat more heavily, especially if you're not accustomed to the heat," he said, recalling his first breakfast in Malu Palekaiko of eggs, sausage and toast. "A pastry, fruit and coffee will suit you much better."

Hermione cut up some fruit while Severus made coffee. Hermione decided to go with some Portuguese sweet bread to go with their shared plate of fresh papaya, starfruit and orange segments.

"Hmm," Hermione groaned as she sipped her cup of Kona coffee. "I wish Ginny and Draco brought some of this back to England in addition to all those pineapples." Hermione had read about Kona coffee in her guide books, but it was much smoother than she anticipated.

"Had I known you were coming, I would have asked Albert to pack me some tea in your trunk," Severus thought aloud.

"What, don't you have any tea here in Hawaii? Only coffee?"

"We do, procuring a fine Chinese black tea, Japanese green tea, or a delicate jasmine tea is easy, there is no lack of good Asian teas around here. But trying to find some good English tea is nigh on impossible, except at one of the imported European specialty food stores on one of the other islands. Our local buyer for custom goods, Naomi, said she'll be doing a run to Los Angeles soon, as there is supposedly a sizable British ex-pat population there, both Muggle and wizarding." Severus went to go pour himself a second cup of coffee and poured one for his lover as well.

"Now that you're no longer wanted by the British Ministry of Magic, you could go yourself," Hermione reminded him.

"True, but I have a business to run, a sizable garden to take care of. My time is limited. I pay for an elf-cleaning service to clean my house and do laundry for me, after trying to do it myself for a time. How you found time to keep house, shop, cook, do laundry, put in the hours you did at the Department of S&R, and attend those Quidditch games, I wonder how you made time to see me in your schedule and still get any sleep." He could certainly empathize with her exhaustion when she would turn up at his flat some times.

"I could say the same about you. Teaching Potions, running Slytherin House, supervising detentions, and then your work as a spy for Dumbledore? I remember those memories you loaned me." Hermione reached out and grasped his hand. "You looked so drawn and thin, and exhausted."
"You looked equally worn out in Lavender's memory of you in front of the Wizengamot. And she said you were looking better in that memory than a month before," he said with equal seriousness.

Hermione withdrew her hand from his and folded her arms across her chest protectively, her hand covering the part of her breast that sported her scar. It was a month prior to the trial she had been attacked, and near the point of over-exhaustion.

Severus reached across the space between them and pulled her hands down, then held them in his hands trying to get her to look in his eyes. "As much as I long to have you here as soon as possible, I do not want you to push yourself beyond your capabilities. It does not serve you well to overwork yourself."

"You did it and survived," she noted petulantly.

"I did it out of many reasons which we've already discussed once before that I do not wish to speak of again," he said quietly. The specter of his dead wife, Gabrielle, rose up between them once more.

"I'm sorry." Hermione wiped away a few tears. "I just miss you so much sometimes. The loneliness. I miss our conversations so much. Just to even hold your hand, sit next to you as we read in silence."

"I know. I've felt it too." He rubbed his thumb along the backs of her hands as he remembered the conversations he used to have with an imaginary Hermione to fill the void of her gone from his life when he first adjusted to his new life here.

She could sense he also had his own difficulty in being parted from her. "This is Christmas. This is not a time for us to be maudlin and remember sad times," she announced, wanting to brighten the mood for both of them. "Come. It's time to open presents,"

After letting the cat out, Severus let himself be willingly dragged to the couch for presents. Growing up he had learned to manage his expectation of what he would receive as presents from his parents and even more so as an adult. Dumbledore always gave him something to unwrap, and occasionally Flitwick and Minerva would give him something as well, usually some book they thought he might find of interest or a bottle of distilled spirits, but as for expecting anything to unwrap, it was a rare treat. His best present in many, many years was the photo of Hermione in a sterling silver frame. Ginny gave it to him; it was waiting for him back in his hotel room after their wedding and reception a year ago. It was the same one sitting on his bedside table, but this year's
present of Hermione showing up on his doorstep unannounced was by far the best present ever. No photo could compare to the real thing.

Hermione was giddy, anxious to watch Severus' reaction to her present for him. She had put a lot of thought, and a lot of Galleons, into picking this present just for him. It was even better, as she was going to be there when he unwrapped it.

"Who shall go first?" she asked.

"Since it seems that all but one is for you—"

"Oh, no," she corrected him. "I saw a few packed in my trunk marked for you, but they didn't seem to say who they were from."

"All right. You pick then."

Hermione squirmed with excitement, cuddled up next to Severus, as she waved her wand to make the large beautifully-wrapped box float out from under the lit Christmas tree. She sat it on the floor in front of Severus. The tag listed clearly who it was from.

He began lifting his wand until Hermione said, "Ah, you have to unwrap it by hand."

"What's the point of being a wizard if you can't do it the easy way," he muttered under his breath as he began to pull at the bow and wrapping paper.

"Says the man who made his students scrub cauldrons and floors by hand, with no magic," she reminded him.

He turned his head to give her an evil grin, not refuting her claim at all.

Beneath the wrappings and trappings sat a new music box. He stared at it, suddenly realizing he had missed the sound of music in his home, but that music would have only reminded him of Hermione's absence.
"It can be used as a table-top music box or as a stand-alone piece," she said as she waved her wand and legs popped up underneath. The music box rose up, similar in movement to a horse getting up from the ground, as the legs unfolded and straightened.

The inlay on the top of the lid was exquisite with a small orchestra playing and a conductor waving his baton. The conductor and musicians were all made of several small pieces of inlaid wood stained various shades or gold, brown and black, and slivers of ivory for their powdered wigs. The little inlaid wooden conductor turned and bowed to Severus in recognition of its new owner. Severus could tell that Hermione paid very good money for a fine music box for their home, just for him.

"I noticed in your Pensieve tour of the house that you didn't have one," Hermione said a bit nervously. When she toured the house yesterday, she was relieved that Severus had not gone off and bought one of his own, but for the fact that Severus had said nothing in regards to his present was making her wonder if he liked it at all.

Severus sat there and looked at his new music box. Draco and Ginny's present of delivering Hermione to him was by far the best Christmas present ever, but as for something to unwrap from under the tree, this was by far the most thoughtful and exquisite present he could ever recall receiving. Turning his head, he could see her chewing on the corner of her mouth, and he knew she was wondering if he liked it.

"It's magnificent," he said and pulled her into his arms to kiss her.

Hermione was so relieved. When she was married to Ron, she always let him pick out the Quidditch gear he wanted. Having to come up with an idea, other than a book Severus might like, had been a rather daunting task for her. Upon her stroll down Diagon Alley for ideas, she'd spotted the music box in the window and felt certain it was the right gift. It was nice to know she'd picked just the right thing to make Severus smile.

"Shall we?" Severus asked with his hand outstretched towards the living room floor, wanting to try out his new present.

Hermione bolted up off the couch, practically bouncing on the balls of her bare feet.

Severus rose and placed his arm at her waist. Waving his wand at his music box, he said, "Foxtrot, slow."
As the soft strains of music rose into the air, Severus took Hermione's hand in his as they began dancing across the living room, next to the Christmas tree aglow with twinkling lights.

They were both in their bare feet, Hermione in her cool summery cotton nightgown and Severus in a plain short-sleeved button-front shirt and cotton shorts.

The chanteuse was warbling an older wizarding tune about waiting for her wizard lover and the anticipation of him Apparating to their secret rendezvous spot. They had danced to that song once or twice before back in London, but now that song seemed to hold a little more meaning for them. As the song ended, Severus dipped her. Hermione laughed gaily, feeling so happy in the moment.

Severus set the box to play some appropriate Christmas music quietly in the background as they continued to open presents.

Now it was Severus' turn to be nervous.

'I hope she doesn't think it's too ostentatious. I hope it fits. What if she doesn't like it?'

There were advantages over not having someone special in one's life, and that was that Severus didn't have to fret over picking out a present. But that was the only perk to being alone, that he could recall at the moment. The benefits of Hermione in his life were certainly worth putting up with a little nervousness Christmas morning. Besides, Draco had helped him select it, so if she didn't like it, Severus could always blame him.

Severus swished his wand to make his present to Hermione sail gracefully through the air until it alighted upon her lap.

She gave him a shy but eager look before she began to pull at the intricate bow, made of silvery netting and white silken ribbons. Tearing at the red foil paper, she paused when she saw the velvet covering the box. There was only one type of present she knew that came in velvet-covered boxes, and this box was far bigger than the very few velvet boxes she had opened before.

Latching her thumb along the lid, she slowly pried it open and felt her breath stop in her chest.
All those times Hermione had taken Harry shopping for jewelry for Ginny, she had always secretly envied Ginny. He had bought her lots of beautiful jewelry over the few years they were married, but never in all her shopping trips did she ever see anything quite as magnificent as the necklace that was in the box before her now.

It reminded her of the necklace that Lavender had rented for her in India, but this was more subdued and tasteful. The one she wore in India was a bit too large or flamboyant for her tastes, but this one was elegant, and literally breathtaking.

"It's..." Hermione choked up. "It's perfect."

Severus let out a silent breath of relief. Considering what he paid, he was thrilled she loved it, though the jeweler assured him if she didn't like it, he would gladly help her trade it in for something more to her style.

Hermione hastily wiped away her tears and set the jewelry box down before throwing herself at Severus. She cried a little, overwhelmed by Severus' gift to her. It was a very, very expensive gift. She had helped Harry shop for jewelry, and didn't even want to fathom what Severus had spent. It was also lovely and romantic.

"Let me see it on you," Severus said, once Hermione stopped peppering his face with kisses.

He lifted it from the box and undid the clasp. Hermione lifted her hair, grinning madly.

Once clasped around her neck, she turned so that Severus could admire it upon her. Yes, it was proportioned perfectly for her.

Hermione cast a quick reflection charm to see it on herself without having to leave Severus or the couch.

"This will go perfectly with your blue dress for the New Year's Eve party," he noted.

Turning her head from side to side, Hermione admired the white-gold necklace set with dozens of sapphires, offset with small diamonds as highlights. The sapphires ranged in color from small, pale-clear watery-blue stones close to the shoulder and collarbone down to larger, deeper and richer-blue stones, culminating with a large, deepest of blue sapphires resting just above her
cleavage. The pattern of the setting gave a hint of a floral motif without it being obvious.

"I don't know what to say," Hermione stammered.

"Say you love it."

"I do! I do. I'm just... This is just so..."

Severus loved the fact he had rendered Hermione speechless. Given Hermione's reluctance to get engaged at the present time, he was glad he went with the necklace upon Draco's recommendation. Perhaps once they were eventually engaged, he could buy her a ring to match the necklace and the earrings she had just received from her parents.

Once Hermione found her voice again, she said, "I have no idea what's in that big box from the twins."

After unwrapping it, she peered into the top of the large box that was almost as tall as her.

"Oh, no. They didn't," she said with disbelief. She sat down and gave a great huff of exasperation mixed with disgust.

"What is it?" Severus asked.

"You don't want to know." She folded her arms and looked cross.

Severus noticed the small card that fell from the box that Hermione had missed. He snatched it up before she could do or say anything in protest.

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"Dear Hermione,

Since this was your idea, we'd thought we'd give you one of your very own. It's been a
top seller, so the Galleons have been rolling in on both versions we offered: the stand-alone and table-top version.

We figured you'd appreciate a near-life-sized version of your own. This ought to spruce up Snape's dungeon love nest with something festive, while you're there for Christmas.

Of course, your royalties will be automatically deposited into your Gringotts vault.

Happy Christmas,

Fred & George"

Severus stood up and peered into the box. "It looks just like an ordinary Santa," he remarked with cool detachment, knowing the twins never did anything ordinary.

"It's not," she growled, embarrassed by her inspirational outburst during her brainstorming luncheon with the twins.

"Really? Then do tell."

She told him.

Severus could understand why Hermione would not want to be associated with a Santa that pulled down its pants and pissed drinks, then "tossed cookies" out of its mouth onto a tray, making use of the euphemism for vomiting.

"And you came up with this idea?" Severus asked, bemused and slightly horrified that something so crass was Hermione's idea.

"I said it more as a way of proposing something so outrageous, so tacky and vulgar, even they wouldn't dare to make it. I was proved wrong." The color of Hermione's cheeks was now nearly as
red as the bits of wrapping paper scattered about the floor. She was tempted to say part of the inspiration was a Muggle novelty she once saw in a window of a Muggle joke and "magic" shop as a small child, but decided that the less said, the better.

Severus then had a thought. "Help me wrap this back up," he said, and they both began waving their wands about the box the Santa was still sitting in. They made sure to leave the bottles of alcohol mix and cookies that came with it in the box, along with the instructions that Severus briefly thumbed through.

"What do you have in mind?" she asked.

"I know just who would appreciate a gift such as this," Severus said as they moved it towards his fireplace. Severus scribbled hastily on a conjured gift tag.

"Who?"

Severus debated telling her, but merely said, "You'll be meeting him later."

With a shove and a bit of Floo powder, the present was delivered and gone from their sight, much to both of their relief.

Sitting back down on the couch, they both hoped nothing else would be quite as off-putting as that last present. There was also a box of 'special' Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans the twins had included from their joke shop. The joke was that every bean was an awful-tasting one, with not a decent-tasting one in the entire lot. It was meant to trick people into thinking they had the bad luck to only select the vile-tasting ones when in fact every bean tasted horrible.

"Let's open this one up. It's from Ginny, so it must be safe," Hermione said with a sigh.

Inside were some outfits consisting of mostly muumuus fitting close to her torso, but were cool and loose about the legs and hips, along with several pareos in cotton and silk, most of them with Hawaiian floral patterns. There were also a couple bikinis and rubber flip-flop sandals in there as well, so this gift had everything she would need to wear for a week in paradise.

"Put this on," Severus said, pulling out a silk pareo printed in a palate of blues, silently thanking Ginny for reading his mind.
Hermione pulled off her nightgown, leaving her underpants on. Looking at the moving diagram showing the dozen ways the pareo could be worn, she twisted and tied it off around her neck, wearing it as a halter-style dress.

Severus smiled. This is what he had wanted to see that first day in Malu Palekaiko back in Justina's hotel room: Hermione standing there in a pareo.

It was partially covering her necklace, but that was about to be remedied.

"Come here," he said, his voice thick with intention.

Hermione turned around, staying out of reach for a bit longer while she modeled it for Severus. "Do you like it?" she asked coyly. Of course she knew Severus liked it. She could see the way his eyes raked over her body and up her legs.

He nodded slowly, sitting on the edge of the couch. His hands reach out and snatched a corner of her pareo, drawing her closer to him as he pulled on her fabric to bring her close. Severus' hands snaked up her legs and under her dress. Latching his thumbs along her underpants, he casually mentioned, "We won't be needing these for now."

Now that she was wearing nothing but her jewelry and a pareo, Severus looked up at her as his hands roamed underneath the silken fabric. Hermione gazed down, suddenly feeling quite empowered, sensing Severus was lost in the moment.

She moved forward to straddle him on the couch, her dress bunching up. As Hermione seated herself upon Severus' lap, she could feel his erection straining up through his shorts. His hands moved along her thighs, gliding up them and around to caress her buttocks. She sighed and tilted her head back.

Hermione caressed his cheek with the back of her hand tenderly, and loved the way he closed his eyes and leaned into her touch. Her fingers began to slowly unbutton his shirt, which caused Severus to stop caressing her in order to shuck his other clothes.

Shorts and underpants hastily tossed aside, Severus felt her hands guide him into her entrance. As she impaled herself on him, he momentarily closed his eyes. Rocking himself in time with her movements, he finally looked up and watched as Hermione's eyes dreamily slipped shut. Her hands
reached up and slowly undid the knot around her neck. So many times Severus had masturbated to a fantasy of Hermione dressed in a pareo, untying it for him so he could see her nude body, and here she was, riding him, doing this very same act.

As the knot came undone, he gazed at her form, noting how the silk slid against her body, caressing it with the same delicate touch as his own hands that now skated across her body. Her breasts swayed and jiggled with each movement as she rose and fell astride him.

Severus pushed up from underneath, wanting to drive himself into her deeper, enthralled with the vision of Hermione atop of him wearing nothing now but his necklace adorning her delicate neck. She was his.

Hermione reveled in this coupling with Severus. There was something quietly intense in the way he was gazing at her, and she felt truly treasured. Even the way he moved, as if he was possessed by the moment, lost in some lovely dream come true. Hermione could relate, since making love with Severus the night before in the hot springs had made her feel the same overwhelming lost sensation of being caught in a waking dream.

Leaning forward, she let her breasts graze against Severus' face as she rocked back and forth.

"I read somewhere once," Hermione said with a sigh, trying to sound conversational while making love, "that the courtesans of India would make love to kings and princes wearing nothing but ropes of pearls or gold necklaces, and lots of bangles and anklets."

"You are no courtesan. You are a queen, my queen," he groaned as his hands moved up from her hips to her breasts, then guiding one nipple into his mouth as he increased the pace. Just imagining Hermione with ropes of pearls about her neck, grazing her breasts and rolling across her skin as she moved, spurred him on. The idea and sight of Hermione wearing nothing but jewelry suddenly held an erotic appeal to him.

Feeling the slow building of heat in her abdomen, Hermione reached forward and grabbed the back of the couch for support, and she rode Severus harder.

"Oh God, how I love you, Severus," she sighed into his hair. This was yet the umpteenth time she had said that simple phrase since she arrived yesterday, and she would not stop herself from saying it when she felt inspired by the moment. Severus never tired of hearing it from her lips.
Her declaration inspired Severus to grab her quickly and spin her around, throwing her back down on the couch to drive deeper into her. Hermione hitched her legs as high and wide as possible, resting her ankles upon his shoulders while letting Severus enter her as deeply as he could.

Severus' hand reached down and stroked her clit, desperate to make her climax soon as he was trying to hold out long enough. He wanted to hear her cry his name once more. She had screamed it so many times the day before, but today was a new day and he needed to hear it again.

Hermione felt the bows and crinkled wrapping paper press into her back, but she didn't care. She was focused only on the sweet sensation of Severus slamming himself into her with abandon and his fingers hastening her building climax.

Severus listened for the way Hermione's breath would hitch and her spoken words would stop short, unfinished, an indication she was close to climax. Severus loved to make Hermione come; the way she would lose herself in the moment and scream his name, the way he would feel her flesh quiver around him, squeezing him. He would lose himself entirely in her, while he poured his heart into this seemingly violent act that brought them closer in the end.

A scream let loose from Hermione's throat, drowning out the low tinkling of Christmas tunes still playing in the background. Hermione's cue let Severus know he could also let himself fall over that edge and join her in that free fall of bliss.

Hermione could barely keep her eyes open, and mostly succeeded. She watched as Severus' face went from teeth gritted to surrender and relief. His grunts were prolonged and almost like some primitive language.

Letting a sigh of satisfaction punctuate the end of the moment, Severus withdrew to study the tableau of Hermione still laying on the couch. Legs parted with their mixed essence dribbling out from between her lips, her pareo undone and partially caught under her back, her necklace askew, hair looking wilder than ever, cheeks flush with color, eyes drowsy and looking at him with adoration and lingering lust – he wished he could have a photograph of this moment. Hermione looked like a woman thoroughly fucked, and he was the one who'd fucked her good and proper.

Hermione enjoyed her own vision of Severus sitting nude on the couch, an open and lazy smile about his lips as he gazed at her, his cock still glistening from the joining. Her eyes were drawn to the tan line between his torso and the paleness of his hips where he still was as pale as her. It was such a stark contrast. Tanned, the blackness of his hair on his head and body did not stand out against his skin anymore. She could now more easily see the Spanish side in him.
Eventually, they went back to unwrapping the rest of the presents under the tree, after Hermione tied the pareo back on. This time she tied the pareo cloth as a sarong, leaving her breasts uncovered, which proved to be a constant cause for Severus to glance at them, if not periodically touch them.

Albert gave Severus several tins of good tea. No doubt, it was a suggestion from Draco, since he and Albert did conspire together for Hermione's trip.

"Bless you, you beautiful bastard," Severus praised Albert under his breath. At least he would have tea available for tomorrow's breakfast.

There was another present from the twins addressed to Severus. Hermione recognized the size and shape of it, but said nothing. There was another note inside, which confirmed the twins must have been in on the secret that Hermione was going to Hawaii, as intoned in the other note.

"Snape,

Thanks for your suggestion for the tropical get-away. You've made us a dragon-dung-heap-high pile of Galleons from your suggestion. So when we heard from Lavender and Albert about Hermione's trip, we figured you deserved to have one of your very own, in case Hermione didn't pack hers.

Inside the 'get-away,' you'll find a box with the Galleons for your royalties at five percent. If you want auto-deposit, you'll have to set that up with your local Gringotts, if they have a Gringotts in that far flung place at the far corner of the globe.

Your former chaos-causing students and now business partners,

Fred & George Weasley

P.S. Don't shag Hermione too senseless and satisfactorily. She comes up with the best ideas when she's sexually frustrated and tense."

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'Too late on that post-script,' Severus wryly thought with some self-satisfaction, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"What does it say?" Hermione asked, since he knew better than to read whatever the twins might write aloud.

"Nothing of consequence, and something very inappropriate you'll wish you didn't read."

Hermione took Severus' advice over satisfying her curiosity this once.

Lastly, there were several gold boxes from Lavender. There were matching midnight-blue silk dressing gowns for them both, in addition to a silk floor-length nightgown in Slytherin green, edged with silver-gray lace, and a pair of silk boxers for Severus in Gryffindor colors.

"No doubt Lavender's 'subtle' commentary about two Houses now joined together. This Romeo-and-Juliet theme would have struck a better chord with Draco and Ginny," Severus noted dryly.

"Actually, Lavender was merely copying Ginny. When we all went out to lunch back in August, we went over to Madam Mandel's for a bit of shopping. Ginny got herself something in green silk and lace, and on a lark, got something in red and gold for Draco." Hermione didn't want to think too much on that day, as that was the day she'd had the panic attack in the fitting room.

There was one last box in the signature gold paper, addressed to Severus.

Lifting the lid, he noticed how Hermione gasped in fear, recoiling back with her eyes held wide in near terror. It held a purple silk corset with black lace. The same corset that had sent Hermione into a panic in the fitting room that day, that caused her to finally seek out help from that Muggle psychologist, James Hoover.

Hermione sat silently as Severus read the small note enclosed aloud.

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"Dear Severus,
Upon consulting with James Hoover about my suggestion of the corset enclosed, he recommended as part of Hermione's therapy to face her fears and desensitize herself to certain triggers. You, the person she trusts most in the world, can help her with wearing this corset during her stay with you. While Mr. Hoover could not discuss many aspects of Hermione's treatments and conversations with him, upon asking, he did say that you might help her overcome some lingering long-term issues.

With kindest care,

Lavender"
Severus closed the box up and set it aside. "We can deal with this later, if and when you're ready."

Hermione curled up against Severus, seeking the shelter of his arms for warmth and protection. As he gave a gentle squeeze of comfort, she relaxed into his embrace, feeling her fears ebbing away, even with his arm snugly wrapped around her rib cage.

The living room was now strewn with scattered bits of wrapping paper, bows, tags, tissue paper, and boxes with unwrapped gifts lying about. It was a mess, but for once Severus welcomed it. It reminded him of the Finaus' living room Christmas morning a year ago; a happy household with remnants of the morning’s Christmas cheer cast about the floor. It made Severus realize he was capable of having his own happy home life as well, and this was just one of the first moments of one with Hermione.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: A round of applause to my tireless betas, JuneW and Hope, and all the hard work they do to clean up these chapters.

Los Angeles, most notably the city of Santa Monica that is located in the Greater Los Angeles Area, has one of the largest British ex-pat communities in the United States. Having grown up in L.A., it was easy for me to find many British pubs and British goods stores around L.A., especially around Santa Monica.

Yes, I have pulled the horrible Bertie Bott's Beans prank once. I yanked out every good-tasting one from the box and left only the vile-tasting ones. My friend, who was Executive Assistant to a very high-level executive, then thought, on a lark, to put them out on her desk as a joke for the rest of the office, for us regular schlubs, as a joke (inspired by my idea). One guy came along, a board-level mucky-muck of the company who was visiting that day, and he grabbed a handful and started popping them into his mouth. Before my friend could warn him, since this was a high-level guy, she kept her mouth shut instead since he'd already began eating them. The guy never made a face nor said anything. And yes, they were the nasty-tasting ones in the candy dish. We still shudder to this day to think about how he ate them without noticing how vile they tasted.
"Christmas Crackers and the Third Degree"

Chapter Summary

It's time for Christmas dinner over at the Finau family home, and the vegetables aren't the only thing getting grilled.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: NSFW, soft R for butt nudity fan art embedded at TOP OF THE CHAPTER

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter One Hundred Three
"Christmas Crackers and the Third Degree"

Disclaimer:
We wish you a legal disclaimer,
We wish you a legal disclaimer,
We wish you a legal disclaimer
Stating Rowling owns it all.

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Hermione couldn't help herself. Just seeing Severus in the outdoor shower again, water sluicing off his muscular tanned shoulders and back, the hollows of his buttocks, hair wet and trailing down his back. She should have been focused on washing her hair and getting the sweat and dirt rinsed off before Christmas dinner at the Finaus', as they were already running a bit late, but the moment of inspiration struck. On her knees, she decided to see if there was one more ejaculation she could milk from Severus, as it was close to the end of the time limit of the Sequoia potion, and he had already orgasmed about four times already while under its influence, not including their earlier morning activities.
Before both of them had taken their matching sexual potions dosage, there was also that half-hour of work they’d both put in on the garden. And before that, some brewing of a quick tanning potion for Hermione, so that she could have a base tan and avoid burning so easily with her pale English skin. It was a full day of Christmas presents, brewing, gardening and then a few hours of love-making. But now that Hermione was having her needs met, she found that her appetite was not quite sated, but further aroused and ravenous.

Recalling Severus’ casual snipe at Hawaiian punctuality, she figured running a bit later than planned would be within the acceptable societal norms of Malu Palekaiko.

As one of her hands swept between Severus’ legs, her other hand kept time with her mouth, stroking him as she licked and sucked and swallowed him whole into her hungry mouth, the water running down their bodies as she knelt. She found the soap and began lathering it between his cheeks. Hermione had already helped Severus wash that part of his body, but there was something else that needed taking care of.
Now that there was a lot of lather between his cheeks to act as lubrication, she pressed a finger to his anus and looked up at him as the water continued to spray down his chest. His eyes glanced down at her, his eyes already begging for her to continue. As her finger slipped in, his hips jerked slightly forward, thrusting into her mouth. She removed her hand from his cock and guided his hand from caressing her hair to grabbing a firmer hold of her hair. This was her way of giving him permission to grab hold and fuck her mouth, allowing him more control. As his hips moved back, Hermione pressed her finger deeper into Severus.

A low groan issued forth from Severus. He wasn't reaching orgasm yet, but he was overwhelmed by the sensation of her finger prodding him, stroking his prostate as she sucked him off, giving him permission to set the pace.

He moaned, not quite begging for more, but clearly willing to accept whatever Hermione was going to do to him.

Hermione was happy to oblige. With more soap and a little more lather, she then added a second finger, which changed the pitch of Severus' moans to something a little higher. It was almost a whimper.

Hermione could feel his sphincter tighten around her fingers. She sucked greedily, wantonly licking the head faster. Severus gently placed his hand on the back of her head and slowly pushed in.

Hot semen gushed into the back of her mouth, though not as much as usual. She tried to swallow around him as he throbbed and twitched with each spurt, her muscles constricting around him and adding more to his pleasure.

With a sigh, Severus collapsed forward, leaning against the walls of the shower for support.

Hermione gently and slowly removed her fingers from his anus. She finished soaping and rinsing herself off while Severus was barely able to stand there, panting, trying to catch his breath.

"You're going to kill me. But what a way to go," Severus finally said as he pushed himself away from the wall to stand once more. He rinsed off the last of the soap Hermione had left on him.

"Yes, if you don't kill me first. I've never heard of anyone pulling an abdominal muscle while
orgasming, so imagine my surprise when that happened to me."

Severus rubbed her abdomen. "Did that ointment soothe and heal it?"

"Yes, though I think I should recuperate for the rest of the night in that respect." Hermione rolled her eyes, recalling the intense orgasm she had and how magnificent it had been, only to have it interrupted by a stabbing pain of pulling an abdominal muscle during mid multiple-orgasm.

"We can play gently tonight, after we come back," he said as she slipped a hand between her legs and gently stroked her clitoris.

Hermione winced, "Oh, I'll need another dose of that lubrication potion if we do that. I'm nearly raw. That beard of yours can be a little abrasive after prolonged exposure."

"Do you need some salve to soothe you there too?" he asked with concern.

"I can wait until we get back. Besides, we're running late, if there is such a thing as late here," Hermione noted.

They finished rinsing off and hurried while they dressed, barely drying their hair enough so it didn't look like it was still dripping from the tips and tendrils of their locks. Something about their lateness and rushing to shower reminded Severus of the time Ginny and Draco were late for a duck dinner at his flat once.

Severus decided to wear long linen trousers and a subdued green Hawaiian shirt. Hermione chose one of the muumuus Ginny had picked out for her, something in red with short capped sleeves and no ruffles that hugged her torso. They both gave a smile to each other, finally realizing the unconscious choices in their color selections in regards to House affiliation, but to be fair they were Christmas colors.

In a pair of red flip-flops to match her dress, Hermione tried to keep up with Severus' long strides as they rushed to the Finau house for Christmas dinner, the box of Christmas crackers tucked under her arm. They were late, even by Hawaiian standards. Hermione barely had a chance to look about the town in daylight as she made sure not to trip or stub a toe on the odd uneven patch of sidewalk where a tree root had lifted it from underneath.
At three thirty-eight, Severus knocked on the door.

When the door opened, Akela screamed as she lunged at and hugged Hermione with boundless enthusiasm. It was a shrill screech filled with the uncontainable excitement that only teenage girls could muster. Severus remembered that sound, not too fondly, from his years at Hogwarts.

In a nearby cave on the outskirts of town, a colony of sleeping bats was temporarily awakened, thinking that one of their own was calling out in distress before the sound eventually subsided and they went back to sleep.

The teenager jumped up and down, still holding Hermione in a death grip, shouting, "Omigawd, omigawd, omigawd, you're finally here!"

Hermione, not wanting to appear too standoffish or too cold, merely hugged Akela back and looked at Severus with a mixture of, "Help," and, "Who is this person?"

Severus merely smirked, feeling vindicated that his perception – that island folk could be a bit too familiar with strangers upon first meeting – was spot-on.

Eventually, the ebullient teenage witch let go of Hermione and reached over to give her Uncle Severus a quick peck on the cheek. "It's about time you guys showed up. But that's okay, because dinner won't be for another hour."

Leaning in and whispering in confidence, Akela warned them, "I think my mom wanted you guys over here early enough so that she could grill you before she got too busy getting dinner on the table." The teenager than ran off without another word.

"And that was Akela. Welcome to island hospitality. One day you may get used to it. One day, so may I," Severus added dryly.

Hermione laughed at Severus' comment, knowing that Hawaii had not stripped him of his snarky personality entirely, just merely mellowed it a bit.

The general noise of people conversing mixed with the sound of children came from off in another part of the two-story plantation-style home. It was a noise Hermione was very familiar with after her many holidays at the Burrow with Ron.
There was yet another round of joyful noise and cheers as the two entered the kitchen.

"It's about time you two showed up," Draco said with a knowing smile. He stood behind Ginny who sat at the kitchen table, a chilled beverage in her hand. Ginny made an attempt to stand up, but then gave up and merely waved at them. She was a whole lot larger than the last time Hermione saw her in October, and she looked to be more like nine months along than just six, as Hermione finally got a good look at her.

Rainbow stopped stirring a pot on the stove and set it to stir itself with her wand while she came over and greeted the couple.

"Severus, Hermione, I'm so glad you could make it," Rainbow exclaimed as her eyes roved over Hermione, shaking her hand. "It's so nice to meet you finally, Severus has hardly said a thing about you. Like pulling Potions secrets from him." Her eyes moved over Hermione some more, making Hermione feel like she was getting the once-over from future in-laws to see if she was good enough for their son, since Severus did mention he had been informally adopted into the Finau family. "My, you're so... young."

Severus wanted to groan and put his face in his hand, which exactly matched the reaction of what Mounga was doing over in the corner of the kitchen. Rainbow knew that Hermione was once married to Ginny's older brother, and Ginny and Hermione had gone to Hogwarts together for many years, but the way it came out, it sounded like Rainbow was surprised by Hermione's youth.

"Hermione, this is Rainbow Finau," Severus introduced the two witches. "You already met her oldest daughter, Akela, at the door." Just then, there was a flash that streaked across the room as Kaimi ran in and nearly knocked the wind out of Severus and jostled Hermione too.

"Mele Kalikimaka, Uncle Severus! Why didn't you come flying with us today?" Kaimi said, pouting a little.

"And this is Kaimi, Mounga and Rainbow's youngest," Severus introduced his favorite "niece" to Hermione.

Before Hermione could greet her, Kaimi's eyes went wide and she shouted, "I forgot something! I'll be right back!" as she ran away as fast as a Firebolt.
Hermione looked about the kitchen and saw the huge mass of a wizard that was only slightly smaller than Hagrid was. "And you must be Mounga. Pleased to finally meet you," Hermione said as she extended her hand.

Mounga ignored the hand and pulled her into a hug, careful not to crush her too much. "It's good to finally meet you too, Hermione."

The large wizard let go of Hermione and clapped Severus on the back, only bruising a couple ribs this time. "Glad you finally made it over here." Then – leaning in in confidence so he couldn't be heard by his wife, who had gone back to stirring the pot on the stove – he added, "Rainbow was about to send the kids over to fetch you at two-fifteen, but I told her to just wait." Mounga then gave Severus a subtle wink, knowing exactly why they were late.

Jerry, who had just come back from fetching a few oranges for Rainbow from the tree in the backyard, came into the room. "The prodigal son returns!" the former Auror exclaimed, which made Hermione blink in surprise.

Walking over to them, Jerry introduced himself. "You must be Hermione. You look just as lovely as that photo from India Severus keeps on his desk."

"Photo?" Hermione asked, turning to Severus.

Severus explained briefly how Ginny and Draco had presented him with the photo upon their return.

"Thanks for that great present you Floo'ed over to me this morning. Boy! Was I surprised! I didn't take you for a guy who got my sense of humor," Jerry said with frank surprise.

Severus knew exactly the type of humor Jerry appreciated. It was usually crude, vulgar, lewd, highly inappropriate for mixed company – especially children, and on a rare occasion scatological in nature. Pat, the office manager, has gently asked Severus if he had a policy in place regarding such humor and jokes told openly in the workplace and slightly offensive cartoons tacked up on his wall in his office, out of the earshot and view of children and their parents, of course. Severus did not, but gave Pat free license to write up a policy that he approved instantly.

He thought about telling Jerry that the alcohol-pissing and cookie-tossing Santa was Hermione's idea, but figured Hermione should not be subjected to Jerry taking such information as her implied
appreciation of his sense of humor as well.

"Well, once I saw it, I figured you were the right person to appreciate such a novelty," Severus said. He spoke in a manner that Hermione, Draco, Ginny, and Mounga picked up on that was not outright a disparaging remark on the surface, but was one when you dug down to the root of its implied meaning.

Jerry was bright enough to catch the double meaning as well. "Touché!"

Kaimi came back into the kitchen, this time walking. "I made this for you, Hermione. Aloha and Mele Kalikimaka." She extended her arms, holding out a lei for Hermione.

"It's lovely," Hermione said in earnest, thrilled by the lei featuring red carnations, interspersed with white jasmine flowers and artfully folded green ti leaves. She took it from the child and placed it over her head. "Thank you, and Happy Christmas to you too," Hermione said, not attempting the Hawaiian Christmas greeting.

Severus looked about, and finally saw the last person to be introduced. Before he could say anything, Akela gave her brother an "accidental" shove, which dislodged him from his hiding spot from around the door frame where he had been discreetly and discreetly observing introductions.

"Hey!" he shouted at his sister, and gave her a none-too-gentle elbow to the ribs that she mostly darted away from in time.

"And this is Iakona, the middle of three," Severus said, nodding for him to come out and meet Hermione. When he saw the boy, he could tell he was in the middle of yet another growth spurt, for he seemed a couple inches taller from when he saw him just the week before during a brewing class. His hormones were active as well, for he had also broken out in a case of acne, which was unusual for him.

"Hel-lo," Iakona said, his voice cracking mid-word.

Severus almost winced, now understanding why the boy was hiding. He felt a great pang of empathy, remembering how awkward he'd felt when his own skin broke out and his voice cracked at that age.
Hermione, hoping to smooth over the boy's awkwardness and embarrassment, gently shook his hand. "Hello, Iakona. Severus has mentioned you're quite the apt Potions student, a compliment I never received myself while under his tutelage at Hogwarts. That's quite the feat. You must be very talented."

Iakona tried not to blush as he muttered out a meek thanks, his voice not cracking this time.

"Still not as good as me," Akela butted into the conversation. "I was so good, Uncle Severus said I didn't need any tutoring."

Kaimi, who had also been earlier picked on by her big sister, felt the need to stand up for her big brother and came to his defense readily with a jab she knew would be even more embarrassing. "But that didn't stop you from wanting to be tutored by Uncle Severus so you could be close to him when you were mooning over him," she said in a taunting sing-song manner, meant to enrage Akela, which it did.

"Why you little..." Akela gritted from between her teeth as she chased after Kaimi.

Kaimi screeched and took off, trying to stay out of her sister's grasp while shouting out loud enough for Hermione to hear, "And then there was the time that you were writing all over your parchment 'Mrs. Sn–'"

Akela had whipped out her wand and cast a Silencing Charm on her little sister.

"Hey, no fair," Iakona said, standing up for his little sister, and ended the spell. "Papa said no spells on her until she gets her own wand and can defend herself." Iakona's words were backed up by a hum of agreement from their father, who decided to let the children sort this out themselves.

Severus was rather appalled at the behavior of the children in front of a guest, but the scene just reminded Hermione of summers spent at the Burrow during her Hogwarts years when Percy, the twins, Ron, and Ginny would go at it like these siblings did. It was comforting in a way, confirming that siblings were just like this all over the world. She could tell that Severus was becoming a bit unsettled by the cacophony of youthful mayhem, and she decided to distract them.

"Kaimi, you're not eleven yet? But you're so tall!" Hermione noted with a little dramatic flair. She had noted just how tall the whole Finau household was and felt like a midget by comparison.
"I'm only nine," Kaimi said, before pointing out her siblings. "Akela is sixteen and Iakona is thirteen. And we get our wands at ten here in the States."

"Thirteen?" Hermione said as she appraised the young wizard once more, a bit astonished, as Iakona was almost as tall as Severus. Looking at Mounga, she could tell that Iakona was going to be as tall as his father and still had another ten or twelve inches to grow yet to match him. Even Akela was as tall as Severus and her mother now.

Finding the kitchen a bit cramped to continue cooking unimpeded, Rainbow said, "Dear, why don't you take our guests to the living room and offer them a drink." Turning to her children, she said in a very sternly disapproving tone, "Oh, no you don't. You keep your little fannies right here, I have tasks for you all."

Hermione almost choked on her own spit when Rainbow used that term, but then remembered that "fannies" was an American term used to mean bottoms, and was not being used with the British slang meaning.

As they ambled out to the living room, Draco said in commentary to his wife regarding the family bickering that just played out, "Are you sure you want three or four? Maybe two will be plenty."

Hermione laughed to herself and turned to see Severus give her a look that maybe that wasn't such a bad idea.

"Hermione," Mounga said, distracting Hermione, "what would you care for? We have Wizard POG, which is a blend of pumpkin, orange, and guava juices. We also have eggnog, an aperitif, beer, wine. I make an awesome 'polar bear.'"

"The 'beer' is served ice cold," Severus warned Hermione under his breath.

"What's a 'polar bear'?" Hermione looked at the array of alcohol bottles scattered on the serving console.

"Ground-up Ice Mice, mixed with crème de menthe and dark chocolate liqueur, and topped with a splash of brandy and half-and-half," Mounga said, shivering at the thought of drinking one. Draco gave a shudder as well.
"I think I'll go with an aperitif, though you will have to teach me how to make a Polar Bear so I can mix some up at the next monthly Potions masters meeting."

"Certainly," his host assured her. "Severus? For you?"

"The same."

"Wise choice," Draco added.

"Another polar bear for you, Draco?" Mouna asked.

"No, thank you. I just finished thawing out my toes and fingertips."

Ginny sat next down to Draco and guided his hands towards her neck, sighing with relief when his cool hands met her overheated skin. She was still nursing her glass of iced POG.

"Jerry?"

"I'll try some of that POG with a splash of something stronger from the bar."

Drinks in hand, they sat about and chatted. Mouna kept the questions light and social. Severus figured Rainbow had ordered him, under threat of keeping his manhood intact, to leave the grilling questions for Hermione to her.

The Finau children were as silent as the Grey Lady Ghost, as they moved about in the dining room, setting up the table with their wands, looking a bit contrite. Even Kaimi was subdued and helped where she could, setting the silverware.

Hermione and Severus sat next to each other on the couch as the conversation meandered. Periodically, her hand would quietly seek out his, to give just a quick and subtle squeeze. She still couldn’t believe they were together, having a conversation with others, with no one thinking their relationship off or disgusting as the initial reaction had been by some of those close to her back in England.
A few times, Severus' hand sought out hers as his thumb gently stroked the back of her knuckles, also seeking to return a small affectionate gesture. Severus was not one for public displays of affection, but these were subtle and quiet, noticed only by his intended.

In time, Akela came into the living room and, looking much more subdued, announced Christmas dinner was ready.

Everyone was ushered into the dining room, which was laid out with the family's finest linens and china. The floral decorations and centerpiece were not made of tropical flowers, but of box, pine and holly, looking starkly English in contrast to the tropical-themed paintings and decor. There were Christmas crackers on the table, which piqued the curiosity of the children immensely.

"Do we open the Christmas cookies now?" Kaimi asked with excitement.

"No, the Christmas crackers are for at the end of the meal, but before dessert," Ginny informed the children.

"Don't make me read the stupid joke aloud or wear the paper hat," Severus grumbled under his breath.

"In for a Knut, in for a Galleon," Hermione said just loud enough for him alone to hear.

After the Finaus said grace, food was served. There was a clanking and jumbling of bowls, platters, spoons, tongs, and other serving items about the table, punctuated with the obligatory, "Please, pass the...", "Thank you," or, "May I have the..."

It was right after Hermione put some bread sauce on her plate that Rainbow launched into the grand inquisition of her captive.

"So, Hermione. Draco has told me that you'll be running the new commercial facility that is being built here in Malu Palekaiko. That's quite a lot of responsibility for someone so young, who, as I've heard, is still working on her apprenticeship."

It did not escape Hermione's notice there was a slightly pained look on Mounga's face. Severus had
warned Hermione that Rainbow liked to know a lot about other people's business, talked a great deal, and often stuck her nose where it didn't belong. However, he also acknowledged that despite her unwelcomed over-inquisitiveness, the Healer was a good person who meant no harm, but must be dealt with tactfully when telling her to mind her own business.

"No more responsibility than it is for Lavender, who is about the same age as I, and founded the company. And I ran her company while she was away on maternity leave, while I was still working on my apprenticeship, and took my Spanish exam for my third language, and continued working on my year-long Herbology portion of my apprenticeship which is nearly at an end," Hermione replied, sounding very business-like, as it was merely fulfilling her regular duties.

"Hermione is almost a whole year older than me and two years more than Ginny," Draco added to the conversation to give Rainbow a bit of perspective on age.

Severus felt like stepping up to defend Hermione against Rainbow's less than tactful approach to the topic of Hermione's youth, and by association their age difference. Then he decided that if Hermione could debate in front of the Wizengamot and win him and Draco their freedom, she could parry a few questions from a nosy parker. He supposed that Hermione could be described as "so young" if you didn't know her background, but she was obviously holding back from telling Rainbow about her experiences in the war against Voldemort; killing evil wizards and watching friends die would make anyone older and sadder.

"And why did you wait so long before pursuing an apprenticeship?" Rainbow asked.

Given the age of the children around the table, Hermione gave the pared-down version of events regarding Dolores Umbridge and how Hermione ended the witch's short reign as Hogwarts High Inquisitor, Calpurnia Fudge's interference with Hermione's apprenticeship application, and the eventual help Severus gave her in securing an apprenticeship under Albert Dobmeir. Severus sat quietly eating, wondering when Rainbow's line of questioning would make Hermione snap at her. He knew it was only a matter of time.

Mounga decided that Rainbow's method of interrogation was a bit too confrontational, so he decided to take over and make it a bit more convivial and less personal. "So, as a town council member, I'm sort of curious as to when operations will be starting up. Draco mentioned you need to finish your apprenticeship first?"

Hermione and Severus exchanged quick glances at each other before she spoke. "Well, it may take a full year or two before I am a fully accredited Potions mistress," she began. She was interrupted by Rainbow giving a gasp in shock at the long "year or two" delay, but Hermione kept talking. "Erm, Severus and I think we may have found a way to have me complete my last language abroad, here in Hawaii instead of back in England. Once I take my Code of Ethics exam around
March and finish taking my Japanese language exam, the only thing left is for me to learn Chinese, which I might be able to learn here, while getting everything up and running with the factory."

Mounga let out a huge sigh of relief, along with Draco.

"But," Hermione added, "that is only if my master, Albert, agrees to such an arrangement. Which he probably will, given this will benefit his employer and mine."

"So how long until you finish learning Japanese?" Draco asked. He was also very curious, since may of the townsfolk had been asking him when they might be able to start applying for jobs at the factory.

"I don't know. I only just started studying Japanese. I heard having to learn a non-Indo-European language, along with a character-based written language, can take longer," Hermione truthfully confessed.

"It's not that hard," Akela interjected, before launching into a few Japanese phrases.

"Then perhaps could I trouble you for some tutoring while I'm here, for starting tomorrow, it's back to work for me with my studies, checking up on construction, and writing up several scrolls on the local flora and fauna of this island for my master." Hermione asked.

Severus cast a stern glance towards Mounga's oldest, answering for the witch, "Akela is not as fluent as she purports herself." He remembered reading her tutoring application scroll; he knew which languages she was fluent in, which was none, but she knew a smattering of a few.

"Gary Fujitani is a council member and a Nisei – that's a second-generation Japanese immigrant. He speaks, reads, and writes Japanese as fluently as a native since he grew up bi-lingual. I'm sure he can set aside some time this week to help get you started." Mounga smiled then frowned. "Pity you can't be here for more than a week. Gary could tutor you daily, instead of just for one week."

Hermione had thought it was a pity as well, for the only Potions master back in England she knew who was fluent in Japanese was Royston. She didn't want to spend more time in his company than necessary, given his previous interest in her as stated during a few drunken confessions about what he would like to do to her. A few of those times had resulted in Hermione dishing out a hex or a curse that kept his tongue in check until the next time Royston got so drunk he forgot about the last one.
Suddenly, inspiration struck. Hermione had been wishing that there was a way for her and Severus to communicate with each other more effectively than the current two- to three-week lag of correspondence via albatross, or the usual method of waiting for someone to make the Portkey trip half-way around the world, with Ginny and Draco playing courier. Later that night she would talk with Severus about her idea and then see if Jerry, with his talent in Charms, could assist them. But that was a discussion for another time.

"Gary's tutoring would be lovely. Any help is appreciated," Hermione replied.

Rainbow decided to take back charge of her interrogation. "So how long so you think it would take you to master Japanese in order for you to pass your language tests?"

"Perhaps six months? Maybe up to a year?" Turning to Severus, she asked, "How long did it take you to master Chinese?"

"About eight months, but Chuff was unwilling to tutor me so I had to learn entirely on my own."

"But your master will be able to tutor you, right" Rainbow asked.

"No. Unfortunately, Albert is not familiar with Japanese, but another Potions master I know is, and he might be willing to help."

"Who?" Severus asked.

"Royston," she ground out.

"I don't want you studying under Royston," Severus said, suddenly sounding very jealous, having heard Hermione's tales of Royston's behavior during the booze-ups.

"If I can handle him when we're both three sheets to the winds at the monthly meetings, I can handle him sober," Hermione countered. "I'd like to be able to move here in six months time, if I can get the tutoring."
Severus wanted Hermione to move in with him as soon as possible, but the idea of Hermione alone with Royston, who had said things in drunken moments like he wanted to, "Stir his potion in her cauldron," or, "See if she could make sparks fly out of his wand like New Year's Eve," made him debate against the idea of her prolonged absence from his arms.

Jumping upon that thread of conversation, Rainbow asked, "So, if you might be moving here in six months, will you be doing any house- or apartment-hunting while you're here this week? I'm sure Draco or Severus can recommend their real estate agents to help. Or will you just move into a hotel when you first move here and then hunt like Severus and Draco did?"

Hermione blinked at Rainbow and wondered what she was talking about, since she would be moving in with Severus, obviously. Then Hermione remembered that in the wizarding world cohabitation outside of marriage was looked down upon, unless you were already engaged or separated from your spouse and living as lovers. She had mistakenly assumed that with the laid-back island attitude such mores would have a bit more latitude here, especially since Severus told her about the stronger Muggle influence on the island.

"I have already made arrangements," Hermione said quietly, not wanting to put Severus on the spot.

Jerry, who had been watching the exchange with rapt attention, and glad to no longer be the victim of Rainbow's slew of personal questions for once, immediately picked up on the implications of her remark. "Ah, POSSLQs," he piped up knowingly, nodding his head with comprehension.

"What?" nearly everyone around the table asked in unison, except for Hermione and Severus. Hermione knew and she had even acquainted Severus with the POSSLQ phrase when they played house together during his last month in London.

Jerry then broke out into song, "Five foot two, eyes of blue. Would you be my POSSLQ? Has anybody seen my gal?" Nearly everyone around the table stared at him blankly. "POSSLQ: persons of opposite sex sharing living quarters."

"Oh," Rainbow said brightly, finally enlightened, "so you'll be moving in with Severus. That's wonderful. When's the wedding date?" The assumption was that unmarried witches and wizards only lived together if they were engaged and would be marrying in the very near future, the same as it was back in England.

The rest of the table erupted in joyous exclaimations of congratulations over the assumption of the couple getting married in the immediate future.
"Can I be a flower girl?" Kaimi asked.

"Severus, you old dog! Congratulations," Mouna exclaimed.

"Do you need help planning the wedding?" Akela asked, looking a bit dreamily lost in the romantic notion of planning one.

"I know just the place where you can get a wedding gown, the same place where Ginny got hers," Rainbow added to the cacophony.

Draco and Ginny said nothing, but noticed how subdued both their friends were despite the assumed good news.

Hermione, overwrought once more at the idea of an engagement and the slew of questions, blurted out, "Severus and I are not engaged!" It came out a bit more hotly then she intended, but it made the whole table immediately quiet, no longer pestering her with questions she had neither the time nor patience to deal with currently.

Rainbow looked a bit aghast, almost as if she was about to place her hands over Kaimi’s ears to prevent her from hearing about such notions as a witch and wizard living together with no intention of getting married.

Severus patted Hermione’s hand under the table in order to soothe her and spoke this time. "Hermione has the pressure of finishing her apprenticeship in a manner that is also time-critical. In addition to her current duties as vice president of The Lovely Lavender Company and then moving here, uprooting from her familiar life in England, to then immediately work on getting the new facility up and running, setting up operations, purchasing, shipping, and distribution channels, the last thing she needs is the added pressure of a wedding and engagement on top of all that."

To clarify, Hermione said in a very formal and businesslike manner, "The topic of marriage has been tabled until a later time."

Severus enjoyed how Hermione had taken a lot of the emotional aspect out of the topic and made it sound like a dry and joyless business venture. It was something he would have done. If anything, it certainly put an end to Rainbow’s curiosity on the matter for now.
To break the awkward silence that had now descended upon the table, Hermione turned to Jerry and said, "You seem to be quite musically talented. I heard you play the other night as we passed by. How long have you been playing piano?"

Jerry then took this opportunity to tell Hermione, and the rest of the guests, about his background growing up in New York, and being pegged as a child prodigy on the piano.

"I was on track to go to Juilliard, a very prestigious Muggle music academy, later on, but when I was ten I got my letter and wand, and then the rest is history." Jerry smiled, but it was tinged with a hint of sadness.

Severus could tell that there was more to Jerry's tale than that, as it was the same sad smile as when Jerry would mention his mother on a rare occasion. Severus knew that she had passed away during Jerry's first few years of his magical schooling; he never explained how she passed, only that her passing had inspired him to pursue a career as an Auror.

Ginny quietly asked, "Could you please pass the turkey?"

"Fourths?" Draco said a little louder than he intended, not wanting to bring attention to his wife's enormous appetite.

Ginny, feeling aggrieved at Draco's remark, said, "Well, I am eating for two!"

"Possibly three," Hermione added, noting how large Ginny had become and comparing her to when Lavender and her Aunt Christine were in their sixth month. "You know twins are genetic." When everyone around the table looked at her quizzically at her use of the Muggle term, she clarified by saying, "Hereditary. Tends to run in families."

"It is?" Draco asked, now looking a bit pale. "Having twins runs in families?"

"How far along are you, Ginny?" Rainbow asked.

"Six months, almost seven?"
Rainbow stood up and surveyed her patient. "Ginny, if I may?" she asked as she pulled out her wand and held it above Ginny's abdomen.

Ginny nodded, and Rainbow began casting a spell with a slow swirling motion. Her wand tip glowed until a shimmery thread of golden dust spilled out to hover in the air like dust motes. The dust began to congeal into a small cluster of three glowing and quickly pulsing orbs of light, orbiting around a larger and brighter golden orb of light that was beating in time, like a heartbeat.

Hermione watched, fascinated with the spell. She was transfixed by the bright glow of the light and the smaller pulsating orbs, like a miniature solar system made of golden dust.

"Not twins," Rainbow said, pausing for a moment, "triplets."

"What?" Draco and Ginny asked in unison, both equally shocked.

Hermione finally understood that each of the small orbs was the heartbeat of a child growing inside of Ginny, and the large central glowing and pulsing orb was Ginny's own heart.

Severus, though slightly surprised, was the first to congratulate the Malfoys. He knew that Draco would be the first Malfoy in nearly five generation to produce more than one child in the entirety of their marriage.

Hermione, noticing Ginny's look that bordered on dismay, asked, "Ginny? Are you all right?"

"I was hoping to finish pursuing my Healer apprenticeship after the baby was born, but how on earth can I do that with three?" The expecting mother began to cry, feeling quite overwhelmed with the news that she was not only to be a mother to one infant, a daunting task for a new mother, but three at once.

"I can help baby-sit," Akela offered, but Ginny seemed to barely acknowledge the offer.

"I'm going to be huger and fatter than ever before they're born!" Ginny wailed, her hormones now quite out of control.
Snapping out of his momentary lapse into shock, sensing his wife in distress, Draco gathered Ginny up in his arms as he got out of his chair and knelt next to her. Smoothing the hair out of her face and wiping away the tears, he tenderly assured her, "Ginny, you are even more beautiful to me now than ever. You're not fat, you're glorious!" It was a moment that should have been private, but given the situation and the place, Draco seemed not to care that Severus, Hermione, Jerry, and the entire Finau family were witness to this shared intimate moment. "I have faith that if anyone can handle triplets, it is you. I've seen you with your keiki class. If anyone can deal with a small rabble of urchins, it's you." Ginny gave a short laugh in response to the phrasing of Draco's praise. "I love you, and I will be there for you and our children to help any way I can."

This earnest declaration of Draco's promise to give his emotional and physical support seemed to have mollified Ginny. She smiled and gave Draco a quick peck on the lips, knowing the dinner table was not exactly the place to share a more passionate kiss in front of others.

Draco settled back into his chair and held her hand for reassurance they were together in this grand adventure called life.

Hermione sat there, absorbing the entire exchange, amazed at how Draco had turned from a petulant boy, quick to dish out a snarky remark, into a man stepping up to his responsibilities as a husband and expectant parent. He was giving Ginny his full love and support in a way that Ginny had always claimed he was capable of, but Hermione had only now finally witnessed first-hand. Even during the best moments of Harry and Ginny's marriage, Harry had not given Ginny the sort of emotional support and assurance that she had just witnessed. Any lingering doubts she may have had about helping Ginny leave Harry were finally erased.

Even back in London, Harry and his wife, Zhubanysh, were far closer emotionally and more well-suited to each other's temperaments than when Harry and Ginny were together. Harry had even admitted as such and reluctantly agreed that Ginny leaving him was the best thing that could have happened, in hind sight. Seeing how truly happy Ginny and Draco were together made Hermione's heart swell, bringing a tear to the corner of her eye.

She wiped it away hastily.

Severus noticed Hermione being affected by the moment, and gave her a squeeze of assurance.

Jerry, trying to lighten the mood, turned to Hermione and asked, "So, Hermione. Going into Potions. Is that something your mother or father did?"
"Oh, no. I'm Muggle-born. Both of my parents are dentists."

Hermione was somewhat stunned by the response of the Finau children, who responded with their own shouts of disbelief.

Severus noticed how Jerry merely choked on his wine while casting a quick glance to the Dark Mark on Severus' forearm. The former Auror gave Severus a quick look that conveyed a mixture of surprise and disbelief that an ex-Death Eater would be romantically involved with someone of no magical lineage.

"Really?" Iakona asked with great interest. "How gruesome!" He looked to be more delighted than horrified.

"Is it true they stick needles in your mouth?" Kaimi asked with morbid fascination.

"How do they drill holes in teeth?" Akela asked, drawn into the discussion.

Mounga laughed and interrupted his children's ongoing slew of questions. "Forgive my children. They're curious since dentists are a popular costume here for Halloween." The town judge went on to explain the custom in Malu Palekaiko of having children dress up as people in Muggle professions, then trick or treat around town.

"How did such a custom come into practice?" Hermione asked, intrigued as to the origins of that custom, a minor flip of the Muggle American one.

"Better to curb their curiosity than for them to engage in some of the stunts I did when I was a young teen," Mounga admitted. "Like the time I made Polyjuice Potion, then had Ragenstia, the hag who still lives on the north side of the island, give me some of her hair. I went trick or treating in Honolulu as her after making an illegal Portkey, and when I got back, I had all my candy taken away and my hide tanned by my father like no one's business." For effect, Mounga rubbed his hip in memory of that punishment.

"Wow, Papa," Kaimi said with amazement, "when you said you were sometimes a wicked boy, you meant it!"
Hermione was rather shocked herself that the town judge had such a disregard for the law in his youth. As for the rest of the table, they had already heard of many other misadventures of Mounga's youth that were far more transgressive.

Severus was tempted to offer up his own tale of Hermione using Polyjuice Potion and accidentally turning herself partially into a cat, but decided that was a tale for when Hermione was more well-acquainted with present company and was comfortable enough to share it herself. It had certainly taxed his own skills as a Potions Master to come up with a brew to counter the effects of using animal hair mixed with Polyjuice Potion. Maybe while Hermione was visiting, he could teach her the counter elixir, should she ever come across such an instance, rare as they were.

Hermione answered the children's questions about dentistry that seemed to take the terror-inducing mystique out of it, much to their disappointment. There were no gruesome tales they could share with their friends, now knowing some of the more mundane aspects about the dentistry field. As a healer, however, Rainbow was fascinated by the subject and asked if Hermione could tell her more about it at a later time.

"Hermione?" Akela prompted.

"Yes?"

"Would you say that you might be finishing your apprenticeship by say... summer, a year and a half from now?"

Hermione stopped and pondered the proposed timeline. Nodding in an unsure manner, she said, "Yes, that sound about right, should it take about nine months on average for me to learn my two remaining languages."

Akela suddenly blurted out with great eagerness, "Are you going to take an apprentice when you're done?"

Hermione was quite surprised by the question, now understanding the urgent tone in Akela's question. "You want to be a Potions mistress?"

"Oh, yes!"
"Akela," Rainbow began, "you shouldn't commit to an apprenticeship yet. You still have about a year and half in your studies left. You may find, as you continue maturing, your interests in a career are drawn elsewhere."

Severus remembered that Akela's keen interest in Potions had begun with her crush on him. She was still interested in Potions, since her heart had moved on, to be broken, healed and then won by the young Tristan. Akela said Tristan would come over that night after he was done with his own family Christmas dinner.

"Well, given Hermione's own difficulties and delays, isn't it wise that I, at least, begin researching my options, Mom?" Akela replied with a bit too much sass.

"As for taking on an apprentice so shortly after becoming a mistress, I'm not sure what the custom is." Turning to the resident expert on the subject, Hermione asked, "Severus? What is the usual time after one becomes a master or mistress that one takes an apprentice?"

"Having never had an apprentice, I can't say myself, but usually within the first five years of becoming one is standard. But given your previous experience, within the first year or so would not be amiss," he added, much to Akela's delight.

"Oh, that's great! My mom doesn't want me to study under any wizards, not unless they are like, you know, over a hundred years old already. And on the island, besides Uncle Severus, we only have Arnold and Ranjit, and neither of those two take apprentices. And on the other islands, we only have two other masters and no mistresses. Mom says that witches who study under masters, um..." Akela stopped and cast her eyes sideways at her little sister, who was too young to hear of such sexual matters. "Get too close, if you know what I mean."

Hermione knew all too well, having fallen into Severus' bed, even before they began working and experimenting on formulas together. Mixing learning and pleasure was a common occurrence in potions apprenticeships. Masters and female apprentices were a recipe for sexual dalliances that usually ended in marriage – or sticky affairs if the master was already married.

"I can certainly understand your mother's concern that you study under a Potions mistress instead of a master," Hermione admitted. "Were you my daughter, I would have the same concern. But in a year, if you are still interested, I will entertain the proposal. Perhaps for work experience you can take a part-time job at the equivalent of the Department of Standards & Regulations here in the States."

"They don't have a department like that," Severus informed her.
"What? How do they make sure ingredients are as they are advertised or sold? What about quality assurances?" Hermione asked, now wondering about the ingredients she would be buying in Hawaii and abroad.

"People tend to hire an in-house quality tester or go by reputation of the company selling the items," Severus said. He had to act as his own quality inspector, even when purchasing from the local apothecary.

Turning to Draco, Hermione said with a bit of exasperation, "Well, that's a position we'll have to hire for."

"I already have it written down on a scroll regarding employment positions to fill," Draco assured her. Leaning forward to speak to Akela down the table, he said, "I'll let you know when we start interviewing for the position."

The conversation continued during dinner, with more questions from Akela and Mounaga about the facility, and Draco and Hermione fielding them equally. Occasionally, Severus was consulted, since he had extensive work experience with the company.

Eventually, Christmas crackers were opened. Severus only agreed to wear the paper hat because Hermione whispered in his ear a promise that erased any hesitation he had. Nearly everyone groaned at the terrible jokes, and the children begged and swapped for the more desirable trinkets that were included. It did not escape anyone of the British contingent that the crackers were the Treble W brand ones. All of Fred and George's usual and popular joke items filled the various crackers. Severus gladly gave Kaimi his fake wand, and Hermione gave her the joke cauldron she received. Jerry traded Iakona his Headless Hat for the Extendable Ears. Mounaga was warned by Hermione about the punching telescope he received, based on her first-hand experience she relayed, and he narrowly avoided a black eye. Rainbow thought the quart jar of fake troll snot was a bit "tasteless," which was an ironic choice of words given that it was actually a tasty lime gelatin mixed with candies shaped like bugs and other disgusting things that might be found in troll snot.

Wishing to move along to more appropriate table conversation, Rainbow turned her focus on Jerry, asking if he had found a date for the New Year's Eve Ball.

Kaimi sat there quietly listening to the different conversations. She quickly grew bored and – with her belly full – eventually fell asleep, slumping sideways against Severus. Her paper hat slid over one eye.
Hermione watched silently as Severus let Kaimi, who was seated on his right, snuggle up and rest her head against his chest, as he wrapped his arm around her to cradle her and stop her from falling over. From the fact Severus reacted little to Kaimi readily clinging to his side as she drifted off, Hermione deduced this wasn't the first time the child had fallen asleep in the company of Severus. It warmed Hermione's heart, assuring her that Severus would indeed make a fine father some day, despite the nervousness he expressed about his own abilities to be an adequate one.

When Kaimi began drooling on Severus' shirt, Mounga came over and picked up his daughter and carried her off to bed. She was no doubt worn out by the excitement of the day and the couple nips of wine she was allowed to taste during dinner.

Akela and Iakona, still somewhat in the doghouse for the unseemly behavior in the kitchen in front of company, were ordered by their mother to clear the dishes and to wash them. Without magic. This amused Severus, since it was a new form of discipline Rainbow had adopted after hearing about how Severus disciplined his own unruly students during detentions.

The adults sat in the living room and conversed while dinner settled before dessert was to be served.

Just as Akela and Iakona finished washing dishes, there was a knock at the door. Akela ran to open the door.

Hermione could hear the young witch breathlessly greet the visitor. "Mele Kalikimaka, Tristan."

"Mele Kalikimaka, Akela," the young wizard replied, in a way that Hermione could tell that the two were quite smitten with one another. She remembered how Severus would greet her in a similarly warm and expectant manner during their courtship.

The visitor was ushered into the living room where he greeted each one in turn respectfully.

"Mr. Snape," Tristan said in greeting, waiting for him to introduce the witch Tristan recognized from the photo in his Potions tutor's office.

"This is Mrs. Weasley."

"Just call me Hermione, please," she amended Severus' introduction. She hated the use of her
married last name in general, since it was often spoken with disdain back home.

Tristan bowed politely and shook her hand. "A pleasure to meet you."

After pleasantries, Akela and Tristan went off to exchange gifts in private.

Hermione sat back and squeezed Severus' hand yet again, reminded of the heady sensation of new love, or at least love during the early courtship phase of the relationship.

Eventually, it was time for dessert. Akela and Tristan came back out from her bedroom, the young wizard's hair looking a bit mussed after a proper snogging. The rum was warmed and poured on top of the pudding. Then the candles around the room were extinguished and the plum pudding was set ablaze by the tip of Rainbow's wand, as she said, "Incendio," setting the blue flames dancing gaily.

The cake was sliced and served with hard sauce, completing the authentic English Christmas dinner the Finau children wanted to experience. Everyone praised Severus on the plum pudding, with Jerry joking that if he didn't make it as a Potions master, he might make a fair living as a baker.

Hermione and Severus walked home Christmas night, a bag in Severus' hand holding plenty of leftovers Rainbow insisted on them taking home with them.

"Is Rainbow always asking questions and a bit too curious?" Hermione asked tactfully.

"You should have heard the questions she was trying to drag out of me about how our romance began."

Hermione laughed to herself. "Oh, dear."

"Of course, I spun a tale so outrageous that she couldn't believe me."

"Any truth to that tale," Hermione asked, wondering if he used the truth for the basis of a lie.
"Not unless there are any rings of any truth to my heroically diving into the Black Lake to save you from the reciprocated amorous advances of the giant squid after you had taken a love potion accidentally tainted with calamari ink," he admitted as if he was rather bored.

This further amused Hermione, wishing she could have seen the look on Rainbow's face when Severus laid that whopper of a tale on her.

"Janine asked me as well. She is the Muggle nurse who helped with the ice pox treatment, but she asked very nicely and tactfully. So I told Janine that you needed a friend to talk with, which is the truth."

Smiling, Hermione hummed in agreement. "Yes, that does seem to sum up nicely how it all began."

Once home, Hermione undressed, willing to fulfill her offer to Severus that convinced him to put the silly paper crown upon his head at the table for everyone to see.

As Severus walked in, holding the gold box he had set aside, he said, "You didn't have to promise to do this tonight."

Hermione placed her dirty clothes in the hamper with a flick of her wand, keeping her red knickers on. "Your fear is looking foolish. I thought if I could help you overcome that fear tonight, it would only be right for me to address my fear tonight as well."

Severus set the gold box on the bed and lifted the lid. Pulling out the purple and black corset, he heard Hermione breathe deeply, as she began her techniques to remain calm. He laid the corset upon her lap to look at, asking if there was anything else he could do to help her.

Hermione suggested brightening the lights, since it had been dark where Alan held her captive. She also asked him to set the music box to play something classical, soothing, a pleasant sound to focus
"I'm ready."

Severus loosened the laces as much as he could before wrapping the silk-and-lace undergarment about her. He let it hang open in the front, holding it loosely about her torso, to allow her to get used to the idea of it on her person.

Hermione knew she had nothing to fear from a piece of clothing, but it brought back the memories of feeling bound and trapped, the same as how it felt when Madam Mandel began to tighten and cinch it. All those recollections and images were close to rupturing through her mental focus of the moment.

With her hands slightly trembling, Hermione began to hook the front closed. She began breathing heavily while trying to control her emotions.

Severus wanted to say what a lovely color it was on her, but knew this was not the time.

They sat there on the bed as Hermione's breaths began to even out once more.

Hermione closed her eyes as she began to confess, "After the attack, I tried to visit the Pensieve memory of that one time you chained me up. I couldn't watch it. Just seeing myself unable to break free, it no longer aroused me, but only frightened me."

The corset was still very loose, and he would not tighten it until Hermione requested he do so.

Severus placed a gentle hand on her shoulder and began speaking in a low and comforting voice. "Do you remember that first time you bound me, when we were experimenting on the Irresistible Potion?"

Hermione licked her lips before breathing her reply. "Yes."

"I know the panic one can feel when one feels restrained," he admitted without further detail.
Hermione could only guess that he had been attacked while immobilized by some spell, hex, or jinx. "How did you get through it? How did you stop yourself from panicking?"

Severus' hand began slowly caressing her shoulder in a way that was meant to comfort, not seduce. "Because I was with someone I trusted completely. I knew you would not hurt me. I knew that while I was with you, unable to defend myself, you would keep me safe."

Hermione closed her eyes and let out a shuddering sigh as she leaned into his touch for support, taking relief in Severus' words and taking them to heart.

"One thing I think you failed to realize," he went on in the same gentle and assuring voice, "was that time I restrained you upon your request, it was not I who was in control, it was you. The slightest word by you and it all would have ended. You were the one in control, though I understand that you may have forgotten that." Severus leaned over and gave Hermione a chaste kiss upon her shoulder.

After a few moments, she sat up straight and glanced over her shoulder at the man she loved and trusted completely. "You can start slowly tightening the laces," Hermione said, her voice a little less shaky.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And thank you to BleedingHeartWorks (http://bleedingheartworks.deviantart.com/) for the lovely commission of Severus in the shower, for the scene at the very top of the chapter. You can view it on my Tumblr page here. Rated soft R (mature) for naked butt, no bits showing, but still, NSFW. http://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/post/153292646125/sneak-peek-at-fan-art-for-and-they-didnt-live

Thank you to my ever talented, always glorious betas, JuneW and thegreyladies. Without my betas, this fic would be far less readable and coherent.

Regular Muggle POG is passion, orange, and guava juice, a favorite juice blend of kids that is available in stores in Hawaii. It is sold in cartons and cans.

Nisei is a person of Japanese descent (second generation), born and educated in the
"Has Anybody Seen My Gal": Music by Ray Henderson, Lyrics by Sam M. Lewis & Joseph Widow Young.
"Pensieve Pleasures"

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Severus find a way to keep communicating while apart; later on, Severus continues to give Hermione more “therapy.”

Chapter Notes

Warning: Mild, consensual BDSM scene.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter One Hundred Four
"Pensieve Pleasures"

Disclaimer: So I got to keep on disclaimin'.
I got to write on, oh, ho, ho.
I, I, I, I'm so tired,
But I just can't lose my stride.
I got fifteen disclaimers to go now,
And I can hear the lawyers calling my name.
It's not as if, as though, I'm stealing Rowling's oeuvre.
I'm gonna tell you till my meaning is plain.
Now I'll be so glad to wrap this up,
And start my own original fic, that's the plan.
Now, when I post my fanfic,
I disclaim all over, rip, and remember who owns this franchise.
I got to keep on disclaimin'.
I got to write on, oh, ho, ho.
I, I, I, I, I'm so tired, but I just can't lose my stride.
Read on, let me tell you, ya'll, I, I, I, I, I, I, I, I'm so tired,
But I just can't lose my stride.
Come on fic, don't fail me now.
I got ten more chapters to go.
I got nine, eight, seven, six, six, six...

A/N: Disclaimer a parody of the song “25 Miles” by Edwin Starr. Songwriters: BRISTOL, JOHNNY WILLIAM/STARR, EDWIN/FUQUA, HARVEY. Published by Lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC
Severus woke up to something warm, furry, and rumbling attached to his face. Gently pushing the cat aside, he sat up to find his bed empty and the sun much higher in the morning sky than when he normally woke.

Glancing at the floor, he saw the corset still lying there as when it was tossed aside during their extended night of passion. Taking a second dose of the Sequoia potion within one day certainly explained why he had slept in.

"Katrina!" Hermione gently chastised the cat, who had finally been given a name by Severus. "I told you not to wake him. He had a long night."

Hermione came prancing in, practically bouncing on the balls of her feet, with a tray floating behind her. There was fresh fruit, a croissant, and a freshly made pot of tea, all for one.

"We both had a long night, yet you're up and about looking chipper." Severus couldn't help but suddenly smirk to himself in memory of the night before. Even he couldn't believe he'd let Hermione bind him to the bed as part of her "therapy" by reversing the roles. What's more, he couldn't believe he'd enjoyed it, but it was merely the illusion that he had given up control. Just the sudden visual recollection of Hermione in her corset, riding him wantonly as her hair tossed about while he was unable to hold her, but knowing he could have her free him at any moment, made his cock stir.

"Breakfast in bed is served," she announced, a lingering twinkle in her eye.

Severus sat up and braced his back against the headboard. He let Hermione set the tray down with the guidance of her wand. "This is something new." He was feeling quite pampered.

"You sleeping in this late is new," Hermione pointed out.

She leaned over and gave him a soft, yet lingering, kiss before going around to the other side of the bed to climb in and keep him company as he ate. She kept Katrina from sticking her nose in Severus' breakfast by keeping her busy with a thorough two-handed scratching behind the ears.

Severus had the tea and milk pouring themselves into a cup with the use of his wand, while he was
busy looking at the Owl Post that had arrived that morning. Opening it, he hummed to himself.

"Anything interesting?"

"Gary Fujitani, your new temporary Japanese tutor, wants to come over today to begin lessons. He wants to know what time he should arrive." Severus knew that Gary would have probably come over instead and knocked on his door or met him down at his shop, but given that Severus had company, Gary probably didn't want to bother him.

"Where's your owl? I could send a reply that eleven o'clock would be fine." Hermione began to get up until Severus stopped her.

"Don't bother owling. I usually keep the owl at the shop. And the custom here is to go over in person."

"That's not very efficient," Hermione noted.

"No, but personal interaction is more highly valued; it's part of the sense of community here. While sometimes a bit impracticable, it does allow for more face-to-face time. It's a small community; most of the island's inhabitants live in town within walking distance, and not every home here has a fireplace. Besides, the menehune are frightened of owls, so people keep the use of owls to a minimum as well, more out of politeness, formality, or official business." Severus ate a forkful of pineapple before washing it down with a sip of tea.

Hermione had read in the Muggle guide book on Hawaii about local folklore of the menehune – ancient little forest people who build great construction projects overnight, fitting lava rocks and stones together seamlessly to build fish dams, aqueducts, irrigation channels, and temples. However, should the menehune be discovered, they abandon their project, forever leaving it unfinished.

There was a lot about life in Malu Palekaiko Hermione still had to learn about. She was still getting used to taking her shoes off when entering a house, a custom Severus had already picked up. It was strange to watch him pad about the house barefoot most of the time, so different from seeing him in black wool trousers, long-sleeved shirts, and boots. She did notice he had proper footwear when he was brewing, though; no open-toed sandals when he was in the Potions lab.

"Speaking of face-to-face, that reminds me of something I wanted to talk with you about,"
Hermione said, prompted by Severus' use of the phrase. She had wanted to speak to him last night about it, but they got carried away dealing with other matters. "Do you remember that mirror Harry once had that was a gift from Sirius? The mirror that had a twin in which you could see the other person's face and converse over distance?"

"You mean the two-way mirror that if Potter had bothered to use, Sirius Black might still be alive this day?" Severus bit out unkindly.

Hermione winced from Severus' acerbic tone, recalling the guilt Harry had gone through, thinking the exact same thing as Severus had clearly stated. She was not about to defend Harry, nor was she going to dwell on that part of their past either. Instead, she kept the conversation focused on the present. "Well, I was thinking, since Jerry is quite talented at Charms, as you say he is, perhaps he can help us create a set of two-way mirrors with which we could continue to see each other and talk a bit every day, instead of these long months apart. And though I might be here in as early as maybe nine or ten months, I really did miss talking with you terribly after you left. Once I do move here, it will be much more practical to stay in contact with Lavender back in London instead of albatross or Portkeys."

Severus mulled it over and wished he had thought of that himself. It was something that would certainly allow him to keep in contact with Hermione and see her, though not in person, every day. He had missed talking with her just as much, and having her around made him the happiest he had been in a long time.

"Perhaps we should visit Jerry before we visit Gary to see if he is capable of such a thing. As much as I am loathe to admit it, Black and Potter were quite talented wizards, and it is a rather ingenious device," Severus reluctantly confessed. "Then if you can continue your lessons with Gary via our mirrors, a long-term tutoring plan can be arranged."

Severus finished up his breakfast quickly and got ready for the day. Upon entering the kitchen, he saw what had kept Hermione busy while he slept in. She had her books on tropical flora out, and a few from his library. Also, she had been working on her scrolls for Albert, no doubt scribbling what information she had gleaned from working in the garden yesterday. Seeing that Severus was ready, she put her work away, and they headed out into the late morning together.

Now strolling, instead of rushing because they were late like the day before, Hermione could look about and admire the lushness of the island. Ferns, ti plants, orchids, and palm trees decorated people's front yards, which were accented with hedges of different gingers, sugar cane, various bamboos, and hibiscus in a rainbow of colors.

They walked together, with Hermione's arm tucked into Severus', towards the edge of town to an area where the jungle was less tamed. Turning off the main road they walked single-file along a
path that was slightly overgrown, and where they had to duck their heads under the fronds of a tree fern, until they rounded a turn in the gravel path dotted with pink and red anthuriums growing wild. Then they came upon a multi-storied treehouse about fifteen to twenty feet up in the air, built atop some long pieces of lumber and around a few trees. Had Arthur and Molly built The Burrow as a tropical treehouse, it would have looked very similar to the house Hermione now stood nearly under, since it seemed there was not a right angle or plumb line in the entire structure.

They climbed a long flight of stairs that led up to the front door.

Severus knocked on the front door, and the two were greeted by a very bleary-eyed Jerry, who had a blue-and-white Japanese men's cotton kimono tied only half-closed. Hermione could see his black T-shirt and paisley boxers on underneath.

"Jeez, I thought you guys would still be busy playing 'hide the Beater's bat' this morning," Jerry drawled sleepily, his New York accent sounding rather pronounced that morning.

Severus was about to do something about the rudeness of Jerry's crude sexual innuendo as he began to go for his wand, but Hermione minutely shook her head, indicating to let it go. If she was offended enough by some remark Jerry made, she was fully capable of letting Jerry know of her displeasure. Besides, a wizard like Jerry who loved a pissing and vomiting Santa figurine was bound to make some uncouth comment about their sex life.

Scratching at his grizzled chin, Jerry stepped away from the doorjamb and waved them in. "Since you're here, might as well come in. Sorry about the mess; I had a party here after dinner last night."

Jerry ambled off towards the bathroom while Severus and Hermione walked carefully. They wanted to avoid the many bottles and drained cups, most of them empty of alcohol, strewn about the floor. When they found their way to the couch, Severus swept his wand across the couch to simultaneously dust and clear it of food crumbs before he and Hermione sat down.

Emerging from the bathroom, Jerry was now in a pair of shorts and a clean white T-shirt featuring a photo of four sullen-looking men with the word "Ramones" in a hastily scrawled font above it, Severus' co-worker staggered to his living room, tipping a vial of hangover relief potion down his gullet.

"Ah, better," he said as he chucked the empty vial over his shoulder, then cast his wand about, making the falling vial and all the empty and partially empty bottles and cups around the place disappear. The room was now clean and presentable, even with the Santa standing over in the corner. At least the over-sized novelty figurine's drawers were currently in the up position, though
to Hermione's shock, two "nude" gingerbread cookies were still busy rutting away on the cookie tray, making the platter softly buzzle and rattle. She hoped Severus wouldn't notice, because she had not told him about her idea of a confectionery sex show featuring stripping gingerbread people – an idea that the twins seemed to have included in their present to her.

"What brings you over to Chez Jerry's at the ungodly hour of ten in the morning? Hey, aren't you supposed to be observing that British Boxing Day thing? Rest, sleep in, let the servants and house-elves have a day off? All that stuff?"

"We're here because Severus tells me you are quite talented at Charms. He told me about the dancing tables and chairs you charmed during your impromptu interview. And I was wondering if your talent in Charms was extensive enough to help us with a commission," Hermione began, sounding very business-like.

Jerry sat there yawning as Hermione started to explain her proposal, but he stopped her. "Sorry, I'm no damn good before my coffee." He flicked his wand, and a tray and hat rack walked out from the kitchen. A full coffee service for three was set upon the tray. "Coffee?" the host offered.

"Yes, thank you," Hermione accepted. Severus nodded as well.

The hat rack played butler and served coffee to all the guests and its master before walking off to stand in the corner.

"So what is it you think that I can do you for? Considering Severus is no slouch when it comes to Charms, I'm surprised you're here to see me." Jerry sipped his coffee and set his cup to hover in mid-air next to the armchair he was currently slouched in, as he didn't have an end table nearby.

Hermione explained the two-way mirror concept to Jerry, who kept nodding along as he periodically sipped his coffee.

"And this Black guy made a two-way mirror when he was what? Fourteen or fifteen? Man, I'd like to meet him someday," Jerry said with admiration.

"Unfortunately, he passed away," Hermione informed him.

"Not that unfortunate," Severus grumbled under his breath.
Jerry decided not to delve into whatever bug Severus had up his ass in regards to Sirius and merely replied, "Yeah, that's simple enough. Well, if you've had advanced training in Charms, it's simple enough." Jerry started to lean forward as if he was going to stand up then stopped. "But you could have gotten around this the Muggle way with a web camera on a computer with a bit of face chat time." He looked at the blank faces on them both. "You guys do know what a computer is, right?"

Hermione sat up a bit straighter and said, "I am Muggle-born. My parents do have a computer, and I do know what the Internet is. I've been on it a few times."

Jerry smirked. "Yeah, but do you have an email account, and could you get lover boy here on a computer too?"

Severus, not taking kindly to being referred to as "lover boy," knew about computers and even had a basic understanding about the Internet, as Hermione had explained it. He reminded Jerry why computers were not an alternative option. "You forget we have no electricity on Malu Palekaiko, and until some months ago, I could not go to the nearest available public-use computer over in Hilo, where they take the children to introduce them to computers during Muggle camp at the Hilo public library. Besides, there would also be a complete lack of privacy in a public library, which is why it is 'public.'"

Jerry looked a bit sheepish and said, "Yeah, there is that. I still have one foot in the Muggle world, and while I will be the first one to use magic when it is convenient, I also tend to think of Muggle solutions, too."

Hermione sighed, understanding his position. "Yes, my Aunt Christine, who is a Muggle, does marketing, advertising, and sales for Lavender, my boss. My aunt wishes we would find a magical equivalent of email instead of dealing with owls, since she and my Uncle Tim are not fond of cleaning up the owl pellets in the backyard."

"Yeah, computers work fine, until someone magical gets upset, then the circuits and motherboard get fried," Jerry remembered. "Had to pay fifteen hundred bucks out of my own pocket to replace my brother's computer I toasted, plus there were all those files he lost." Jerry laughed to himself, then stopped and frowned. "Yeah, maybe staying away from computers is the best."

Jerry agreed to make the two-way mirrors. When Severus and Hermione offered to pay him for his trouble, he refused payment. "Listen, if it wasn't for the opportunity to work at your shop as a tutor, Severus, I might have gone back to Arnold, and all that other stuff we won't go into. This job gave me a way out and a way to move out."
Hermione and Severus sat on the couch for the next ten minutes while Jerry rifled through dozens of books until he found the right one.

For testing, Jerry took a small hand-mirror and cut it in two. There were a few incantations and complicated wand movements. When he was done, he handed the two pieces of charmed glass to the pair for testing.

Severus went outside while Hermione went to the upper tier of Jerry's house, to prevent any accidental bleed-over of sound. The visuals and sound came through perfectly clear.

As they shook Jerry's hand, the Charms tutor said, "When you finally get the two mirrors you want me to charm, just let me know and I'll come over to your place. No point in schlepping them all the way here and back."

Hermione was smiling to herself as they walked on towards Gary and Iolana's house.

"You look very pleased with yourself," Severus noticed.

Shrugging, Hermione was indeed pleased with herself, but she was smiling thinking about how instead of masturbating and trying to imagine Severus was watching her, he actually could watch her now with the charmed mirrors. Masturbation, home alone back in London, was about to get a whole lot less boring and lonely.

Gary was thrilled to teach Hermione Japanese. He had taught his own children, but they had grown up and moved away years ago, and it was too far for him to Portkey all the way to Seattle, Washington, to teach his grandchildren on a weekly basis. He had tutored a few others around the island, but opportunities were few and far between for those who were serious enough to become proficient in the language.

Upon finding out about Hermione and Severus' two-way mirrors, Gary was even more excited to help teach Hermione long-term. Severus, who had been taking lessons from Arnold until Jerry started working for Severus, asked Gary to help him continue his learning of the language, since he and Arnold were currently not on good terms.

"How much would you charge for daily tutoring?" Hermione asked.
Gary waved his hand dismissively. "Don't worry about it."

"At least I should pay you then," Severus insisted.

Gary sat back in his chair and gave a light chuckle. "Listen, Severus, before you got here, we only had Arnold and Ranjit for Potions masters. I'd teach you just for thanks for being someone I can ask to brew commissions for me without giving me the stink-eye or opening his big fat trap."

Severus had brewed quite a lot of Sequoia potion for Gary, much to the delight and thanks of his wife, too.

Looking at Hermione, Gary added, "And the sooner you finish your Japanese language requirements, the sooner you get here. That means the sooner business will be up and running, and tax dollars will be coming in. We're hoping with the tax revenue Lovely Lavender will bring in, the town council members can give themselves a pay raise for the first time in nearly eight years. And with the additional taxes we are hoping to come in, we are planning on sprucing up the downtown with a few nice benches, better tiki-torch street lighting, maybe a wizard-Muggle chess corner in the park, but mostly money for the new school. So the sooner you're here, the sooner the money comes rolling in."

Severus had a vague idea how much town council members were paid, as Mounga had encouraged Severus to run for the town council. There was hardly any pay in it, and all the council members, except for Gary who was retired, had to have other jobs as their main source of income. Severus figured his time was better spent working on other endeavors. He was ambitious, but ambition didn't mean you had to work for a pittance; there was little pay for what little power he could attain through a seat on the town council.

Since Hermione and Severus would be long-term students of Gary's, it was decided that lessons would begin tomorrow morning at nine, at Severus' house. Gary gave them a list of primer books to pick up at the local bookstore.

At Paige Spien's Bookstore, the pair spent so much time browsing and shopping, they were almost late for supper over at the Malfoys'.

Arriving at their friends' home, with their bags of books in hand, Draco laughed at the pair standing on his front porch.
"It figures you two would go to the bookstore together first chance you had." Draco ushered them inside.

"Given we both have our first Japanese lessons with Gary tomorrow at nine o'clock, it was best to shop now while they were still open. I just wish Flourish and Blotts had after-Christmas sales like Paige Spien's," Hermione said with a huff as she set her bags of books by the door and slipped out of her shoes to go barefoot like her hosts and Severus.

Ginny waddled into the living room, greeting Hermione and Severus.

Hermione realized she was now living this other life she had thought so strange a year and a half ago, yet Ginny and she had both longed for it. Her and Severus having weekly Sunday suppers with Draco and Ginny. While it was surreal the first time they all dined together back in Severus' flat, it now seemed a comfortable and natural situation to find herself in. And while Harry and Ron used to run off and abandon Hermione and Ginny to talk Quidditch, Severus and Draco made no such move to segregate themselves from the company of their witches. This was the life that Hermione had dreamed of for months: A slice of normal domesticity in which she could see herself happy, instead of muddling through frustrated and disappointed, feeling like she had settled for less in life.

"Draco was quite busy this morning with the news that we have three babies on the way instead of one now," Ginny began the conversation.

"Why? What were you so busy doing?" Hermione asked out of curiosity.

"I finished the baby's quilt a month ago, but now that there will be three, I had to start working on two more if they are to be done in time," Draco replied.

"You're making the babies' quilts?" Hermione asked, not thinking Draco to be the witches sewing circle type.

"Oh yes, didn't Severus tell you? Draco won first place at the Pele Festival craft competition for novice division in Hawaiian quilting," Ginny beamed with pride.

Hermione couldn't help herself, she turned to Draco and dryly remarked, "Cooking and sewing? You'll make a wonderful housewitch for some wizard some day."
There was a moment of silence, and Hermione wondered if she had gone too far or if her joke had fallen flat, until Severus and Ginny simultaneously gave a sudden laugh each.

Draco gave a short laugh at himself before saying, "Well, they encourage everyone who moves here to pick up one of the Hawaiian cultural traditions. Severus is studying the language, and Ginny is learning hula. While I have an ear, I didn't feel like learning an instrument, and I'm not dancing bare-chested in a ti leaf skirt in front of thousands at the Pele festival. So I chose this instead, which I can do quietly in the evenings."

Hermione asked to see the blanket, and praised the fine workmanship and the quartered design of the flying Golden Snitches. "What charm did you use for the thread work?"

"No charms. Hawaiian quilting is done by hand, no magic."

"No magic? But why?" Hermione asked.

Draco took the blanket back from Hermione, folding it carefully. "Because it was a craft brought over by Muggle missionaries, and because the witches and wizards thought that to learn it without the use of magic was a way to teach patience and understanding so they could better understand those who were born without magic. But even though the Statute of Secrecy forced the split of the Muggle and magical Hawaiian communities apart, they still kept the tradition of sewing by hand."

"Well, it's simply lovely. You did a beautiful job."

Draco smiled and nodded his head, accepting her compliment.

For supper, Draco grilled a whole opakapaka (a local crimson snapper) on the grill in the backyard. Ginny made the salad and side dishes.

Sitting out on the back patio under the shade of an African Tulip Tree, a cool chilled drink in her hand and wonderful food shared among friends, the conversation flowed easily. Hermione couldn't believe that the sun was getting close to setting; time had flown as everyone enjoyed the long afternoon together.
As Hermione and Severus slipped on their shoes and picked up their bags of books to carry home, Hermione told Draco she would be over by ten-thirty, after her Japanese lesson, in order to go over construction plans and survey the site. Ginny and Hermione also made plans to have lunch together in Honolulu later that week, in addition to a bit of shopping.

The sun was low in the sky as Hermione and Severus finished putting their books away in the library.

"So how much space do you think you'll need with your current library?" Severus asked, wondering if he'd planned enough shelving for their combined collections.

"Oh, I'll take up less than half of available shelving once all my books are here." Hermione ran a finger lovingly along some of Severus' books, remembering reading certain ones by the fire in his flat while snuggled next to Severus as he read his own book. "I'm still full. How about we go read on the front porch and enjoy the sunset?"

Severus had been thinking the exact same thing, and he felt contented that they were so well suited with one another. He grabbed a book he was in the middle of that was marked with a silk ribbon, while Hermione grabbed one of her newly purchased books on native Hawaiian birds and their magical uses.

Rarely had Severus ever laid in the hammock on his front porch by himself. With the two of them on the hammock together, head to foot, reading by the late afternoon light, their skin caressed by the tropical breeze that came up from the ocean, Severus could barely keep his eyes on the page in front of him. There was Hermione, book in hand, an arm crooked behind her head to support it as she read, one leg hanging over the edge of the hammock, the descending sun making her hair shimmer with golden highlights.

This was the vision he'd had of her back in London, a sight that now made him feel at peace with himself. These past three days had been the happiest of his life. There was little more Severus could think of that could make his life more complete than what he had at that moment. He had a life and career of his own choosing, the respect and admiration of friends and the community, and a beautiful witch he knew would someday marry him and bear his children, binding them together.

He was so lost in his self-reflection, he didn't notice that Hermione had caught him staring at her in an odd way and had set her book down.

"Severus? Are you all right?"
Shaking himself from his reverie, he admitted freely, "Yes, everything is perfect."

Hermione turned around in the hammock to cuddle up next to Severus. She noticed that the sky was darkening and probably close to the horizon, the sun having finally disappeared behind the trees and mountainside.

"Are the sunsets always so vivid here?" Hermione asked.

They couldn't see the sun setting over the ocean, but trails of scarlet and vividly orange clouds that streaked the sky could still be seen from the front porch.

"Quite often." Severus suddenly had an idea. "The view of the sunsets is spectacular from my farm on the west side of the island. We should have a picnic and watch the sunset from there. I can also show you where I grow my Mediterranean plants in the rain shadow of the volcano. You can also see some of the lava fields from recent flows nearby and the ferns, ohelo shrubs, and the ohia lehua trees growing in the lava cracks, the beginning of reforestation."

Hermione intertwined her fingers with Severus. "In the Muggle tour books, they tell the tale of the ohia tree and lehua blossoms."

"How close do the Muggles get this story correct versus the way I was told by the natives here?" Severus prompted her.

"Let's see," Hermione began, her eyes glancing upwards as she began to recall the tale. "Pele fancied Ohia, a handsome young Hawaiian man, and she asked him to marry her. But Ohia was already in love and promised to Lehua."

Severus hummed in agreement, encouraging her to go on.

"Pele, furious she had been rejected and out of jealousy, turned Ohia into an ugly tree. The gods, unable to undo Pele's curse, took pity on Lehua and turned her into a blossom on the Ohia tree so that the lovers will never be parted. And local legend says if you pluck a Lehua flower, you are separating the lovers, and it will rain that day."
Severus put his arm around Hermione, and she snuggled closer. The context of the story was too close to the truth that at the end of the week, they too would be parted and there would be tears falling like rain.

As if sensing their sudden melancholy mood, a cluster of dark storm clouds appeared on the eastern horizon, a sign that it would surely rain tonight.

Stroking her jaw with the side of his finger, Severus felt his heart ache knowing that this happiness he had been reveling in for these past three days would come to an end. They would be parted. The last time they parted, even he had cried at the loss of his love.

Hermione tilted her face up to look at Severus. His eyes looked larger than normal, shining with what looked like unshed tears in the fading light. Her heart went out to him, knowing that he was thinking of how they were to be separated once more. Overwhelmed with her love for Severus, she craned her neck up and captured Severus' mouth in a kiss.

At first it started off soft, a soothing caress to assure him she felt the same way, but then it grew more urgent. Their kisses became more possessive, familiar with the same feeling they had in those last few weeks before Severus fled, knowing they would soon be apart from one another.

Severus' hand snaked up under Hermione's top, cupping her breast. She arched her back, pressing into his hungry touch. She tilted her head back, allowing Severus to trail a mixture of kisses and nips along her neck while her hand began undoing the button and zipper of his shorts.

Suddenly, they stopped when they heard two people talking along the road in front of the house. Severus had left enough dense vegetation along the front property line, but one might have been able to spy the amorous couple in the hammock when passing by the front gate.

Remembering that the front porch wasn't entirely private, they quickly moved their activities into the house, shedding clothing in a trail from the front door to the bedroom upstairs.

As Severus was spooned up behind her he slowly thrust into her, his arm clasped around her waist to hold her in place. His hand stroked her, as he moaned, "If I could change the stars and turn the world inside out to keep you here with me, I would."

"I know," Hermione sighed, arching her back to allow Severus to go deeper. "But it will be a shorter time apart, my love, I promise. And we'll have the mirrors," she reminded him.
He tilted his head forward and gently bit her shoulder, a subconscious sign of his desire to possess and mark her as his own. "You can't make love to a mirror."

Hermione pulled away from Severus momentarily as she changed position. Pushing him onto his back to mount him, she slowly rolled her hips back and forth as she sat up, letting Severus watch her above him, his hands stroking her thighs and caressing her hips as her breasts jiggled and swayed. "No, but you like to watch me touch myself. And while it won't be you, I do have those toys the twins gave me." She smirked openly at Severus before biting her lower lip to add a sense of false coyness to her suggestion.

Severus grabbed her hips and spread her a little wider as he drove himself up into Hermione, lifting his hips of off the bed with a few quick, pistoning thrusts. "Yes, I heard about you and your Pensieve trips. You like to watch as well."

"When I have something as beautiful as you to watch, how could I not?" Hermione leaned forward and kissed Severus as his hands reached up and grabbed her breasts firmly. He tweaked her nipples enough to make her gasp momentarily, knowing he had pushed her to the edge of pleasure and pain. She tore her mouth away from his to gasp harshly and concentrate on the sensation of what his hands were doing to her breasts.

"Do you want to finish your 'therapy' and watch something else?" Severus suggested.

The night before they had made great progress with Hermione and her corset. She even let Severus momentarily bind her to the bed, after he had let her bind him down first. It was a dual exercise in trust and conquering her fears. She had mentioned her inability to find arousal from the memory in which he had bound her back in his flat, but now that her fears had been mostly broken down – so it seemed – this was a way to address some of her lingering trauma in a non-threatening situation.

Hermione stopped riding Severus and stroked his hair lovingly away from his face. Severus had suggested something she found far more compelling than any remaining fear she had over watching herself in a memory bound and tied. She had longed to be with Severus in a Pensieve, watching each other in an intimate moment. While she had not openly told him of her secret desire, it was as if he had read her mind.

"Yes, I want to watch something else," she breathed heavily, even more turned on by the thought of it alone. "Oh, yes," she added once more heartily, letting Severus know just how much she was willing.
"Do you want to wear the corset?" Severus asked, wondering if the undergarment would help her with her "treatment."

"Why not. We can always remove it later on... as needed." Her implication of the last phrase was that it was hard to breathe when one was rigorously fucking and trying to get enough oxygen in the process.

Severus helped her with the garment, cooing the soothing words to her he said the night before that helped her deal with the sensation of the corset constricting around her rib cage. "These are my arms about you, keeping you safe. This silk is me, holding you close. The tighter I cinch, the tighter I am embracing you." He pulled the laces by hand, caressing her shoulders and kissing the nape of her neck with each round of tightening until it was snug yet still comfortable for Hermione.

"I'm ready," she sighed with anticipation.

They walked to the Potions lab, Severus completely nude, carrying only his wand, and Hermione in nothing but her corset, her wand tucked down the front of it. Severus lifted the silver dome over the Pensieve.

Hermione closed her eyes and recalled the memory that no longer seemed to frighten her as much. Slipping the silvery threads into the basin, they watched as the swirling waters carried the memory on an unseen current.

The lovers held hands as they both leaned forward, allowing themselves to be pulled into her memory together.

They found themselves back in the flat in London, when it was still Severus'. His armoire was there, along with the rest of the furniture he’d left that had come with the flat.

The scene began with the memory version of the lovers bursting through the kitchen door.

*Severus was running after Hermione. He was supposed to be a threat to Hermione in this little game, but the periodic knowing smile that graced Hermione's lips as she escaped his clutches once more by ducking sideways belied the true nature of the chase. Her torn nightgown hung precariously from one shoulder, her breasts periodically visible through the large tear in the fabric as she swayed back and forth, attempting to fake out her pursuer.*
The real version of Severus, who watched this memory unfold, slid up behind Hermione and wrapped an arm around her waist, while the other toyed with a tendril of hair, stroking her neck and shoulder in the process.

Hermione leaned against Severus, resting her head back against his shoulder as they watched together.

"You never told me what the inspiration behind this fantasy of yours was," Severus murmured in a low and seductive voice into her ear. His hand slipped from her waist, gliding along the silk and lace to rest between her legs, cupping her mons.

Feeling a bit heady in the intoxication of fulfilling a fantasy and Severus' languid touch between her legs, Hermione felt any hesitation or shyness melt away. "That time I caught sight of Ginny and Draco, I saw him restrain her. And... and..."

It was hard for Hermione to continue as Severus' finger was stroking her clit in such a way that it was making it hard not only to think, but to talk coherently while watching the scene before her.

_Hermione gasped harshly in mock fright as Severus finally caught her and roughly threw her on the bed, ripping at her nightgown, tearing it away completely. Her captor laughed menacingly in a way that sent a visible thrill through her._

The real Severus felt Hermione shudder in his grasp, thrilled at reliving the vision of the scene as when it originally happened. "Tell me what you were thinking at that moment. You're pretending to fight me off, but not that hard. Why?" he asked sweetly.

"That I wanted you so badly. I wanted you to take me roughly, like an animal," Hermione admitted with a plaintive sigh as she rolled her hips into Severus' touch, increasing the friction of his hand between her legs.

"But why fight me? Why not just sweetly beg? Why the pretense of a chase and refusal to submit to me?" Severus prodded with his line of questioning.

_Severus had flipped Hermione over onto her stomach as if she weighed nothing. Then he yanked her up roughly up onto her feet, but in a way so as not to hurt or pull her arms out of joint._
Still, the memory version of Hermione struggled against him, pleading in tones that were not very believable. "Please, let me go. Don't hurt me." They had already pre-arranged safe words to use.

"Hurting you is the last thing you'll think I'm doing to you when I'm done," Severus promised, a leer plainly written on his face as his eyes raked over the nude form of his prey. He quickly latched the metal chains around her wrists and ankles by hand; Hermione reduced her efforts to resist, in order to allow him to restrain her more easily.

This was how the lovers got around the restrictions of the Death Eater Decree that still allowed Severus to bind Hermione. She had placed the chains there beforehand with her own wand.

Hermione, watching herself chained up, felt her breath become more rapid, but it was not fear that caused her breath to become short. She was beginning to remember more aspects about this fantasy with Severus by her side she had pushed out of her mind.

She reached down and found Severus' length was hot and hard, and it twitched in her hand as she firmly grasped it, her hand slowly stroking him.

Severus felt his own breath hitch briefly as Hermione clamped her hand around his cock with a firm grip. "Why?" he breathed into her ear as his hand slipped further between her legs and his fingers began toying with her entrance. "Why pretend to not want me when clearly you do?"

Severus began toying with Hermione's body, gently stroking her skin in a way that made her body shake and shiver. The captive struggled against her chains, but it was more for show than any desire to escape, adding to the false narrative. Pleas for him to stop came feebly from her lips.

"Because I wanted to lose control completely," Hermione admitted.

"But you were always in control," Severus reminded her. "Look at me," he told her, directing her to continue watching their memory selves.

Severus was hastily pulling off his clothes. "I don't think your begging is very convincing. Beg harder for my mercy," he sneered, but the curl of his lip quickly faded and was replaced with a look of unadulterated lust. His mouth hung open, visibly panting as his hand stroked Hermione's body much more tenderly than from anyone who wanted to do her harm.
"Please," Hermione wailed more piteously, fighting against her chains more earnestly.

Severus grabbed her roughly from behind, embracing her. One arm wrapped tightly about her waist, the other grabbed at her breast greedily.

Hermione threw her head back. Her hips bucked backwards, grinding up against the erection Severus was pressing into her hip.

"Please," she begged once more, her voice becoming near hysterical. "Release me."

Severus moved behind Hermione and placed his cock between her thighs, grazing between her cheeks. "But you didn't want to be released."

"No," Hermione replied as she moved her hips to rub against Severus' cock, her hips making small movements to tease the head around her entrance. "Not that kind of release."

"See how I am fighting with myself from not taking you right there and then? I'm waiting for you to give me permission to proceed." Severus felt the tip of his cock catching on the edge, almost slipping into Hermione only to slide past and almost stroke her clitoris from behind. "You're in control. Why the illusion?"

"Please," Hermione wailed once more as Severus' hand slipped between her legs and began to stroke her clit.

"Please what?" Severus growled in response, his head bent forward resting on her shoulder as his other hand stroked her more tenderly, caressing her hip and softly cupping her breasts as his finger worked faster between her legs.

"The illusion of complete surrender," Hermione finally admitted, all of it coming out as if a dam were breaking. "To be seduced, to be so willing to be taken by you, to give complete control over to you that I would do anything you would ask. To be your slave if you asked, trusting you so fully I would do anything and everything you asked of me, wanting to please you in an act of submission I didn't think myself capable of."
"Please, take me. I beg you, have mercy and take me please!"

Simultaneously, the memory of Severus and the real Severus entered their respective Hermiones, who each cried out in their own ways.

_Hermione shrieked with release, fighting against her chains if only for the fact she wanted to clasp her arms about her welcomed attacker and hold him fast to her as his hips pumped furiously into her. His own screams and grunts were telling that he was also equally lost within the rapture of the game they played._

"Oh God, Severus. Take me any way you want. I'm completely yours!" Hermione wailed. Her eyes were shut tight, as she was unable to keep her eyes open any longer as she pushed back against each of Severus' thrusts. He came close to knocking her forward and nearly off balance, if it weren't for the fact he had a death grip on her hips as he slammed into her.

Severus was close to orgasming, but he valiantly held back. Roughly grabbing her about her torso to pin her back against her chest, he asked in a harsh whisper into her ear, "Any way?" To make his point, his finger slipped between her cheeks and pressed against her anus.

"Yes," she said, arching her back to let Severus slip a finger inside of her, knowing full well what he meant.

They didn't need to remain in the Pensieve until the end of the memory. With a swish of Hermione's wand, then found themselves back in the Potions laboratory.

Kissing each other, their hands grasping and clutching at each other, Severus moved Hermione backwards until her back pressed up against the edge of a workbench.

His arm shot out and grabbed the bottle of safflower oil she had pointed out the other day. Quickly flipping the cap off, not caring that it landed on the floor and rolled away to rest beneath another workbench, he sloppily poured a handful of the oil into his cupped palm. His body kept Hermione pinned in place against the work bench as she feverishly kissed at his shoulder, chest, upper arm, and neck.

She squealed momentarily as Severus began urgently rubbing the oil all over his cock that was currently pressed along Hermione's stomach. The oil dripped down both their bodies, running down their legs as Severus grabbed Hermione by the hip and encouraged her to turn around.
Hermione, now facing the bench, bent forward, enjoying the shock of the cool wood against her skin.

Severus, presented with her backside, slowly began rubbing oil all over her hips, making a circular pattern with his hand before pouring a small measure into his hand. Then he started tenderly applying the oil to her other entrance. Severus generously coated his finger in oil before inserting it, making sure there was plenty of lubrication in Hermione when he finally entered her.

"So you want me?" Severus asked, wanting Hermione to be sure she really wanted this, given her aversion to the act in the past.

"Yes, Severus. Take me. I want you to finally have all of me," Hermione sighed as she pressed her cheek against the bench top.

"Stroke yourself," Severus suggested as he pressed the head of his cock against her entrance, which was clinched tight and was unyielding. "Relax," he cooed.

"Then I should get rid of this," Hermione suggested as she stood back up and unhooked the front of her corset, now temporarily stained with oil.

Hermione's and Severus' wands, which had been stowed in her cleavage, stuck against her sweaty skin. Severus set his aside, but Hermione held out her wand and said, "Accio Junior Assistant."

A small dildo flew out of Hermione's trunk, sailed through the house, and landed in Hermione's outstretched hand. Smiling, she said, "This will help me relax."

Using a familiar charm, Hermione set the dildo to vibrate while simultaneously rubbing up against her clit in a familiar mode she often used when masturbating.

Bent over once more, her arse presented to Severus and the beginning of tingling threads in her abdomen beginning to bloom, Hermione announced, "I'm ready for you."

Severus could tell Hermione was much more relaxed as the magical dildo vibrated and stroked her clit. As he held himself with one hand, he concentrated on entering Hermione slowly. She had
taken one or two of his fingers, but nothing of this girth before. As he pushed his head into her, he heard her breath momentarily hitch. He could tell from her grunts it was a little uncomfortable, but also she was feeling pleasure. Her vocalizations encouraged him to go a little more, a little more, a little more...

Finally, Severus’ head was inside of her, past the tight sphincter, and she gasped from the sensation of the intrusion of him in a place he had never been before.

Hermione could feel him inside of her. It was quite different. She breathed to get through the stretching of his head as he entered her, but now that he was inside of her, with her tight ring snug around his shaft, she wanted him to start moving in and out of her.

She pushed back against him, having his length go deeper into her, and sighed, "Yes, oh yes."

Severus started slowly, adding a little more oil to make sure she was properly lubricated.

It was all Severus could do not to come right there and then. Hermione was tight, unbelievable tight. In appreciation of the trust she gave to finally let him have her this way, he softly sighed, "I love you, Hermione."

Quite uncharacteristically, Hermione said as sweetly as the moment allowed, "Shut up and fuck me, Severus, before I get too sore to enjoy this much longer."

Severus began thrusting into Hermione with ever increasing speed, which was met with ever increasing screams of pleasure from Hermione.

The application of the magical dildo augmented the pleasure Hermione was feeling from this strange sensation of Severus in her arse. She was reluctant to believe Severus when he said it was yet another erogenous zone, but in the heat of the moment, she had to agree it was quite incredible. It was different, but in a good way, though she was quickly becoming a bit tender. Hearing Severus panting and groaning so sweetly, Hermione felt herself reach orgasm, helped by the stimulation of her clit.

Feeling Hermione clench and tighten around him as she came, Severus let himself go and pumped himself into her with abandon, unable to hold back any longer.
A strangled cry came from Severus, feeling as if he was cumming all the way up from his toes. He shuddered and nearly collapsed.

She felt Severus' cock pulse with each spurt as he emptied himself into her. She was quite tender now and felt every twitch and throb of his cock in her.

As Severus very slowly pulled himself from her, she made small mewing noises indicating she was quite sore. The jar of soothing salve was still on the bench top within arm's reach from the last time. He reached for it and very tenderly applied a little to her anus, kissing her oily back in gratitude.

"Thank you," he said. There was no need for him to say it, but he said it anyway. Hermione had told him about her fear of pain, given her one previous attempt at anal sex with Ron years ago, and for the fact she had trusted him enough to let him try, he was grateful.

"Thank you for making it pleasurable," Hermione said, though it was a bit uncomfortable towards the end. "I was afraid I wasn't going to enjoy it."

Both slick with oil along their stomachs, loins and legs, they padded on the balls of their feet through the house to the nearest bathroom, which was one of the other bathrooms downstairs next to a guest bedroom. Fortunately, Severus had it stocked with the basics, as Draco had stayed overnight as a guest once. While still a very nice bathroom, it wasn't quite as luxurious at the master bath.

They took a lengthy shower, as there were lots of places they had to soap to completely clean the oil off. And some of it got in Hermione's and Severus' hair, which required a washing as well. They canoodled about in the shower, kissing, and Hermione giving her honest feedback about anal sex.

"While I wouldn't want to do that all the time, once in a while would not be amiss," she admitted, knowing that with more frequent activity, Severus' size would not bother her as much.

As Severus was rinsing his hair, Hermione suddenly asked, "Severus?"

"Hmm?" Wiping the water from his eyes, he answered, "Yes?"

Hermione began soaping a spot on his thigh that still had some oil clinging to it. "Remember your
suggestion about using Polyjuice Potion?"

"I hope you're not suggesting we do that tonight, because between the extra exertion and recovery from Polyjuice Potion, neither of us will be awake in time for Gary's Japanese lesson tomorrow morning," he reminded her.

"No, of course another night, but I was wondering about something. Now that I've had the pleasure of trying anal sex, when you are Polyjuiced as me, would you like to try that as well?" she asked as her soapy hand slid up the back of his thigh and caressed his buttocks.

Severus glanced at her over his shoulder, a smile curled at one corner, but not answering, since he had not contemplated it.

"Or," she breathed quite huskily, "I could transform into you first." Her soapy hand slipped between his cheeks and pressed against his anus this time. "And I could give you a proper prostate massage."

Given what it took for Hermione to be completely lost in lustful abandon for her to finally let him fuck her up the arse, it was a rather quick and sexually assertive leap to suggest she fuck him up the arse now as well with his own cock. Severus had now thoroughly stripped her of her sexual timidity for her to suggest such a thing as she began soaping his arse and pressing a finger against his own entrance.

"Why don't we take it slow the first time. We can see where the evening leads us, and we can see how comfortable we are in our new positions," Severus said, pleased at his own inadvertent pun before positioning himself for Hermione's attentions.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to my ever glorious betas, JuneW and Hope. I cannot thank them enough.

You can further read about the menehune (pronounced "meh-neh-HOO-nay") here: http://www.mythicalrealm.com/creatures/menehune.html

If you would like to see the inspiration behind Jerry's House, check out the video I
made when I stayed at Skye Treehouse in Volcano, HI. It was so unique I had to incorporate into the story somehow, when I was still working on this story. You can view the video here: https://youtu.be/knXtL39NEVU

You can visit Skye Treehouse website's here: http://www.volcanotreehouse.net/
Chapter Summary

Hermione and Draco have a heart-to-heart about Severus. The Potion master and the apprentice discuss how they became bound to each other.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter One Hundred Five
"Catalysts and Indomitable Connections"

Disclaimer:
I'm going down to AO3; gonna read myself some fic. Friendly authors everywhere; hacking fanfics with no infringement. Going down to AO3; gonna write another disclaimer. Tons of lemons day or night; people spouting, "Harry Potter's Rowling's baby!" Heading on up to AO3; gonna smirch my virgin mind. I wish I could make lots of riches; I'm not making money, bitches. So come on down to AO3 and read some fanfics of mine.

A/N: Disclaimer a parody of the "South Park" opening theme song.

=========

Severus finished downing the last of the Wit-Sharpening Potion he'd brewed that morning. He was in sore need of it, after yet another lengthy night of making love with Hermione. He was exhausted, finding even a strong cup of coffee did little to awaken him, and just the nearby presence of Hermione sent his mind off into gauzy-viewed daydreams of how next to have her once more. Fortunately, the potion cleared his mind well enough so he could concentrate on his first Japanese language lesson.

Hermione seemed to suffer no such effects. If anything, her desires and needs fulfilled seemed to give her boundless energy and allow her to concentrate without distraction.

Jokingly, Severus was beginning to consider Hermione may have been part succubus, for it seemed the more sexually worn out he was, the more vim and vigor she seemed to display. He remembered seeing Draco and Ginny after their week-long secluded honeymoon and the way Ginny energetically frittered about while Draco looked like he was close to becoming an Inferi. Now, he
surmised, it was merely an after-effect of lots of sex within a short period. Though, if he kept this up for the rest of the week, he would have to start brewing Invigoration Draughts as well.

Severus and Hermione bid farewell to their Sensei, addressing Gary with the formal Japanese title of teacher. Though Gary began their lessons at the very beginning level, both students felt that they had learned a great deal during their first lesson, even if some of it covered information they were already familiar with.

On the front porch, Hermione bid farewell to Severus before heading off to meet with Draco on business for The Lovely Lavender Company's new manufacturing plant.

"Draco mentioned he would take me out to lunch today as well, then off to the builder's office for an appointment. I'm not sure when I'll be back," Hermione said as she gave Severus a lingering hug.

"I'll probably be in my lab when you get back. I'll leave the front door unlocked." Severus had yet to get a spare key made for Hermione. He had a Floo, but he had it locked out of habit.

At the Malfoys', Draco gave a kiss on the lips to his wife – and three kisses on her ever-expanding abdomen – before heading off with Hermione.

Walking together in silence towards an empty parcel of land on the east side of town, out of the blue Hermione said, "I was quite surprised when Lavender told me that starting a facility here in Hawaii was your idea, and that my running it was your idea as well. I was under the impression you didn't care for me very much back then."

It was a bit late in the game for them to both have this conversation, but they had been so wrapped up in other things when the Malfoys returned to England last August, they hadn't had a chance to honestly talk with each other alone until now.

"I didn't used to care for you," Draco admitted. "We both held on to our comfortable and well-worn perceptions of the other, which continued to reinforce that animosity. I originally thought of you as a self-righteous know-it-all, and I perceived your initial interest in Severus was that he was some pet project to save or some infatuation to fill the vacuum of your own miserable marriage."

Hermione said nothing, her mouth set in a grim line at Draco's assessment of her and her
relationship with Severus.

"But I knew you probably still viewed me as the arrogant, cruel, bigoted, daddy's-little-rich-boy who thought my name and money should grant me carte blanche to the world."

Hermione kept her eyes down on the occasional uneven pavement in front of her, despite wearing her good pair of hiking boots. She'd used these boots on previous weekend trips with Albert, to tromp about the wild landscape of the future site of the Hawaiian headquarters.

"Am I wrong in my assessment of your original opinion of me?" Draco prompted her, wondering if his statement was correct.

"No," Hermione sighed. She glanced up at him a bit guiltily, knowing she did think of him in those terms for quite some time.

"When Ginny and I were first given sanctuary here, we were so happy that first morning. And when Severus came out of his interview with Mounga, we all went out onto the beach and danced around in a circle out of sheer joy." Draco smiled to himself as he continued, his voice tinged with rosy nostalgia upon recalling the glory of precious moments. "Severus had not wanted anything so much as his freedom for the longest time. Even during the war, he wanted to be free. On that beach, as much as he'd finally attained what he wanted so much, I saw that he still was not truly happy. That was because you were left behind in England." He glanced sideways to gauge Hermione's reaction to that small detail.

Hermione remained silent, not sure what she was expected to say.

"Seeing Severus finally get on with his life here and yet still moping about and mourning for you, I had to do something. I owed it to Severus. If it wasn't for him, Ginny and I never would have fallen in love. I suppose I also felt indebted to you, for if it wasn't for your help, Ginny and I could not have been together in the end. And so, I hatched my plan to get you two back together. Besides, if you're Ginny's best friend and the love of Severus' life, you can't be all that intolerable," he finished with a light ribbing.

"When we showed up with you on Severus' doorstep as a Christmas surprise three days ago, I finally saw the expression of joy and pure happiness I had expected to see on Severus' face that first morning here after we were granted sanctuary." Draco glanced again to see Hermione lost on her own thoughts recalling that surprise that was just as joyous to her as to Severus.
Hermione almost tripped, suddenly coming to a halt upon realizing that Draco had stopped talking and walking simultaneously.

"We're here," Draco announced.

They stood at the edge of a large overgrown section of jungle. It looked like it would have the capacity of thousands of square feet for offices, brewing floor, storage warehouse, and everything else needed to run a fully operational beauty potions company.

Draco swiped his wand from side to side, clearing a path through the lush brush which grew taller and denser as they began walking to survey the property Lavender had bought last August.

Draco and Hermione had a rather warm and humid day of tromping about the brush and discussing the best layout for the facility, given the slope of the land and access to paved streets compared to present designs drawn up by Lavender's architects. They then looked over the grounds of the new school in another part of the town's outskirts; it was also still an untamed jungle, as ground had not been broken there either. Draco and Hermione then headed off to Ohana Family Diner.

"This is the first place we ate after we were granted sanctuary," Draco informed Hermione as she settled into her seat.

"This seems cozy," Hermione remarked, looking at the décor. There were shells, paintings of tropical flowers, photos of events on the island featuring parades and people dancing the hula on stage, and an old surfboard with a plaque underneath it mounted to the wall etched with "In Memory of Matt." Besides the plaque was a photo of a man posing with a two-seater surrey bike.

A waitress in a snug T-shirt and a pair of cream-colored shorts covered by a red apron appeared. "Hey Draco, who's your friend here?" she asked. She smiled quite broadly, her teeth looking very white and eyes exceptionally pale blue against her dark brown skin.

"This is Hermione, Severus' guest this week. She'll be running things once we get the plant built and producing." Draco took the two menus and handed one to Hermione.

"That's cool. Everyone is wondering when construction is going to start," the waitress remarked.
"Well, these things take time, but that's part of the reason Hermione is here this week. Hopefully we'll start construction soon enough," he assured her.

"Okay, well, take your time and let me know when you're ready to order. Oh, and do you want me to box up a slice of coconut-macadamia nut pie for Ginny for you to take home?" the waitress asked, familiar with Ginny's recent craving for the dessert.

"Yes, that would be wonderful. Mahalo."

"No problem, dude," the waitress assured Draco. Then she left to take care of some other customers at a table nearby, who cast the occasional glance over at Hermione, listening in on their conversation.

Looking over the menu, Hermione was a bit overwhelmed. Everything looked delicious, and yet she didn't have any clue as to what she was in the mood for.

"What's good here?" Hermione asked, trying to narrow down her choices.

"Most everything on the menu is decent. If you're famished, one of the loco meals will fill you up, especially since they give you two scoops of rice, in addition to a scoop of macaroni salad. Good if you're going to go flying all day long," Draco said as he continued to scan the menu. "The burgers are fairly good, but given I had never had one until coming here I can't really judge by comparison."

"I'm really in the mood for a tossed salad."

Draco started coughing, choking on his water. Hermione noticed the odd look on Draco's face as he regained composure of himself.

"For Merlin's sake, don't ever say that around Jerry or Mouna," Draco warned her.

"What?" Hermione asked innocently enough, unaware of what she said to make Draco react.

Draco discreetly waved his wand to put up a Silencing Charm to avoid being overheard by the next
table, whose diners were still trying to discreetly listen in to their conversation.

Leaning forward, Draco said quietly, "Ginny has these cravings, you know." Hermione nodded for him to continue. "One day, when Jerry and Mounga were around, she said she was dying for a tossed salad, and those two completely lost it. Broke into hysterics. It took five minutes for them to control themselves without busting up into gales of laughter once more."

"I still don't get it," Hermione said, wondering what was the big deal is. She glanced over and noticed that the next table had given up trying to eavesdrop on their conversation with the charm in place.

"Well, it seems that with Jerry and Mounga's careers in law enforcement and their experience dealing with criminals, they picked up a few choice Muggle prison terms along the way. One of them is tossed salad."

Warily, Hermione asked, "And what does that mean, in prison slang?"

Draco tried to begin phrasing it in delicate terms since she was a witch, but then remembered that she was a Potions apprentice who had worked on a sex potion with Severus, so there was probably little left to shock her. By the look on Hermione's face, along with the fact she actually blushed, it seemed that perhaps there were a few things Severus had not yet exposed her to yet, Draco incorrectly assumed.

"Oh God," Hermione said, slightly mortified. Burying her face in her hands, unable to look at Draco, Hermione confessed, "At Christmas dinner, Rainbow asked about how I was liking food in Hawaii so far. I almost told her that Severus served me a delicious tossed salad the other day for lunch." Hermione blushed in memory of the fact that Severus had indeed served her a tossed salad at the hot springs that night for the very first time.

Draco shook his head. "Rainbow would have probably hexed those two if they lost it at the dinner table. I certainly did for embarrassing my wife like that, though Ginny did admit later if she was in Mounga or Jerry's position, she would have laughed as well."

"Was it my imagination or did Rainbow's eye change color during dinner?" Hermione asked, suddenly remembering how her eyes seemed green one moment and brown the next.

"No, her eyes change color according to her moods. If her eyes have gone black, stay out of her
"path," he warned her. "Severus and Mounga seem to be the only people on this entire island not afraid of Rainbow when her eyes have turned black."

"She does seem to ask a lot of questions, as Severus warned."

"She's the town gossip, which is odd, considering how Mounga is more of the silent type and knows a lot of secrets from sanctuary-seekers." Draco set his menu down, having decided on his lunch choice.

"How is it that she hasn't blabbed everyone's secrets then, if those two are married?"

"Mounga can't say anything Severus said during his interview for sanctuary." Draco cast his eyes down. "Gary, your Japanese teacher, is the one who processed me, and he knows things that not even Ginny or Severus know about me. But the witch or wizard who interviews you is bound to say nothing. Only way anyone knows anything about your past is if you say something yourself, then it becomes public knowledge in a way."

Hermione had wondered how Severus and Mounga had become good friends, and she supposed telling a person every little secret about yourself might create a certain bond between two people. Hermione confessed many of her own secrets and fears to Severus at the beginning of their relationship, and she felt a certain connection with the sharing of herself with him.

As the waitress passed by their table, Hermione saw her attempt to make eye contact with them to see if they were ready to order. Picking up her menu, she figured she would order the first thing her eyes landed on and just eat that.

Draco ended the Silencing Charm, and the waitress came back to take their order.

Clearing his throat, Draco said, "I'll have the fish tacos, grilled, easy on the avocado sauce, and with the mango salsa on the side."

Hermione couldn't look the waitress or Draco in the eye when she said, "I'll have the Thai chicken mixed salad." She couldn't believe her luck her eyes would land on that section of the menu in light of the recent conversation.

The rest of the conversation during lunch was kept light and free of any proprietary information to
The Lovely Lavender Company, should anyone attempt to eavesdrop again. Since they came in at the end of the lunch rush, as they ate the little diner began to empty out.

When Amy – their waitress, who was a mix of Fijian Indian, South African, and Estonian descent – cleared their plates away and topped their drinks off one last time, they were the only ones left in the restaurant.

Now that they were basically alone, with Amy and the cook back in the kitchen, Draco’s face became quite somber to match the tone of his voice. "Did Severus discuss with you how he took the news of you being attacked last summer?"

Hermione had thought to talk with Severus about that, but they had been too busy – focusing on their happiness at being together – to dwell upon unpleasant things. "In his memory you brought me in August, he mentioned he went temporarily mad and flew off into a cyclone. He otherwise dropped the subject rather quickly, and I haven't wanted to press him on it. He only just helped me with some psychotherapy regarding me and being confined in a corset–," Hermione began, but stopped mid-sentence. "Did Ginny tell you what happened with the corset at Madam Malkins?"

Draco nodded and reached out to pat her hand as a gesture of comfort. Considering it was Draco, it seemed quite strange to Hermione, but she supposed that if they were going to work together and have their lives intertwined through Ginny and Severus, then it was only natural that they should eventually become friends.

"During my time as a Death Eater–" Draco stopped and had to take a sip of his drink, finding that just uttering those words made his throat close up. "It was not uncommon for Death Eaters to amuse each other and the Dark Lord by finding one with his guard down and binding or hexing him. It was a way of trying to display alpha dominance over another and rise in rank within the social order, besides seeking praise from that monster. I had a few instances where that happened to me. My father, in an attempt to make Severus look weak in front of the Dark Lord and others, bound and hexed him when his back was turned."

Hermione never asked Severus about his hex scars, but that certainly explained a lot. "Knowing how Severus doesn't want to talk about anything until he is ready, I haven't asked him about that, though he did tell me he got his white streak from being struck by lightning."

Draco looked like that first-year Slytherin she remembered as he frowned and looked to be fighting with his better judgment, until he seemed to come to some internal resolution. "Please just answer me plainly. Do you and Severus plan on one day getting married? I don't care about time lines: Will you two eventually marry?"
Hermione, who had been leaning forward, sat up abruptly, stunned by Draco's blunt question. She hesitated before answering, "Yes. Severus proposed, but I got hysterical, telling him I didn't have time for the nonsense and insanity of an engagement. I have an apprenticeship to finish and then getting the business going here, but I told him some day, yes."

Draco let go of a huge breath he had been holding before raking his fingers through his hair nervously. He leaned forward once more to speak, this time even more serious. "What I'm about to tell you, you can't let Severus know you know. Only Mounga and I know. But since you are so central, so integral, I think it would be remiss for you not to know." Draco once more cast a Silencing Charm to avoid any accidental eavesdropping.

"When Severus heard about how you'd received the wrong flowers, he was certain you hated him. I could see it crushed him, especially when Lavender said you thought he'd dumped you. And then the news of Parker attacking you and Severus presumably thinking how you had been targeted because of your association with him alone – before he heard the whole story – he just lost it." Draco licked his lips nervously, casting his eyes down. He was unable to look Hermione in the eye knowing the pain she would be feeling upon hearing the next bit of news. "In his madness and grief, he was convinced that he'd brought death to any witch who he was close to. His first crush, Lily Potter, his wife, Gabrielle, and then you nearly getting killed. He jumped on a broom and was going to offer himself up as a sacrifice to some unknown gods or the Fates – some entity – to save you, to keep you safe from future harm. He made a bargain in his skewed mind to give himself up to protect you."

"What?" Hermione asked, her voice cracking and tears brimming in her eyes. "What was he going to do? Throw himself into the volcano?"

"No, he flew out to sea in the cyclone and nearly drowned, but as he was about to be dragged down to the bottom of the sea, he came to his senses. He wanted to live. Some part of his mind that still held on to common sense said to him that you had not fought to clear his name only for him to just kill himself. And as he was flying back home, a lightning bolt struck and shattered his broom. If it wasn't for the fact that Mounga has a tracer spell on every sanctuary-seeker on this island, we wouldn't have found him in time, as he fell unconscious into Chum Reef."

Hermione sat there quietly crying, digesting everything that Draco had said to her. Kaimi's drawing on the card that sat on the bedside table suddenly made more sense to her now.

Amy popped out from the back of the diner, but when she saw Hermione and Draco talking and the tears on her face, the waitress disappeared back into the kitchen to leave them alone to talk once more.

Finally finding her voice, Hermione asked, "Why are you telling me this if Severus won't?"
"Because Severus is so madly and thoroughly in love with you, should you break his heart or should any harm come to you that he thinks was caused by him in any way, who knows what he might do. As abrasive and bristly as his exterior is, his heart is as fragile as glass. No Reparo Spell could fix it, should it shatter. You didn't see his flat the morning after your anniversary dinner, I did. His place was destroyed, empty bottles of liquor everywhere. I swear, he nearly poisoned himself from alcohol alone. Utterly despondent. I had never seen him so broken, except after he was fished from the sea and patched up by Rainbow quietly at their house. If anything, they wanted to protect Severus' reputation and prevent word of his lapse in judgment."

As much as Rainbow was annoying to Hermione at times, she suddenly felt a certain gratitude towards the Healer for helping Severus and keeping quiet about the incident. There were far too many tales of a Potions master who had gone mad on his own elixirs, and Severus flying off into a cyclone to kill himself would no doubt peg him as a Potions master who had lost his wits. A Potions master's reputation was everything to him.

Draco reached out his hand to grasp Hermione's and focus her attention on his next words. "As Severus' friend, please, know that he is far more fragile than he is willing to admit. You mean everything to him. Be gentle with his heart, and for Merlin's sake, do your best to stay safe and away from harm."

If would have been rude for Hermione to point out that of course she wanted to avoid injury to herself, but she knew Draco meant it as a warning that should any harm come to her, Severus would feel the injury in his own way as well.

She nodded, understanding the gravity with which she must deal with Severus. His heart was in her hands, and she would do her best to treat it gently.

"I must look a mess. I should go wash up before we go to the builder's office," Hermione said, trying to change the tone and put the topic of conversation behind them.

"Here," Draco said as he pulled out a familiar jar of Puffy Poof Eye Crème from his pocket. "Ginny's hormones have her crying at the slightest provocation, so I always have some on me just in case."

Hermione thanked him before cleaning herself up in the bathroom. As she came back out, she found Draco had Ginny's slice of pie boxed up, and he had paid the bill.
Standing by the door, he said, "Come on. Let's see how the local building codes have totally destroyed Lavender's carefully-designed plans the architect back in London drew up, and then let's see if we can salvage the plans, in addition to giving our own input to keep it functional."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Trudging up the hill, her arms full of scrolls showing the changes to the design to the construction plans she was to go over tonight, Hermione finally reached the front gate. As the gate creaked on its hinges, she spotted the light in the living room pop on shortly afterwards. No doubt Severus was aware of her return, as she was walking up the front path when the door opened and Severus stood there to greet her.

"You had a full day," he noted, smiling down at her as she ascended the front porch steps.

Three days rest made Hermione feel as if her energy to handle a full day of work had waned to nothing. "I don't know how your day had been, but I could use a drink," she said with some exasperation as she finished walking up the stairs.

Just seeing Severus standing there and now knowing what Draco had told her that day, she wanted to drop her scrolls, run into his arms, kiss him, and beg him to never do anything so foolish as what he did when he nearly killed himself. But Draco had made her promise to not let Severus become aware of her knowledge about those events.

"Then I guess you'll be thrilled that I cooked for us, and you won't have to do anything but the dishes tonight." Severus offered to take some of those scrolls from her arms as they walked into their home.

"What happened to the elf-owned cleaning service?" Hermione asked, not minding having to do the dishes as it would only be a few swishes and flicks of her wand.

"I gave them the week off when I originally planned to be in London instead," he reminded her, and they dumped the scrolls on the kitchen table.

Her arms now free, she went over and hugged Severus.

"What's wrong?" He knew her well enough to sense the change in her demeanor.

"Long day," she partially lied. She had missed him, even though they had spent nearly every
minute together since she showed up.

"Was Draco's company that awful? You know, you two will be working together. He's not that bad, once you get used to his sense of humor," Severus assured her, then added in a deadpan voice, "At least it's not as vulgar as Jerry's, so be thankful."

She laughed lightly in response to his last comment, agreeing with him. She lifted her head that was pressed tightly against his chest. Stroking his cheek, she studied his face – the way his eyes looked a bit softer, his brow more relaxed – and she knew he was happy. And knowing deep down that she was the cause for his happiness now, she was humbled by it.

"Draco was fine." She heaved a sigh as she tried to think of some way to explain that knowing what she did now had changed her perception of Severus.

Hermione had thought that she was the one more emotionally invested in this relationship than Severus, given his reluctance to be more emotionally open with her back in England. And even with his confessions and assurances about how important she was to him in his Pensieve memory for her, and knowing he had built a house with the intent of sharing it with her, she did not realize the magnitude of how vital she was to his happiness. Now – after hearing the similar words from Draco and knowing how much Severus needed her – this new knowledge made her in awe of his love for her. Draco's talk with her made her understand that Severus did love her as deeply as she loved him.

To explain her slightly maudlin mood, she came up with a believable lie, based in truth. "I'm going to miss coming home to you after a long day at work when I'm back in London."

"But we'll have the mirrors," he reminded her. "And while you can't hug a mirror, you did say it was better than nothing, which I agree."

Severus opened a bottle of some California wine that he said wasn't a complete waste of his Galleons and was tolerable. Hermione wondered if the fact he didn't want to seem too easy to embrace American culture made him talk about the wine so dismissively, despite it being a lovely, light, and crisp Riesling that she could find no fault with. It was as good as any German or French Riesling she could recall.

This was the wizard who had yet to try a burger, having told Draco that if he was going to have perfectly good beef, it wasn't going to be ground up pointlessly to ruin the texture, drowned in condiments, topped with some plastic-like cheese, and served on a flavorless bun. Yet he would periodically eat chili con carne served with shredded cheese. It was most probably because of the
slovenly Portkey officer in San Francisco that Severus had a lingering aversion to burgers, a story
Draco had told Hermione at lunch.

For dinner, Severus had stuffed and roasted a chicken. Since vegetables were not so dependent
upon the seasons in Hawaii, he served it with some lightly sautéed greens and courgettes, mixed
with freshly peeled and diced tomatoes, carrots, and fresh basil.

They talked about potions Severus worked on during the day, and Hermione told him about the
progress she and Draco made with the builder. She even asked Severus to look over the changes to
the plan with her for his feedback, given his lengthy work experience with Lavender and large-
scale potions manufacturing. Fortunately, there were hardly any changes regarding the school’s
blueprints.

The cat fed, leftovers put away, and dishes done, Hermione and Severus got to work looking over
the plans. Severus made a few suggestions, including moving the storage warehouse for
ingredients on the opposite side of the brewing floor from the finished-product storage warehouse.
While space in the London facility required the two storage places to be right next to one another,
there was no such constriction of the layout space with the lot in Hawaii. It also ensured that
finished products would not be accidentally placed in the same room with pre-brewed ingredients,
some of which were volatile.

"When do you have to give your feedback to the builder on these plans?" Severus asked.

"Wednesday morning. Draco also has a set of plans and asked for a few days to look them over
himself. The next phase is final plans by the builder given to me by Thursday afternoon to take
back to Lavender for last and final approval. Then an albatross will be back with her approval, but I
suppose we could cut that time down with the mirrors as well."

Hermione sat there, looking at the blueprints and realizing that not only would she be moving in
with Severus, but that she would be running a fully functional manufacturing business as well. And
she would be the boss of it all. Not only had Severus attained what he wanted most of all, coming
to Hawaii, but she realized that she would be finding that fulfillment she was lacking all those
years, stuck with Ron in a mediocre marriage in which they were both unhappy, and working at a
dead-end job that afforded her no sense of accomplishment or mental stimulation.

"Then if the rest of your calendar is open, I thought tomorrow I could take you down to the shop,
then afterwards, I could take you to a favorite spot for collecting urchins and anemones. I can teach
you how to field-process those, if you haven’t had the chance to learn yet. Get a bit of beach time
in, and a nice picnic lunch. Then later go to my farm on the west side of the island, do a little
gardening, then have an unobstructed view of the sunset," Severus suggested. Well, since he had
the whole day planned, it was more like an itinerary than a suggestion, but Hermione was thrilled
he had planned the day.

"That sounds wonderful." Hermione craned her neck up and kissed the underside of Severus' neck, since he was still bent over, standing behind her while studying the blueprints.

Hermione's mind went back to what Draco had said earlier in the day, as she thought about how much Severus loved her. Was it their love for each other alone that tied them together, or was there something in that Irresistible potion that they took that somehow bounded them together?

"Severus?"

"Hmm." He was still looking over the plans, wondering if there was some way he could make the layout yet even more efficient.

"Do you still remember those two dreams we shared?"

Hermione felt the pressure of Severus pressing his lips against the top of her head in his initial response to her question.

"All too clearly," he said with some resignation. "More clearly than any dream, which makes me think they were not dreams." Severus sighed heavily before grabbing a chair to sit close next to Hermione.

"I was wondering about the Irresistible Potion we worked on. Was it something we did that created this... connection between us that calls the other when one is in some sort of danger or peril?" she asked, sounding a bit frightened that they had done something inadvertently with their experimentation. "I've been monitoring St. Mungo's for reports in which both spouses fall into a trance or coma when one is injured or gravely sick, and there have been no such cases. Fairy Brandy has been around for a long time, and no such recorded occurrences have come from that," Hermione said, as she ticked off mentally all the avenues of research into this strange phenomenon. "And the Caprese mother of pearl, that has had no such recorded effect either that would explain it." She heaved her own heavy sigh before asking, "Could the pomegranate juice have acted as some sort of catalyst, much in the same way those potions you read about that amplify emotions? Could pomegranate juice be used in an attraction potion – and did it strengthen our attraction to one another beyond the time limits of the primary potion's effects?"

With Hermione's conjecture, Severus finally spoke. He had thought of something in which to
support Hermione's assertion. "It may have been the pomegranate juice."

"What? But how could a simple ingredient, which has been drunk and used in potions for thousands of years have caused us to share dreams? It is used in the Blood-Replenishing Potion and Strengthening Solution, but how is it that it was the cause of these shared experiences?"

Severus rose from his seat and walked over to the bookcase. On the shelf, still wrapped in the plain brown paper, was the ancient Greek tome he ordered through Paige Spien's. It had taken over two months for them to find another copy of that particularly rare book he once found in the Restricted Section. He paid several Galleons extra for the prolonged search due to the many owls and albatrosses that were sent to various booksellers worldwide, but it was eventually found. Severus still had it wrapped in the paper, since it only arrived a few days before he'd planned to leave for London and discuss this topic with her and Albert there, but since she was here, this was as good a time as any.

As he unwrapped the book, he said, "Once at Hogwarts, I had come across one strange variation of the Greek myth of Persephone, written in ancient Greek. I found it in the same rare Greek Potions tome in the Restricted Section I had read about Himeros – the Greek God of sexual desire and impetuous love – and the naiad, Langia. In this account of Persephone's trip to the underworld, she had not been kidnapped, but had willingly gone to join her secret lover, Hades." Severus stopped to let the implications of the story sink into Hermione's mind, as it was sometimes difficult to grasp a new perspective to a story that was so firmly ingrained into memory. His fingers finally found the passage and opened it to the spot for Hermione to read alongside him. "When pressured by Zeus to return Persephone, Hades and Persephone shared a pomegranate so she would be bound to return to him for part of the year, the fruit used as a means to strengthen a bond between two lovers reluctantly torn apart. The pomegranate gave Persephone strength to pass between the worlds of the living and dead each year."

Both Hermione and Severus were thinking the same thing: Could it be that they, being secret lovers torn apart to different ends of the world, had created their own magic, and were now bound to each other with the use of pomegranate in their research?

"Years ago, when I read this, I had discounted the veracity of the story for its worth, since it was the only telling of Persephone's kidnapping as a willing abductee I had ever come across. It was remiss of me to so easily discount such an account, just because it ran counter to all the other variations of the myth."

Severus felt guilty for dismissing the information and unknowingly binding Hermione and himself together with foolish experimentation, something he had prided himself to be far too skilled and knowledgeable to fall prey to.
To further explain his folly, he added, "In all my years of research, I had never read of any use of pomegranate to strengthen an emotional, mental, or physical bond between two people. And never had I ever read in all my years of research the use of pomegranate for anything other than a restorative in the healing arts. But what else could explain my sudden and unexplained time asleep that coincided with your attack and recovery? And my own hallucination during the ice pox?"

Hermione finished reading the story in ancient Greek before slowly pushing the book away.

"I am sorry for unknowingly binding you to me. As a Potions master, I should have been more careful, and I must apologize." Severus turned his face away, unable to look at Hermione, having admitting his failings that he was reluctant to confess.

They sat there in silence for a long while. Hermione dissected every part of the Irresistible Potion, analyzing the ingredients in her mind, their usage, and every other component. There was only one thing Hermione could find that somehow turned the pomegranate juice from a mundane ingredient into something more magical than either could originally conceive.

"I think you are forgetting something in this potion that has bound us together, Severus." She reached out her hand to grasp his hand. "You forget that love is what bound us together, knowing that someday we must part and do so with great reluctance."

Hermione's hand stretched up and turned his face towards hers. "This only worked because we loved each other before we began experimenting with the ingredients for the Irresistible Potion, knowing we would be parted and didn't want to be. It was love that was the catalyst, not the pomegranate juice. Without love, it would have had no other long-term effects on us. It tore my heart out to be parted from you. And I don't regret at all that I am bound to you, Severus Snape, for I love you as much as you love me."

Severus had wondered as well if the catalyst was love, for he knew that she loved him. Hermione's simple confession eased his guilt, for the fact she confessed she did not regret it. It was love that bound them together, and the pomegranate only helped strengthen their existing bond. Even without the pomegranate juice, they would still be bound.

Leaning forward, her hand still stroking his cheek and beard, he kissed her, tasting the salt of a few tears that had trailed down her cheeks to the corners of her mouth.

In the bedroom, as Hermione sat on the bed watching Severus remove his shirt, she reached for the box and pulled out a vial of lubrication potion for herself and a vial of Sequoia potion for Severus.
Smiling at her, he shook his head. "I don't want to use that tonight. I won't need it," he assured her.

Hermione was about to ask why, but didn't question. As Severus kissed her slowly, his hand teasing her clothes off her body in a deliberate fashion, Hermione began to understand why Severus decided to forego taking the stamina potion. Had he downed it, he surely would have ripped her clothes off by this point and be close to burying himself into her in haste. Severus' intentions tonight were different from their urgent need to join since her arrival. This was a seduction.

Hermione attempted to help him remove her clothing, but he stopped her hand and shushed her. "We're in no hurry."

Most of their love-making sessions had been frantic and hungry, making up for lost time or trying to cram as much passion as possible into their brief week together. It was with the analysis of how and why they were bound together on a plane beyond this current one that made Severus realize Hermione would always be his. They had the rest of their lives together to make love and be together. He wanted to savor these moments instead of rushing through them towards some moment of completion – a point he would still arrive at if he took his time.

They kissed, rolling about the bed. Severus' hand swept up Hermione's legs, teasing the skin along the edge of her shorts, her top already discarded, but her bra still on.

Delicately tonguing the pulse point on her neck, he murmured, "You're positively filthy. I can taste the sweat and jungle on your skin." He sighed and ground his erection, still hidden in his underpants and shorts, against her hip.

"What do you recommend, Mr. Snape?" Hermione asked in a none-too-innocent tone.

He raised a quizzical brow at the use of his formal name before letting a bemused smirk spread across his face. "I suppose a survey to see how filthy you really are before a course of action can be recommended to address the issue would be in order." His first survey was between her breasts to tongue the sweat from her cleavage.

As his fingers deftly unhooked her bra, Hermione sighed. Severus was certainly doing a very good job of arousing her. When he peeled away the fabric from her breasts, the change in air temperature made her nipples tighten and pucker. Of course, Severus had to survey her nipples as well.
Severus didn't know why, but he found the tang of salt and dried sweat on her alluring tonight. Perhaps it was the fact her own natural scent was stronger than usual, and he could smell her more than usual. She had made sure to her contraceptive potion earlier in the week and she couldn't be ovulating, but even without her being fertile, he wanted to drown himself in the intoxicating scent of her.

As Severus kissed his way down Hermione's stomach, she played with his hair. His long, silken strands slid through her fingers. She shuddered as his hair caressed and grazed her body, counterpoint to the hot trail of kisses he left with his lips as his mouth traveled lower.

"Your hair," Hermione sighed wistfully.

Severus lifted his face from her stomach. "Yes? What about my hair?"

"Caress me with it," she asked, as her hand played with a hank that had fallen over one of Severus' eyes.

Severus understood, for Hermione had used her long hair to tease and caress his face and chest. Now his hair was finally long enough to return the favor. Rising, he flung his head forward to allow his hair to cascade over the top of his crown and around his shoulders.

Hermione raised her arms up in surrender above her head as Severus, above her on his hands and knees, began dragging the tips of his hair across her face and down her neck. As the tips of his hair caressed her breasts and rib cage, she visibly shuddered, groaning from the teasing pleasure.

He could smell her musk now. His nose, drawn down to her stomach, grazed along her abdomen as he continued to drag his hair across her skin. The sound of the zipper on Hermione's shorts almost seemed to fill the room with its metallic notes, signaling what was to come.

She allowed him to peel her shorts off, but wondered why he left her knickers on. His cheek resting on her mons, he inhaled deeply, as if analyzing the ingredients in a custom pot of herbal tea.

Kissing her mons through her knickers, looking up at her, his eyes heavily lidded, he said, "You're not the only one who used a Pensieve to relive happier times."

Hermione smiled down at him, glad to hear Severus admit to her as much.
"And while the senses of sight and sound are sated, the Pensive memory lacks touch and taste. And unless it is very strong, it lacks scent as well." To drive his point home, he hooked her thighs over his shoulder, buried his face into the apex of her thighs, and inhaled deeply once more.

The tip of his tongue teased along the edge of her knickers, heightening the anticipation, making her more wet, the lubrication potion in full effect. She squirmed against his face, wanting him to do more, yet enjoying the anguishing slow pace Severus had set.

Finally, much to Hermione's mewling whimpers, Severus pulled her knickers off to begin teasingly toying with her clitoris. His tongue flicked and lapped, swirled and delved, relishing in her robust taste and scent. His lips tugged and played with her labia, exploring every fold and licking her thoroughly in the process.

As Hermione was close to orgasm from Severus' deft tongue work, she was about to protest when he suddenly stopped, but she wasn't surprised when Severus readjusted himself on the bed to lay next to her. One of his knees pushed to spread her thighs apart while his mouth came bearing down upon hers.

Severus thrust his tongue into Hermione's mouth, and she gladly accepted his invasion. She could taste herself on his lips, mixed with the heady taste of his own saliva. She welcomed his tongue and devoured it, as if sharing some ripe fruit or sip of wine, passed from one lover's mouth to another.

His one hand slid back down and replaced where his mouth was working only moments before. First one finger then another slipped into her. His thumb made long strokes up, down, and around her clitoris. He kept his touch light, gradually adding pressure as her groans rose in pitch.

She could feel him palpitate lightly against her G-spot with each stroke. She wouldn't last much longer; his fingers were well practiced.

When Severus felt her back begin to arch and the back of her throat close-up, he knew she was at the crest. Rising-up on one elbow, he wanted to watch, and he brought her to completion. This face of exquisite rapture, this twisted visage expressing unadulterated exultation – he drunk in the sight of it all knowing he was the one who had brought her to this point. He watched as her own hands reached for her breasts, pulling at her nipples to increase the pleasure as the walls of her vagina clamped down on his fingers.
The back of her throat opened and Hermione's own Song of Solomon issued forth. Her wails and guttural grunts and formless scream spoke of her love for him as if in some other language. Her eyes, fighting to stay open to watch Severus watch her, professed her heart and all that it contained. Severus had never used Legilimency on Hermione, but had she the ability to speak coherently, she would have invited him into her mind to experience all the love she had for him. She wanted to open herself to him completely.

As her body relaxed, her orgasm waning, Severus swept a stray tendril from her face, a tender moment between lovers, where everything was said, but not a word spoken.

Hermione's chest heaved as she tried to catch her breath, her eyes still watching Severus watch her.

Inspired by the moment, Hermione rolled over and on top of Severus, who was still in his shorts. Now her wild and wavy hair fell about and framed his face, intermingling with his straight black locks. With her hand placed between their bodies, she stroked his hard length through the cotton twill.

"Pensieves also only relive the moment," Hermione remarked breathily. "It is only when we are in the moment itself that we can feel it all: your heart beating so strongly in your chest against mine, the caress of your breath on my skin, the overwhelming feeling of love right here, right now."

She leaned down and kissed Severus, her hand never stopping its slow rhythmic stroking of Severus' length.

As her mouth trailed around his face to lay soft kisses upon his temple, cheek, and ear, she confessed, "I revisited that memory of that first time I nearly completely surrendered to you. Remember that time you had me blindfolded and pinned against the cupboard? You begged me so sweetly, I had never heard anything so beautiful as your voice, filled with desire for me. And on the couch, telling me how much you needed me. I almost let you take me completely that night, consequences be damned. You were my Siren that night, and I would have nearly dashed myself upon the rocks for you. I want to hear that beautiful music again."

Somehow during Hermione's erotic retelling of that night, she had made Severus' shorts and underpants disappear. He didn't know how, and he didn't care. All he could concentrate on was Hermione's own seduction of him.

"Beg," Hermione said as she straddled him. "Revisiting memories is nothing compared to the wonder of the moment itself. I need to hear you."
Severus' eyebrows twitched in confusion, his mind clouded by hormones and lust.

"Beg me, please."

Severus yet had to satisfy himself, so of course his own body was begging for its own release. He did not have to act for Hermione, it came naturally and without any hesitation. "Do you have any idea how much I want you? How much I need you?"

Hermione gave him a wicked grin, feeling more in control of the situation than Severus. "Oh, I can feel how much you need me right here." For added effect, her rolling her hips, grinding herself against Severus' length, rubbing her wetness along the underside of his cock. He closed his eyes and hissed lightly.

"Please, Hermione. I need to be with you right now, to have you, possess you, crush you in my arms. Let me fill you, make you scream my name, make my body feel what my heart already feels that you are mine." It was hard for him to continue, as his normally sharp mind was so fogged with sex and desire, it was difficult for him to be even this eloquent.

Thrilled by Severus' sweet words and the way his voice pleaded, Hermione grabbed his cock in her hand and guided him into her entrance, swirling it around and around, teasing not only her own body, but Severus' too.

She loved watching Severus' eyes slip shut, as he tilted his head back against the bed and the veins popped out of his neck as he attempted to control himself. Hermione knew it was all he could do not to flip her onto her back and slam himself into her, but she knew he wouldn't. He had refused taking the Sequoia potion and wanted to prolong this. She would torture him deliciously until he begged for his own release at just the right moment.

"So lovely," she cooed, as she watched Severus squirm beneath her. "My dark angel. My demon lover. So much passion, so much love, and to be consumed by you is the greatest pleasure of all." Hermione's own eyes shut, as she felt the tension in her abdomen throb from need, tightening with each teasing swipe of Severus' cock as it nearly slipped in with each pass.

Severus was deliriously drunk on the moment. Hermione turning the tables on him with her own heady seduction made him lose control.
Draco had told him once that it takes a strong wizard to completely surrender to love and to be truly exposed and naked with the one he loved. Severus finally understood.

"Please, take me, Hermione. Please. Please... please..."

She adjusted her grip and swiftly sheathed himself in her with a quick thrust of her hips.

Both cried out in release, Severus sitting up and pulling Hermione into his arms, his face buried in her breasts as she rode him.

"I need you more than you can know," he confessed, his words mumbled against her breasts and shoulder as he continued to meet the rolling of her hips with his thrusts from underneath. He was willing to let it all come out, realizing he was not being weak, over-emotional or too sentimental – just completely honest. "I felt my own heart ripped out the day I left you. But you stayed behind to make me free. I've only ever been truly happy since you've been here. I don't want to let you go, I want to keep you here with me, and it kills me to know this time I must stay and you must go. But if I don't let you go, you'll never have your own freedom. And it scares me that I'll feel this aching hole in my heart when you Portkey away. I love you, and I don't want you to go."

It almost broke Hermione's heart to hear him lay his heart out so plainly. It also made her love him even more so, if that was even possible. She didn't think so before, but she was proven wrong.

"I need you too, Severus. Just as much," she sobbed, starting to cry, overcome with bittersweet joy. She continued to ride him, her tears absorbed by Severus' hair, and she clutched his head to her chest. "I don't want to go either."

This is what Hermione feared and made her reluctant to come visit Severus all those months. That once she was there, it would be too hard for her to leave him again.

"I'm completely yours, Severus. I always have been."

Severus felt his balls tighten and squeeze. He clutched Hermione even tighter around her torso and pushed her down harder onto his shaft as he tried to bury himself as deeply as possible as he came in her.

Hermione, feeling his cock throb as he emptied his seed into her, tightened her muscles, grasping
him tighter and making Severus gasp. She tightened her muscles in small pulses and then squeezed tight once more which made him groan once more and finally go slack. Severus dropped his death-grip on Hermione and fell back onto the bed, his whole body covered in a light sheen of sweat.

Still astride his hips, she played with the sweat on his body with the tips of her fingers, watching Severus' chest shake with each thunderous beat of his heart. She could nearly hear it. His chest was heaving as he tried to regain his breath. Puckering her lips, she blew lightly across his chest, the light and brief breeze making a smile light up Severus' face from the loving gesture. He placed his arms up in surrender to feel her cooling breath graze against the insides of his arms as well.

Severus watched her. He had poured his heart to her, exposing himself more than ever, yet he did not feel vulnerable for once. He noticed the way her lips puckered as she blew once more. She could have cast a breeze charm with her wand, but she didn't. She was tending to him in her little ways that made him feel loved. He watched the way the light from the candles flickered and cast shadows across her breasts and face. Her face glowed and smiled down upon him, as if she was one of the Graces or some blessed deity casting her love upon him. But this unearthly love was for him and him alone.

Hermione did not miss the way Severus was studying her. She could also tell that Severus was more at peace with the world than ever. In the flickering light of the candle, she could almost imagine the boy he once was. But she knew even as a boy, Severus was never that happy. He had confessed he had never been happier in his life than now, with her. His heart no longer hammering against his chest and the sweat on his body mostly dried, Hermione finally crawled off Severus to cuddle up alongside next to him.

She was still in awe that they loved each other so much that they had bonded with each other and pulled each other into a shared dream twice. One thing which bothered Hermione was that Severus had described his second turn into the dream world as more of a hallucination than a dream.

Her mind latched onto the conundrum of where they went; the thoughts had made her brow furrow.

"What's wrong?" he asked, pushing her hair away from her face, sensing her mind had changed gears.

"If we didn't share a dream, where did we share our consciousnesses then?" Suddenly the romantic mood had fled in the light of another mental puzzle yet to solve for her.

Still coming down off the heady highs of his orgasm, Severus was not about to become all business. It was quite emotional stuff sharing one's heart so completely. Kissing her shoulder, he
began to postulate, "Well, we were both unconscious at the time."

"How seriously was your health threatened when you were during the ice bath treatment?" Hermione asked, having not heard all the details yet.

"Rainbow was quite concerned, since I was fairly sick with the ice pox, quite a bad case in comparison to others by Janine's and Rainbow's accounts. Though I wasn't at risk of dying, it was severe enough they were worried."

Hermione smoothed a hand over Severus' face, noting that he did seem to have a few less lines around his face than from before, a common side effect from those who recovered from the ice pox.

"What I'm confused about it that before your attack, and my passing out, I had felt sick since the day before. Quite nauseous, and no potions could ease my nausea and I felt unsettled," Severus noted, his own brow furrowing as he tried to deduce that particular anomaly.

Hermione had an idea, but she had to confirm it. "When did you start feeling nauseous?"

"I woke up Friday morning feeling unwell. Why?"

"I received your – or I should say, I received the wrong flowers Friday afternoon. And it tore me apart. I was nearly sick to my stomach and feeling physically terrible, in addition to emotionally broken. It may have been my own physical reaction to the flowers and what I thought it meant at the time, or it could have been the strength of our binding was being strained."

They both laid there silent, each lost in recalling those unpleasant days.

Severus added, "I passed out shortly after noon, on Saturday."

"Which would make it just past eleven at night back in London. That would be around the time I was stunned." Hermione started curling up into a fetal position, and Severus moved his arms to encircle her as if to protect her from the outside world. She continued describing, as best as she could remember, the time line of the events between waking and passing out after Harry rescued her.
Severus hummed to himself. "And the timing of your dream at night in India and my own experience with the ice bath indicate that they happen concurrently, despite where we are in the world or what time it is."

"But that still doesn't explain where we go. It wasn't Hades, for neither of us died," Hermione surmised.

"It was more like Purgatory. That first dream was a recreation of the night that—" Severus stopped, unable to say the words.

"I know," was all that Hermione said. She remembered his description about the night Gabrielle died. Even in her dream, she recognized that Severus – on the ground, covered in mud – had replaced his wife that he had been forced to kill those many years ago.

"The reliving of our worst sins," he said with quiet somberness.

"But what of the desert?" she asked.

"That was quite similar to my own three days in hell with Chuff in which I was dragged there unprepared." He growled to himself, still upset at his sadistic Potions master for that unpleasant jaunt.

"And the lava?"

Severus shook his head. "Maybe with you piled under all those sheets. And with the ice pox, I felt so cold that it was almost burning. Maybe that is why that place was conjured in your mind or mine."

"But where?" Hermione continued to ask. "Some place between life and death? Limbo? A plane of subconscious existence in the aether or nether sphere? Maybe some chamber in Morpheus' citadel?"

For the fact that not even Severus, who was more well read than herself, was clueless as to where they had gone during those journeys of their minds, was somewhat disquieting to her. She wished
Dumbledore was alive, for surely in his vast knowledge and experience, he might know what had happened. Perhaps this was something only those who worked in the deepest bowels of the Department of Mysteries, studying behind the door that could never be forced open, knew and would not divulge to anyone. Maybe this was a mystery that was beyond any explanation one's mind could conceive.

Severus sighed with resignation that even this was beyond his capabilities of logic and observation to discern. "Whatever the place we both visited, it has only been when one of us has been in some form of great distress. Let us hope we never revisit such a place again."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to my ever lovely and immensely talented betas, JuneW and Cygnuz.

Tossed Salad: Originally, in prison, to have someone eat your ass out, with or without salad dressing used as a means of disguising the taste of someone's ass. The salad dressing is also used as an impromptu lubrication.

Regarding the Persephone and Hades alternative myth, there was an SSHG Promptfest (after I had completed this story) in which one prompt was, "Retelling of any mythology story with Severus and Hermione as the main characters." I expanded upon my initial idea in this fic and retold the Hades and Persephone myth with her willingly going with Hades to the Underworld instead of being abducted against her will. It is a two-part story titled "Seeds" about 11,000 words long. You can read my reinterpretation of the myth on AO3 and Ashwinder here:

http://archiveofourown.org/works/7606516

"Dragontinis and Drunkards"

Chapter Summary

Hermione and Severus have an idyllic day out. Later, “the girls” have lunch out while “the boys” have a long-overdue booze-up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter One Hundred Six
"Dragontinis and Drunkards"

Disclaimer:
This fanfic has been drinking, it still needs a disclaimer
And the writer lost her mind, the plot was getting lamer
And the characters all get drunk, and my spelling was just so weak
And the readers are getting restless, and my betas need a break
And this fanfic has been drinking, Rowling has created Potter, not me, not me...

A/N: Lyrics a parody of "The Piano Has Been Drinking (Not Me)” by Tom Waits.

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Gary noticed that Hermione and Severus made a concerted effort to focus on the morning’s Japanese lesson, but he was gracious enough not to chastise them when he would catch them periodically casting longing glances at one another. They were as bad as any pair of lovesick teenagers he had seen, and though they tried to behave as rational adults in control of themselves, they failed. He knew that Severus had been pining for Hermione and that her stay would be brief, so he let it slide this week. He would tap his wand at the chalkboard to rouse them both out of their momentary distraction in order to have them recite what he had written on the board and correct their pronunciation as needed. Both were excellent students, but he also recognized when two people were madly in love with one another.

To end the lesson for the day, he instructed Severus and Hermione to ask if Draco would invite them to a tea ceremony before Hermione left to go back to London. "Many of the great Japanese Potion masters were also masters of the tea ceremony, which requires some common skills – the stillness of mind, paying attention to the number of times to whisk the tea, the precision of movement, the selection of only the best-quality ingredients.”
Gary began waving his wand about, folding up the chalkboard as he continued talking. "Draco, though not formally trained as a tea master, is quite good for a novice with no Master to study under, especially since he was self-taught from books translated into English. He was kind enough to invite me and Iolana for tea a few times. Observing a proper tea ceremony will help you understand some references in this highly contextual language, no doubt."

Severus thanked him for the suggestion and said he would contact Draco that day.

Once Gary was gone, Severus packed up the cabana he had finally gone out and bought the other day, since most other people on the island had a portable cabana for their family days at the beach.

Meanwhile, Hermione packed the picnic hamper, making sure to include the small hibachi grill from the back deck, but she left room for a few more items they would need to pick up. There was also the matter of towels, bathing suits, a small folding prep table, knives, net bags, and vials and containers to hold specimens until they could take them back to the lab upstairs, and other equipment and accoutrements required for a full day out. She wondered if using an Extension Charm on the picnic hamper would harm the specimens.

As they were heading down to Severus' shop, since he'd promised her the deluxe ten-Sickle tour of the place, Hermione stopped in the middle of the street.

She blinked in confusion. "Wait, wasn't that a Korean Bar-B-Que restaurant before?" she asked, pointing to the Thai restaurant.

"Yes. As diverse as the palates and different cultures that are here on the island may be, there isn't a population large enough to sustain a dozen different restaurants. So the restaurants rotate every two to four days. This building switches between Korean, Thai, and Indian, along with the décor and cooks." He then turned around and pointed to a Mexican restaurant one block down. "That place is a Mexican taqueria and El Salvadorian papuseria three days a week. It shares the space with a family that runs a Persian restaurant every other weekend, and an Ethiopian and a Brazilian restaurant."

"And what do the people do when they aren't running their restaurant?"

"Many people have farms they work on the rest of the time and use the restaurant to supplement their income, but there wouldn't be enough business on this island to have them run it full-time. However, the locals found if they rotated, there was enough of a revenue stream that they could
share rents with others and keep enough patrons coming in to make a profit with the trickle that Portkeys or Apparates in from the other islands." Severus then spun about pointing out each spot with his finger, "Mario's, Ohana Family Diner, Flo & Eddie's Noodle House, Golden Dragon, and Yamamoto's are the only restaurants that are occupied by the same restaurant all the time."

They continued walking towards Severus' shop again until Hermione stopped and yanked on his arm. "Oh, wait! We still have to go mirror-shopping." Hermione remembered as they passed by the store that sold housewares and linens. "We should go in and shop now in case they have to order them."

Severus supposed this was as good a time as any to go shopping, though it was a rather tiresome chore.

Hearth, Hale & Ho'opika was where Draco had gone to outfit his home before he wed Ginny, and it was probably the only shop on the island that would probably sell mirrors.

The pair were greeted by Lorraine, Matt’s widow. Severus introduced Hermione to her, and Lorraine told them to look around, as she had several mirrors hanging about the store for display.

Some of the mirrors in the store were enchanted and started calling for Hermione and Severus to come look at them.

"Is there anything that doesn't have gold gilt bamboo or palm fronds for a frame and isn't already charmed?" Hermione asked quietly. She did not care for some of the more ostentatious styles of tropical-themed décor with charmed glass that was quick to flatter them. Some of the Asian-themed décor mirror frames did not tickle Hermione's fancy, especially the ones that were charmed to talk back, some not even in English. Given that the mirror Hermione picked would sit in her flat for months, and then be moved to Lavender's office to reside there, she had to pick something that not only she could tolerate, but that Lavender could as well.

Severus found a mirror he liked, a free-standing, floor-length uncharmed one that had a plain teak frame with little adornment. It was simple, but Severus' current decorating job at the house was also very simple, since the house still looked only half-furnished.

Finally, Hermione's eyes fell upon a mirror hidden towards the back. It had a frame with a European neoclassical style, featuring deep blue enamel and a small amount of gilded gold work that was understated. The glass wasn't even charmed. It was a large wall mirror, and it would also fit within the décor of Lavender's office. It was marked down and was otherwise perfect. Looking about the rest of the store, she could tell that European-style décor was not in hot demand in Malu
Severus paid for the mirrors and instructed Lorraine to have them delivered the following morning between ten and eleven, after his lessons were over for the day.

As they turned down the small alley of Humuhumunukunukuapua`a Lane, Hermione let out a small squeal of delight. She saw the shingle hanging from under the awning and the wreath of silvery-green eucalyptus and red leucodendrons on the front door.

"It looks charming already," she exclaimed with anticipation.

Just as they reached the door, one of Jerry's students was exiting and held the door for them both.

"Severus!" Pat cried out in amazement from behind her reception desk. "Draco told me that he had a surprise that would keep you here, and here she is. You must be Hermione," the middle-aged witch said as she stood up to walk around her desk and shake Hermione's hand.

"Hermione, this is Pat Vallier, our office manager, receptionist, and most talented guardian against pointless appointments." Severus said with a lilt of dry humor in his voice.

"You must be very good to earn such high praise from Severus," Hermione remarked with her own wry observation.

"Given that I found ways to write off more expenses for the business, since I'm also versed in wizard tax code, I think I've saved him enough to earn my keep." Pat heard the hooting of an owl arrive. "If you'll excuse me, I have some things to attend to."

Just as Pat left, Jerry stuck his head out of his office. "They popped up for air!"

Severus gave Jerry a pointed look that said sexual innuendos in the office would not be tolerated, as his eyes then darted to Jerry's next student who had been watching the exchange quietly.

Taking the hint, Jerry said, "Well, I have my next student here, so I'll leave you two alone while you give your guest the grand tour." He then looked to the young wizard waiting patiently.
"Jimmy? Why don't you come in."

Hermione glanced at all the Christmas cards pinned to the wall, peeking at some of the inscriptions from grateful parents and students. Then Severus showed her his classroom setup and how it was meant for a much smaller class size. It was in a U-shaped table configuration so Severus could stand in the middle and observe all the students simultaneously, while not having to run around benches to reach a student before his or her cauldron exploded. Cauldrons of various sizes were stacked neatly in one corner, and there was a cabinet with various sizes of robes that students could wear; if they didn't bring their own robes, they could rent these for a fee.

In the next room back was the storage area, where Severus found Thomas stacking some deliveries that had come in. Thomas was one of his students who worked to help pay for his lessons.

"Oh, sorry, Mr. Snape," Thomas said with surprise as he stood up and dusted his hands off. "I thought you were going to be gone off to England this week. Pat told me to come in and put these deliveries away in case there was anything in them that would spoil, but I doubt you would order anything that needed special charms while you were away. But I came in when Pat asked anyway."

"That's all right, Thomas," Severus assured him. "This is Hermione Weasley."

Thomas recognized the witch from the photo on his boss' desk. He blushed a little when Hermione shook his hand and said it was a pleasure to meet him.

"Ma'am." He nodded his head, looking a bit shy as any young man did in the presence of a witch who caught his fancy and made him nervous. "Say, you wouldn't happen to be related to Ron Weasley, the Keeper of the English Chudley Cannons, would you?"

Hermione could distinctly hear the grinding of Severus' teeth, which she pretended not to notice. Trying to sound bright and unperturbed by the question, she said as nonchalantly as possible, "That would be my ex-husband."

Thomas' face fell. "Oh, I am so sorry, Mrs. Weasley," he stammered, ineloquent, but sincere in his embarrassment.

"Don't be sorry, I'm not."
"So then you aren't related to Lavender Weasley?" he asked innocently, too enthralled in the discussion to notice Severus glaring at him.

"That would be my ex-husband's current wife." Hermione paused and added for effect, "And my employer."

There was a moment of silence before Thomas commented, "That must be awkward."

Hermione found humor in the statement and laughed aloud, which surprised even Severus. "At first, yes, but it was for the best, and we're all much happier for it." She paused, then explained, "The three of us were classmates at school for seven years, and we still have friends in common."

Thomas nodded in understanding. "Oh, just like when kids here date and break up with each other, then date another friend."

Hermione smiled, glad to ease the young wizard's discomfort. He really was just a child, who might even end up working for The Lovely Lavender Company in a few years.

Severus was thankful for her skills with people. But mostly, he was surprised that the love-triangle relationship between Hermione, Lavender, and Ronald had not already spread to all the corners of Malu Palekaiko already. "Well, carry on with your tasks, Thomas," Severus said tersely, dismissing the young wizard.

Reaching into his pocket, Severus pulled out his keys and wand, using both to unlock his potions lab in the back where he brewed his commissions. As they entered, candles flickered to life; the place was deathly quiet. Severus had decided not to let anything simmer while he was away, should anything like a vengeful Mad-Eye Moody or some other unforeseen circumstance keep him from coming back in a timely manner.

As Severus shut the door so they could continue talking without being interrupted or overheard, Hermione noticed the layout and feel of the place.

"This reminds me of your old classroom," Hermione noted, a twinkle in her eye. "And if your students here require detention, do you make them come serve it here while you work away?"

"No," Severus said, having an inkling where Hermione's line of questions were going to lead. "If they misbehave, I either serve the parents with a nuisance fee or make them work it off by collecting potions ingredients for me for free. I no longer must supervise unruly students and waste my time disciplining them. Misbehaving students are prevented from signing up for future brewing
classes with me, and I leave the parents to deal with the punishment."

Running a finger along one bench, looking a bit kittenish, Hermione said, "And if I was your apprentice and was a bit unruly, how would you discipline me?"

Severus folded his arms in front of himself and lifted his nose in the air, trying to look haughty and imperious. "Fraternization between master and apprentice is a solemn arrangement meant for serious study, not an excuse for dirty old wizards to exploit naïve, young, alluring and nubile witches for the purposes of satisfying their titillating peccadilloes."

"Yes," Hermione purred as she played with the button of Severus' black and green Hawaiian shirt, "but what if he's an attractive, virile wizard who is not so old, and what if the apprentice is not so young and naïve, and has her own dirty, lustful peccadilloes?"

Severus quirked a smug brow at her.

Hermione and Severus made sure every hair was in place, every button was buttoned correctly, and zippers were up before they left Severus' private lab forty minutes later. Pat and Jerry might have guessed they were busy talking about Potions, or they could have correctly guessed the couple was busy with other pursuits other than professional talk, but the lovers would not give them any cause to guess the latter.

Severus made use of an office owl and sent a missive off to Draco about the tea ceremony. They would have stopped to ask in person, but that would have delayed them. Severus wanted to be there to dive for urchins and anemones when the tides were optimal, and they still had to go shopping.

At the market, more people came up and talked with Severus, many – like Thomas – surprised that he was around that week. The social exchange turned into a chance for Severus to introduce Hermione to more of the townsfolk.

With enough food packed for lunch and dinner, they finally headed out to the edge of town to Apparate to a choice spot to go collecting. Severus set up the cabana along the beach, which allowed them a chance to change into their swimsuits in privacy. With their wands secured in their suits' loops, and their net collection bags in hand, they entered the water. They both cast Bubble-Head Charms before diving down.

Hermione was amazed at the variety of tropical fish that nibbled at the coral reef below. Yellow
tangs as large as Severus' hand, Moorish idols, trigger fish, brightly-colored parrotfish, and several species of butterfly fish swam about. They all dazzled Hermione with their beauty, as she had only ever seen fish like this in aquariums, and much smaller at that.

Severus guided Hermione down to a spot that was rich in exotic corals, urchins, and anemones. Pulling out a knife, he showed Hermione how to pry and cut the various specimens free and gather them into the net bags carefully. Hermione had little problem with the pieces of coral and urchins she gathered, but with one anemone she did get stung.

Up on the beach, they deposited their collection into some tubs filled with sea water in order to hold them until they could begin processing some for parts. But before that, Severus fetched a bottle of vinegar and poured it over Hermione's hand, neutralizing the sting of the anemone. Severus also applied a salve to help speed healing, having had his own share of jellyfish and anemone stings over the past year.

In the shade of the cabana, Severus cracked open the first sea urchin, halving it neatly with a slicing spell in order to show Hermione the interior of the animal and the useful parts that usually were shipped dried to England. Once done with the anatomy lesson, he tipped the urchin over to empty the internal organs before reaching into the cavity.

"And now the delicious part," he said with relish. "The gonads."

Hermione watched as Severus plucked out the dark golden organ, rinsed it lightly in a small pan of sea water, and popped it into his mouth.

With his eyes closed, he chewed on it, savoring the sweet and briny soft flesh. He pulled the next one out and offered it to Hermione. She was almost reluctant to try it, having had urchin in a sushi bar once and was underwhelmed by the taste of it. But when Severus placed that fresh delicacy on her tongue, her eyes popped open with surprise, and she groaned with delight.

After swallowing, she said, "Oh my God, that is good. That is nothing like the urchin I've had before."

Severus smiled, as if he had personally shown her the secret cellar that stored the nectar of the gods, and let her sample some. He was almost like a giddy schoolboy sharing some great secret he'd stumbled across. "It's only good fresh like this. Once you pull the gonads out, the texture begins to change almost immediately and it won't keep, which is why this is the best way to enjoy it."
Hermione gave a try at cutting open a live urchin and cleaned out the various organs to throw them into the respective containers Severus had brought. Once done, Hermione pulled out a set of five more gonads, which they shared as a quick bite before they began cutting open the rest of the sea urchins to collect for various potions ingredients.

Once all the collected specimens were cut and set in various trays, salted, and left to dry in the sun, or thrown into jars and preserved with various fluids, it was time for lunch.

Hermione pulled out some fruit and began to slice them up as Severus lit the coals in the hibachi grill. Noting that Hermione was wielding a blade, he asked, "How are your knife skills lately?"

"Better," she replied noncommittally.

"Good enough for you to bet?" he goaded her.

"Depends. Are your massage skills just as good? Because after giving you a back rub last night, I need one of my own now." Hermione feigned that her shoulders ached, pouting and making over-exaggerated sad faces. "I don't remember your muscles being so tight back in England, and I had to put a lot of effort into it."

"I've had to put a lot of effort into you. You forget how much work it requires to satisfy you, though if you're still game to try Polyjuice Potion tomorrow, you'll finally figure that out first hand." He gave her a knowing leer.

"Well, if I win and I get a proper back-rub; what do you want should you win? And how shall we judge this competition?"

Severus had to think about it. She had already given him a very nice back-rub the night before, and without him even asking for one. There was little in the way of sexual desires that they hadn't already sated or planned to fulfill during the rest of the week.

He thought for a moment before deciding. "Hmm, fine. When we go to my farm, I get to sit back and supervise, and you can harvest and process the various things I need for my shop, in addition to gardening chores."
Aghast, Hermione huffed, only slightly amused. "What do you think I am? Free slave labor?"

"You are the apprentice. I am the master. Were you not aware that essentially you are indentured during your apprenticeship? Or has Albert been paying you when you work on his garden?"

Severus gave a very self-satisfied smile as he leaned back, clasping his hands behind his head, knowing he was right.

Eyes narrowing, she gave him a playful glare that she was ready to meet his challenge and felt she would surely be getting her back-rub later that day. "Fine, let's do it."

Hermione split the fish in half evenly with the same slicing spell Severus had used. After placing the fish halves on the scales Severus had also brought, it was confirmed that that the two halves weighed equally. The wizard who had the fillets that weighed the most would win.

What neither expected was a contingency should they come to a draw and both their fillets weighed the same. In the end, it was agreed that Severus would supervise while Hermione worked on Severus' farm later that afternoon, and Severus would give her a much needed back-rub afterwards.

After a lunch of grilled fish, everything was packed away. Severus had promised Hermione some beach time, and they Apparated to a spot where the sand was as soft as sugar beneath their feet. Severus normally didn't swim for fun, but only for exercise. However, with Hermione, he was enjoying himself as they swam about. Eventually, they both came out and rested in the shade of the cabana, each pulling out a book to read. Severus even dozed off for a bit, his book resting on his chest while Hermione continued to study her Japanese primer. When Severus awoke, Hermione had a refreshing chilled drink ready for him.

Arriving at the farm, they changed back into their clothes. Severus gave her yet another tour, pointing out the nearby farms and the various crops grown there. His farm still had areas he had yet to clear, but he also told Hermione what he planned to do. He had already planted some citrus trees, since they did better on the drier side of the island, with plans of a nice-sized orange grove soon. The rosemary and thyme were growing at an astounding rate; Severus instructed Hermione to take tips off of his rosemary bushes, and then set them up for drying.

He had built a small shed to house his tools, drying rack areas, a small desk, a sturdy sink to wash large batches of whatever was harvested, and a toilet. Reclining on a hammock on the front porch of the shed, he watched as Hermione moved about quickly, cutting bushes, dead-heading plants, picking fruit, and pulling weeds with great efficiency. Severus wished the students he supervised to work on his farm for pay worked as quickly and diligently as did Hermione, who admittedly did this to honor a bet, rather than for pay.
Sweat trickling down her face, she trudged up to the porch. "Well, I did all you asked so far. What next?" Hermione swiped her wrist across her brow to stop the sweat from trickling into her eyes.

"That's it. That's all that needed to be done today."

Relieved, Hermione came up to the porch and collapsed into the hammock, coming to lie next to Severus. Unfortunately, the sun was in the west and beating down on the front porch.

"You're filthy again," he noted.

"And you're still all salty from the ocean."

Severus set up the cabana for a third time that day, as the cabana came equipped with a shower for rinsing off after a day at the beach. Once showered, and with no one around to bother them, Severus honored his end of the bet and gave Hermione a thorough back-rub while mutually nude. This back-rub eventually turned into a tussle in the cabana as he straddled the backs of her thighs, sliding into her as he continued to dig his thumbs into key tight spots on her back and hips. They made use of lounge chairs they had reclined on earlier.

As sunset approached, they reclined in the hammock, side by side, enjoying the unobstructed view of the horizon. The sky changed quickly from golden to peach, then vivid orange and burnt orange as the sun set along the western edge of the Pacific.

Severus pulled out their food from the picnic hamper as twilight set in. He had some marinated pork set on bamboo skewers that he grilled on the hibachi. Hermione cooked the rice in a cauldron set at the edge of a small fire-pit she made with some lava rocks and some old dried pieces of wood. And there was a lightly pickled cucumber-and-carrot salad done Thai-style to round out the meal. Severus uncorked a Pinot Blanc to go with the meal.

The coals dimmed as they were finishing the last of their dinner, just as the stars came out.

As they relaxed once more in the hammock, they gazed up at the stars together. Hermione had not seen so many stars since she was a student at Hogwarts. There was no light pollution from any cities, and the sky was so filled with stars, she could even discern Severus' face by their light alone, the moon having not yet risen.
"As much as I wish it so, unfortunately no," he sighed with resignation. Severus was not about to let sentimentality overtake him this time, for he knew better. "As much as your visit has been like some fantastical dream of near perfection, I am not about to lie and wax rhapsodically that this gloriously heady time will be eternal. We'll both come home from long days at work and fall into our complacent habits. Hopefully, we will not fall into the common trap of taking each other for granted and thereby become resentful, but familiarity does breed contempt. I cannot promise that I will always be as agreeable as I have been this week with you, drunk on the euphoria of having you with me again, but as with love potions, passions that burn so bright burn out and cool in time."

For Hermione, it was quite sobering to hear Severus speak so frankly. She digested what he said before replying. "True, a blazing fire can burn out quickly, but if one tends to the fire to make sure it doesn't burn out, it can remain a constant source of warmth. As long as you don't neglect it, it can last a very long, long time, Severus." She snuggled her head against his chest. "And I will always tend to you, just as you've tended to me."

Severus hoped in the long term he would not fail Hermione. As much as he loved her, he had little experience when it came to long-term commitments, since his first marriage was so short. He had only known Gabrielle for about two years before becoming a widower at twenty years old. He barely had spent an entire six months with Hermione in the entirety of their relationship, including his time when she only knew him as Calleo. The only thing that quelled his own deep fear was that he knew that they loved each other deeply, enough to forge a bond that defied convention and was inexplicable. It was their love that gave him faith that perhaps he could have decades of happiness with Hermione.

It was a cloudburst of pelting rain that woke them up, after they'd drifted off to sleep in the hammock as they watched the stars above. Severus cast a Parapluie Charm to shield them as they ran under the cabana for shelter. It was late, and neither had any idea how long they had been asleep. They packed away everything from their day trip, with the canvas-covered cabana packed last before they Apparated home.

Severus set the various items they collected away in his lab. Meanwhile, Hermione lit a few candles and began working on her scrolls for Albert, while everything was still fresh in her mind, including drawing a diagram of a sea urchin.

Kissing the top of her head, Severus said, "Don't stay up too late. Come to bed soon."

Hermione pressed her cheek against the back of his hand that was resting on her shoulder. "As soon as I've finished," she assured him. She smiled, knowing that if Severus was still her professor and she just a young student at Hogwarts, he would have demanded she stay up as late as necessary to
properly finish her work, giving no pity regarding the late hour.

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"Yes, yes, Draco! This isn't the first time I have Portkeyed with a pregnant witch. I know what to do," Hermione said with great exasperation.

"But she's extra pregnant," Draco fretted.

"Versus a little bit pregnant?" Ginny ribbed her husband. "You are or you aren't. Besides, I'm not completely disabled, I can still walk."

Hermione placed a reassuring hand on Draco's arm that he could let go of his wife and let the two witches Portkey over to Honolulu for the day. "Don't worry, I will take very good care of her."

Halulu, who was one month further along than Ginny, chuckled to herself and rolled her eyes as she guided Hermione and Ginny over to the Portkey area. Shaking her head, she said, "Well, at least he cares enough to fret like a mother Kneazel."

Once the two witches Portkeyed away, Severus clapped a hand on Draco's shoulder. "How about a drink? I think you need it to calm your nerves."

Hermione and Ginny arrived in the Honolulu Portkey office, ready for a day of shopping and a long leisurely lunch between old friends.

Since it was almost lunch time, they decided to take a "Wiz-ped-cab." It looked just like the Muggle pedicabs that ferried people about the main drag of Kalakaua Avenue in the heart of Waikiki Beach, but it traveled much faster and took witches and wizards all over the island.

Stepping into the Wiz-ped-cab, Ginny asked, "Where do you recommend for lunch?"

The young wizard, who helped Ginny up, asked, "Muggle or wizard?" knowing that sometimes the tourists liked to be daring and mingle with the Muggles for a thrill.

"Oh, let's try wizard," Hermione suggested, knowing that once she moved to Hawaii, she and Ginny could try a Muggle one next time.
The wizard hopped on the bicycle attached to the front of the open-air cab and began peddling faster and faster, but the Wiz-ped-cab was going nowhere, despite the rapid speed in which his feet went around and around. Eventually, the wizard flipped a lever that looked like a bicycle gear control, and suddenly the Wiz-ped-cab lurched forward.

They were zipping through the streets of Honolulu so fast, they were observed by Muggles as nothing more than a gust of ocean breeze that ruffled the dresses of those it passed close by or dislodged the occasional Muggle's hat. As they approached their destination, the cab slowed down quickly to the point where it looked like any other pedicab delivering passengers to another restaurant. Though if the Muggles had noticed this particular pedicab, they would have asked how one made it high up onto the slopes of the mountains above Honolulu while towing passengers.

Hermione paid the driver, who gave him his card if they needed another ride when they were done with lunch.

Once seated for lunch at the Rikki Tikki Tavern, the two witches looked out at the expansive view from high up on the hillside of Honolulu and Waikiki Beach laid out before them, with Diamond Head in the far distance.

With a deep sigh, Hermione drank in the vista and said, "It's going to be hard to go back to London after a week in paradise."

"It's going to be hard on me. Just when I get my best friend back, you're gone again." Ginny gave a faltering smile as she rubbed her stomach absentmindedly.

"It's been almost surreal here. Like some wonderful dream I fear I'll wake up from, and I'll find myself back in my bed back in London, alone and hornier than ever," Hermione growled.

"Um, would you like to start off with some drinks?" the young wizard asked as he poured a couple glasses of water for the witches, his face a brilliant scarlet.

Hermione hid her face behind her hand, ducking her head down, embarrassed that that particular part of their conversation had been overheard.

"Yes, please," Ginny said brightly, trying not to laugh. "Can I get a half coconut water, half pineapple juice, with a splash of pumpkin juice for myself, and a Dragontini for my friend."
Once the young wizard was gone, Ginny laughed aloud. Hermione also eventually found humor in the incident and lightly chuckled at herself.

"So," Ginny began, her brows raised with amusement, "Severus had been looking progressively more happy and progressively more worn out as the week has gone on."

Hermione could not stop the broad grin from spreading across her face. "That makes two of us. If it wasn't for having to stop to do work for Lavender and Albert, I think I would have literally worn Severus down to a nub, and killed him with exhaustion after shagging him to death."

"Your drinks, Ma'am," the wizard squeaked, his voice cracking. His face was now even a more vivid shade of red, if that was possible.

Hermione didn't even look the flustered wizard in the eye, snatching the drink and taking a long sip to avoid looking at him. It was Ginny who thanked him, snorting as she tried not to burst into further whoops of laughter.

"I keep forgetting that I'm in public sometimes, and I can't speak so freely," Hermione said under her breath. "Ever since I won Severus and Draco their freedom, I can hardly walk down Diagon Alley without getting some sneer or disparaging comment cast my way."

"Yeah, when Draco and I were walking about shopping back in August, I did catch a few dirty glances thrown my way, but Draco would catch their eye and glare at them, and they'd shuffle off," Ginny volunteered. "We mostly stayed either at Malfoy Manor or Ron and Lavender's place, dealing mostly only with family and close friends. With my condition, Draco didn't want me out in public much to get hit with a revenge hex."

"I can certainly understand. After I divorced Ron, I had a mix of people either cursing at me or shaking my hand in thanks, but once winning their exoneration, I've had one or two close calls where people nearly pulled their wand on me. There were some Howlers too, two from Padma even. I swear, I only ever Floo between my flat, work, and Albert's place, and the monthly Potion masters' booze-up. At least the Potion masters and mistresses there have my back and support me."

Hermione drained the last of her drink as she tipped the glass up, thinking maybe she should order a second one since she could barely feel the effects of the alcohol. "Now I can certainly empathize with Severus and Draco, and why they always skulked in full cloaks early in the morning before anyone is hardly up. And that time I saw Severus at Flourish and Blotts late one night, his hood was pulled up when I thought he was still Calleo. It seems the only time I do go out in public is to Flourish and Blotts, and that's shortly before they close and with my hood up completely as well."
Hermione waved at their waiter to bring over another drink. A second drink in her mitts, they finally ordered lunch.

Relaxing on the back porch of Chez Malfoy, after a couple of bowls of Vietnamese pho from Flo & Eddie's, Draco leaned forward to refill Severus' glass.

"So have you shown her the hot springs yet? Or have you both been so preoccupied you've forgotten?" Draco asked as he drained the last of the Ogden's Finest Quadruple Distilled Single Malt into his own glass. He had been saving the bottle for a special occasion since he brought it back in August, and this was as good as any time to kill it. Besides, it had been over a year since they had a proper booze-up.

"We went this morning for a sunrise soak, since Katrina woke us up before dawn." Severus yawned. "Pardon."

Draco waved it off, having been in Severus' shoes before: blissfully worn out from lots of sex.

Severus lifted his glass and took a sip, his limbs feeling quite heavy. "She had wanted to see the place there in daylight, after I took her there Friday night after dinner at Mario's." There was a long pause as Severus tried to remember what his next train of thought was; he was feeling quite listless and devoid of tension since he was on his fifth glass. "I proposed to her there on Christmas Eve, and though she said yes in a round-about way, she was quite frantic in her explanation of why we couldn't sooner as opposed to later."

"After the way that Molly terrorized and harangued Ginny and Hermione with wedding preparations, can you blame them? Even you said yourself that the night before her wedding to Weasley, you remembered what a harried mess she was, breaking down into tears once you gave her your honest answer to what you thought about her marrying Ron," he reminded his mentor.

Severus merely nodded to himself.
"Besides," Draco went on, "you know what an overachieving perfectionist she is," then stopped himself and added, "and I mean that in the most complimentary manner in that she's a witch who seeks to excel in everything she undertakes, which is why she is perfect for you. Matched bookends, you two are." Tilting his head back to enjoy the beautiful canopy of the tree above their heads that was shielding them from the sun, he added, "If I might be so bold, why not – when she is done with her apprenticeship, and the business is up and going and I can run it for a few weeks – elope with her?"

Severus rubbed the side of his face, which was feeling a little numb from the very fine and potent spirits he had been drinking. "Elope?"

Hermione did rave on about all the plans that would be made to have a wedding and all the hassle that would entail. Perhaps eloping with her would save her from all the bother and stress. With the Malfoys' own wedding, Ginny only had to make arrangements for the rings, a dress, flowers, and a brief meeting with Mouna where she and Draco discussed the ceremony. Draco had arranged the reception at Mario's originally, which the town subverted with the secret wedding luau feast.

Both Hermione and Severus had gone through the full traditional English wizard wedding, both marriages ending in their own ways disastrously, and nobody happy with their spouses. Perhaps bucking convention by eloping would be the best thing for Hermione's sanity and thereby his as well. He loved Hermione, but he didn't think he could stand weeks of Hermione putting herself into a tizzy over a ceremony that lasted at most twenty minutes.

But even with eloping, that would mean he would have to schedule that any commissions he was working on were not burning while he was on his honeymoon. While it seemed grand to go off at the last minute spontaneously, he knew it would not be possible. Besides, Hermione would have to have Draco trained on running the business before they left, and that meant arranging things beforehand. But Severus could insist that they keep it as simple as possible, much in the same way the Malfoys had done.

Standing next to the curb, Hermione put her hand out and made the Shaka sign, a common hand gesture on the Hawaiian islands among Muggles and wizards alike. A few back on Malu Palekaiko had even waved at Severus using the odd gesture.

The Wiz-ped-cab – peddled by the same young wizard as before – came up curbside, Summoned by the hand gesture. "Ah, and how was lunch, ladies?"
"Excellent, thank you for the recommendation," Hermione said as she and the wizard helped Ginny up into the cab. Following Ginny, she hopped up herself, surprised she barely could feel the alcohol of the three drinks she'd sucked down during lunch.

"Where to now?" their driver and escort asked.

"I need to go shopping for some Muggle knives. Do you know any high-end cutlery stores?"

"Don't tell me you're going shopping for Potions equipment while on holiday," Ginny whined with exasperation as the Wiz-ped-cab zoomed off again.

"No, I'm going birthday shopping for Severus," Hermione retorted, leaning sideways and propping up Ginny with one hand as the Wiz-ped-cab made a sharp left turn.

"Only between two Potions boffins would the exchange of knives be considered an acceptable gift. I've heard the joke about the wizard who gave his wife knives and regretted it later," Ginny warned sarcastically. The Wiz-ped-cab driver was listening in on the conversation and started laughing, having heard that joke too.

"Well, I'm at a loss as to what else I can get him since his personal lab is outfitted with everything possible." Hermione harrumphed, wishing she could get something a bit more romantic than a fancy set of knives for Severus, but knowing he would still appreciate them.

As they pulled up to the large Muggle shopping center, the wizard directed them to a cookware store that would probably have what they were looking for. They found the store easily enough, especially since the name of the store was in large gold letters above the entrance.

Upon entering the store, Hermione was accosted by a floor salesperson wearing an apron, who offered to help her find anything.

"Yes, do you have ceramic knives?" Hermione asked politely.

"Oh, yes. Please follow me," the saleswoman indicated with a sweep of her arm.
"Ceramic? They make knives out of pottery now?" Ginny asked.

"No. It's these special knives from Japan. They bake a ceramic coating on the outside of the blade. They're harder than even the best steel, and supposedly require sharpening far less often, if at all. My parents just bought a set, and I tried them out while helping my mum make Christmas dinner the weekend before I came here. I was very impressed. Only thing better is Goblin steel, and they only make swords and daggers, not knives suitable for our type of work." Hermione knew better than to commission a Goblin to make knives for Potions work, knowing they would consider it beneath themselves for such a task, no matter how many Galleons you offered them.

The Muggle sales associate tamped down a giggle, listening to the one woman ramble on about Goblin steel. No doubt this was one of those Dungeon & Dragons live role-playing nerds she had seen in the parks on weekends, playing about with their foam shields and bamboo katanas.

Ginny nodded, duly impressed that Muggles could make anything as good as what was commonly available for the wizarding population.

The two witches listened to the saleswoman ramble on with her marketing jargon and speak about the excellence of each blade and so on. Hermione could spot advertising fodder from a mile away, especially since her Aunt Christine was the specialist in marketing bullshit.

"That's all well and good, but may I try them before deciding?" Hermione asked, trying to cut to the chase. She wanted her decision to be based upon performance, not fancy adjectives pulled from an advertising hack's favorite thesaurus.

"Um..." The salesperson looked a bit lost. She had never been asked if a customer could try knives personally, even though the knives were displayed next to a nice butcher block cutting counter area that seemingly invited Hermione to give her knife skills a whirl.

"Look. There is a perfectly good cantaloupe. Bring it over here." Hermione instructed the hesitant clerk, looking over at the decorative fresh fruit display meant to show off a tall glass footed centerpiece bowl that was for sale. "I intend to purchase one of these sets, but until I can test them I can't decide which would be the best set to suit my needs."

"Okay, but let me talk to my manager first," she hemmed and hawed.
As she shuffled off, Hermione turned back to Ginny. "So, Severus wants to try Polyjuice Potion tonight. He says he got the idea after you and Draco in the honeymoon suite declined to go flying that time. Got any advice you can impart?"

Turning a very vivid shade of red, Ginny said, "Well, I didn't think he picked up on that, but I guess he did."

Ginny's back was beginning to kill her with this standing around. She would have conjured a chair, but they were out amongst the Muggles and she could not indulge in such instant gratification of her needs. Looking at another sales associate who was wandering about, she asked, "Can I get a chair to sit on while we wait for the manager?" She leaned over the butcher block table, pressing one hand to her back to add extra emphasis.

Turning back to Hermione, she advised, "For the fact you're both working with equipment neither of you are familiar with operating, start off like a novice. No fancy positions, start with the basics. Oh, and take a breath mint before you start kissing. Kissing someone with Polyjuice breath is almost as disgusting as swilling it." She stopped talking and thanked the woman who brought her a chair before continuing on. "And make sure he takes the lubrication potion after turning into you. For some reason, when my hair sample was snipped while under the potions effects, it didn't transfer to Draco very well, and he had to take another dose of the lubrication for it to properly work."

"Did you try a dose of Sequoia after you transformed?" asked, now really curious from an academic standpoint of the effect of potion effectiveness to transfer between bodies using Polyjuice Potion.

"Oh, yes," Ginny sighed dreamily, recalling that afternoon fondly. Hermione didn't have to ask how well it worked, based on the look on Ginny's face.

"And Draco tried the Sequoia, then you tried the Polyjuice using fresh samples?"

"Yes, but once again, not as potent. Almost negligible." Ginny stopped her line of conversation after noticing the manager mincing over towards the pair, an overly bright smile on her face.
Polishing off the last of the rum, Draco said, "Wow. Can Ginny and I book an afternoon with your Pensieve? After the children are born, of course."

Severus waved his hand, indicating that he would be as accommodating as possible. "Just ask, and I'll make myself scarce for however long you need. It's the least I can do after you conspired to bring Hermione here." Severus stared into his glass while trying to recall if he was drinking rum or bourbon, and wondering what else Draco had in his liquor cabinet. "Best fucking Christmas present ever," he said with a lopsided smile, gazing off into the distance.

"You have been fucking your Christmas present," Draco noted with a snort.

Severus was in such a good mood, even he laughed at Draco's observation of his Freudian slip. Also, it helped he hadn't been this drunk in a long time. For once he wasn't drinking to forget his troubles, but rather celebrating how good life was, a first.

"How many times have you used the Pensieve so far?" Draco asked.

"Three times. Speaking of unique experiences, I've noticed that you stopped commissioning me for Polyjuice since Ginny has been pregnant," Severus finally remembered.

"Well, I didn't feel like being the third wizard in recorded history to go through a male-pregnancy. So we stuck to days before we predicted Ginny would be ovulating. A prudent way to avoid complications."

"Yes, quite," Severus agreed. Too drunk for either of them to get up, Severus used a Summoning Charm to retrieve the bottle of pear brandy.

"Ooh, brandy," Draco said longingly, forgetting he had bought some when he was in England. "Which reminds me, have you used the Fairy Brandy yet?"

"No. Though when we do, I may have to cast a reinforcement charm on the bed beforehand."

Draco nodded in agreement. “Definitely. With that bottle you gave us, along with the fresh passion fruit juice, I swear..." He gave a hearty groan implying he was quite put out by the end of the Fairy Brandy's influence.
Exiting the store with bags in hand, and everything gift-wrapped, Hermione shook her head. "You'd think they'd never seen anyone competent with a knife wield one before."

"'Are you a sushi master?' That was a good one," Ginny said with an amused snort. "But, you having an audience of fifteen Muggles oohing and ahhing as you sliced that cantaloupe into pieces so thin you could read a paper through it – while even I'm impressed, it's not like I didn't believe it was possible. Then all those Muggles clamoring to buy sets of their own after watching you use those knives. Sometimes it amazes me that Muggles can dream up such fantastical things like space travel and go all the way to the moon, yet couldn't believe you could do that with just a knife."

Hermione silently agreed with Ginny, nodding her head as they continued walking through the mall to window-shop a bit before taking the Wiz-ped-cab back to the Honolulu Portkey office.

Arriving back at the Malu Palekaiko Portkey office, they stopped to chat with Halulu a bit, recommending the restaurant they went to and giving Halulu a brief description of shopping at the Muggle shopping mall. No doubt the island's witches were in need of a fresh infusion of more gossip on the island; the tale of Hermione thrilling the Muggles with her knife skills would be passed around quickly.

With their bags dropped off in the living room, Hermione followed Ginny into the kitchen. It was as the two witches were grabbing something cold to drink when they heard something strange. Well, to Hermione is sounded strange since she had never heard it before.

Opening the back door, they spotted Draco and Severus, each slumped into their respective chairs, drunk off their arses and laughing uncontrollably. It was a rather foreign sound to Ginny as well.

Draco spotted his wife, but only after he put a hand over one eye so he only saw one of her. He waved. "Oh, hi, darling. You're home!"

For some reason, the two wizards both found the phrase amusing and both began laughing again.
Severus nearly fell out of his chair as he tried to turn around to spy Hermione, who was behind him. "Oh... Hey..." For a second, he almost forgot her name, then suddenly remembered. Severus was so far gone, he nearly had trouble remembering his own name. "Ermio-me, yeah, that's it."

Draco found this amusing as well and started laughing once more.

Hermione turned to look at Ginny, asking, "Is this a weekly occurrence?"

Ginny shook her head. "First time since we've been here they've done this. Not even after their yearly Victory Day sorrow drownings have I ever seen them this pissed. Nor this silly. What the hell did they drink?"

Severus and Draco both found this funny as well. They laughed so hard, both of them slid out of their chairs and laid sprawled out on the deck, on their backs, unable to move as the world spun about them.

Hermione looked at the number of bottles that were empty and divided that by the number of hours they were gone. She wondered if Rainbow had ever treated a wizard for alcohol poisoning or did a liver transplant before. Hermione was amazed at the amount of alcohol consumed, even when compared to what the other Potions masters drank at their monthly booze-ups.

Speaking out of the side of her mouth quietly enough so that only Ginny could hear, she advised from personal experience, "If you love him, give him the Hangover Relief Potion before you give him any Sobering Solution. That is, if you want to sober him up. Or you can just put him to bed with a bucket and let him enjoy it. And make sure the Hangover Relief is within arm's reach when he wakes."

Draco was oblivious to Ginny using a Mobilicorpus Spell to move him to the bedroom. Severus was not quite so oblivious, but he did think it was pretty darn amusing watching Draco float about, bobbing in mid-air. It was as Hermione lifted his body she noticed the half-finished bottle of Cheery's High Spirits Spirits. No doubt whoever Summoned that bottle didn't notice what they had. For the fact it wasn't the only bottle polished off explained that Severus and Draco were probably in the middle of drinking it when they came back home. No doubt they would have been even more far gone had they finished off the whole thing.

Ginny suggested Hermione use the Floo, but as Severus had locked the Floo back home and she couldn't get Severus to stop laughing when she asked him how to unlock it, she decided to Side-Along Apparate home with Severus instead.
As Hermione and Severus landed in the living room, that was the impetus for Severus to empty his stomach contents all over the floor. Hermione patiently held his hair back until he was done, conjuring a bucket for him in the middle of his ordeal. Once done, she went to his lab for the requisite potions to restore him back towards his sober and less giggly self.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to be talented, patient and hard working betas, JuneW and thegreyladies.

Hale is Hawaiian for home.
Ho'opika is Hawaiian for hospitality.

"A boffin is pretty much anyone who is into science in quite an intense way and carries this intensity as a defining characteristic of their personality. Professor Stephen Hawking is a boffin. David Attenborough is a boffin. Sheldon from The Big Bang Theory, when he’s not dressed in his Flash costume, is a boffin as much as he is a nerd. Mad professors are boffins. The Doctor is a boffin. He’s not a nerd though, and clearly, by Time Lord standards, he’s nowhere near being a swot. Far too wayward for that."
The Hangover Relief Potion and Sobering Solution had already taken effect, but that didn't stop Severus from holding his head in his hands as he sat at the kitchen table while Hermione made him a cup of weak tea.
Severus was mortified he had been unable to stomach Apparating home, and in front of Hermione. He groaned once more, his pride hurting more than his head.

"I told you not to worry, Severus. You said yourself that you haven't been drinking nearly as much as you used to, and your tolerance is now lower than what it was back in England." Hermione gave him a very gentle kiss upon the top of his head as she placed his tea in front of him.

"Yes, but as a Potions master, I am supposed to maintain my tolerance. I haven't done that since I was an apprentice," he grumbled, sounding a bit petulant.

Standing there beside him with her hands on her hips, Hermione stared down at him with empathy as he was reluctant to meet her eye. "Looking at the number of bottles that were empty, I don't think even Niles or Royston could have kept up with what you two put away this afternoon. And if you're going to go on a bender, at least be aware of what you're Summoning from the bar. You two downed over half a bottle of Cheery's High Spirits Spirits, giggling like a couple of fourth-year witches on Valentine's Day."

"Merlin, kill me now," he muttered under his breath. No doubt, Draco Summoned that bottle, and it was his own fault he'd accepted whatever Draco was pouring without reading the label.

"No. Killing you would put you out of your misery," she gently teased him as she rubbed his shoulder in an act of solidarity. "You'll survive." Hermione had survived enough humiliating binges of her own when her tolerance was lower, Severus would survive this as well.

"Why don't you finish your tea and go have a lie-down," she suggested in a kind, motherly tone. "I'll fix dinner tonight. Zhubanysh taught me how to make beshbarmack, which she assured me had helped her brothers and cousins after drinking far too much kumis."

Severus' stomach churned at the thought of that alcoholic drink made from unpasteurized fermented mare's milk. Fortunately for him, there was nothing left in his stomach.

Once Hermione tucked him into bed, she headed off to the store for a few ingredients that weren't already stocked in the kitchen.

Severus stirred from his nap due to the gentle stroking of Hermione's fingertip along his brow. She was singing to him in a language that sounded similar to Turkish, but he could not understand.
He laid there unmoving except to blink, watching her with rapt attention as she sang. He had realized he had never heard her sing before. Her voice, while not the most beautiful, was sweet, even when it wavered as she sang in a near-whisper. In the light of a single candle, she looked like an angel as she gazed down at him. He wondered if it was an after-affect of drinking so much, but there seemed to be a faint halo about her head.

Smiling, she continued to sing her lullaby while stroking his brow and cheek with the lightest of touches.

"Жаным эзунду абайла.
Учкан куштай too ашыйп,
Тынчсыз ойлор кайып болсун,
Алыс алыс жайларга.

Менин сүйүүм мөл булаг,
Тоо аралап ағылгапан,
Жан дуйнөндү сугарып,
Жүрөгүндү даарылап.

Көкурөктө соккон жсүрөк,
Кулақ салсан сага айтат,
Сени коргоит санаанан,
Сага арналган маҳабат."

Severus was speechless; he continued to stare up at her dumbfounded by this moment of extreme tenderness.

Hermione suddenly became self-conscious, now that Severus was finally awake and watching her intently. She stopped singing to turn her face away from his scrutiny as if she was blushing.

To fill the awkward silence, Hermione said, as she stared at the pattern in the wood floor, "When Harry came back to England from Hawaii, that day after you left, I had never seen him so angry at me. I had also never seen him so broken. I had helped Ginny leave him, and he felt betrayed by those closest to him." Hermione paused, wondering if Severus had heard the tale. Figuring how much he disliked Harry, Ginny and Draco probably never told Severus the tale of how Harry met Zhubanysh. "So he took off on a transcontinental broom race without telling anyone. Somewhere along the Pamir Pass in the middle of the night, Harry fell off his broom. They don't know if it was due to the freezing night temperatures, thin oxygen from the high altitude, the snowstorm, lack of sleep during the race, or all of those factors, but in the morning he was found by another racer.\"
unconscious in the snow."

Hermione turned to look at Severus to gauge his reaction, but he continued to just stare at her. "He was taken to a nearby yurt where Zhubanyaksh was living with her family. I don't know if Ginny or Draco told you much about her, but she comes from a nomadic wizarding tribe from that area. Zhubanyaksh nursed Harry back to health. She claims it was the good horse broth she made that helped bring him back and restored his health, and Kingsley's healing knowledge. But I think it was the songs she sang to him as he lay there unconscious, by the way Harry tells it. Horse broth and basic healing spells can't mend a broken heart." She smiled to herself, her focus drifting to the candle that flickered on the bedside table as she continued her tale.

"When Harry finished his recovery and came back, he invited me over and introduced Zhubanyaksh as his wife. I was shocked. I wondered how Harry, who was so..." she paused momentarily, choking up upon recalling the memory, "... so broken after Ginny left, could so easily fall in love with a new wife and marry her so quickly, but after my own... After the attack, I could understand how Harry could fall in love with her so completely. I was waking up every night screaming, and I found the only way I could go to sleep and not wake up in tears and cold sweats was if Zhubanyaksh would come over at night and sing to me when I went to bed. She sang that song to me practically every night for almost two months before I could sleep without her nightly lullabies. That was one she sang to me every night."

Hermione didn't know what else to say, feeling Severus' eyes so singularly focused upon her and so still.

"It was lovely," he said in a soft whisper. "What language is it?"

"Kyrgyz. She even taught me the translation:

"Rest my sweet one
   Let your troubled thoughts fly away
   Like birds over the mountain pass
   Carried far, far away

My love is a mountain
   From it a spring cascades
   To feed the valley of your soul
   And water the pastures of your heart

Rest your head upon my chest
   Hear my heart beat
   It speaks of love to keep you safe
   Rest my sweet one."
Hermione stroked Severus' face once more and saw his eyes shutter close briefly, as he reveled in her gentle touch. "If you do ever come back to England, I hope you'll meet Zhubanysh. She calls me 'sister.' She is very sweet."

Severus finally stirred, moving his hand to stroke the back of Hermione's hand that was currently resting on his chest. "I'm glad she has been there to help soothe your mind when I could not be there for you," he said with some regret. It did not escape Severus' attention that Hermione had slept peacefully every night since arriving at their home Friday.

"It's okay. I understand," was all Hermione said, implying so much with that simple phrase. Changing the topic to avoid thinking about how Severus would not be in bed with her come next week, she asked, "How are you feeling now? Are you able to eat dinner? It's ready."

Severus sat up fearing he would feel like hell, despite the potions he took earlier that never countered all the after-effects of drinking so heavily. But when he sat up, he felt fine. In fact he felt quite wonderful. Maybe it was Zhubanysh's magical lullaby that Hermione sang to him that made him feel whole and rested, but he wasn't certain. Maybe purging all that alcohol out of his system did the trick, but he didn't want to repeat that experience again to confirm or refute that theory.

"Dinner sounds splendid."

Hermione conjured a rug for the middle of the floor, with the Chinese wok filled with the beef-and-noodle dish sitting in the center. On the rug around the wok, there were cushions on which to sit while they sat on the floor and ate the beshbarmack Hermione had prepared, following Zhubanysh's recipe. This is how Hermione always enjoyed it while eating it over at the Potters' house, so she continued the tradition over in Hawaii in her new home as well.

As Severus licked his fingers clean, since it was a dish eaten with one's hands, Hermione asked, "Are you still up for trying the Polyjuice Potion tonight or shall we wait until tomorrow night, if you're not rested enough?"

Severus gave her a mischievous smile. "Feeling nervous?"

"Aren't I the one who is supposed to ask you that? This will be your first time as a woman to experience intercourse," she reminded him.

"Yes, but I've practiced with fingers."
"Fingers are not the same, I promise you that. Were they the same, I would not have made good use of the samples the twins gave me since you left, and even then, it is a poor substitute for the real thing. Especially you." She reached across the rug and squeezed Severus' hand.

Both of them stood there nude in the bedroom, holding their cups of Polyjuice Potion. Hermione was a bit nervous, since her first experience drinking it had resulted in her spending a great deal of time in the infirmary while Severus brewed a counter-potion to her half-feline state. Even he had been gracious enough not to bring up that embarrassing schoolgirl episode during their adult relationship.

After placing a hair from each other's heads into their respective goblets, they drank. They watched each other with fascination as they changed, as if watching a vision of someone else morph into a mirror reflection.

For Hermione, being so much taller was quite strange, as it gave her a slightly new perspective of the world. And what's more, Severus, now transformed into her, looked positively tiny by comparison when she was used to a lover so much taller and bigger than herself.

Severus was having his own existential experience, seeing his own body from outside his own. When Hermione smiled broadly, it startled him to see his own visage grin – and so unreservedly – while she was sheathed in his image.

With a tentative hand, Hermione reached out and stroked his arm, noting how much larger her hands were now.

Looking up at her, Severus remarked, "My God, I didn't realize how much larger I am than you." In his current smaller form, he felt more vulnerable and was in awe of the reversal of size, being used to being always taller and larger between the two. Now the roles were reversed and he found it a bit overwhelming as if he was Alice in Wonderland and had drank something he shouldn't have.

Hermione walked up to Severus and gently put her arms around him, similar to when he would
wrap his arms about her. "Yes, but I find that I like you larger than me. I feel protected in your arms when you hold me, and nothing in this world can harm me when I'm enfolded within them."

Severus leaned into Hermione's chest, feeling the hard planes of it beneath his cheek. Yes, he could see the appeal of it, feeling as if he was a small child wrapped up in a parent's arms, but different. Slowly, his arms wrapped about Hermione and stroked her back, feeling the muscles beneath his palms.

Gingerly, Hermione stroked Severus' hair, seeing the pattern of swirls and waves atop his now bushy brown crown. Comparing sensations, she noticed how much softer Severus' skin was now in contrast to the masculine skin she now sported. She could understand how Severus would murmur how he loved the softness of her skin, now that she could feel for herself, using Severus' senses in this other body.

As much as Severus was initially aroused by the idea of switching places, now he found himself unsure how to proceed. He was even a bit intimidated, having to get used to feeling so small, now that there was another body in which he was in close proximity to. Size did not matter in terms of a witch or wizard being able to defend themselves with a wand, but something in the primal part of his brain let him know he was more physically helpless. He may now inhabit the form of a woman, but his mind and psyche were still those of a man's mindset. Now being smaller and weaker was quite unsettling to him, even knowing Hermione would never hurt him. He was feeling uniquely vulnerable.

Hermione was having her own mental adjustments to deal with. She was afraid of breaking Severus, as if he were now made of delicate china. Of course, in their regular forms Severus had used a firm grip on her while making love to her or snogging her senselessly, but now she understood the instinctual need to tread more lighter than before.

Stroking his face, she tipped his chin up. "Are you all right?" she asked, noting how quiet Severus was and not initiating much beyond hugging her back.

Severus nodded. "Yes, just getting used to this rather new perspective." She'd never told him how his chest hair tickled her much smaller nose.

Hermione kissed his forehead tenderly, willing to go slowly. She now understood why Ginny said to take things at a novice pace. While Hermione was not sexually attracted to women, she had to remind herself that this was still Severus beneath this softer form in her own image. They had both wanted to experience what it was like to be together from the other's perspective and to know what it felt like to make love.
She initiated the seduction, since it was Severus who had slowly seduced her with his soft and arousing touches that slowly broke down her walls and wended his way into her heart.

Severus closed his eyes, feeling the scratching of his beard and mustache against his forehead, cheeks and eye lids, wondering how Hermione could stand the feeling of rough hair scraping against her tender skin so much. But despite the beard distracting him, he felt Hermione's warm breath caress his face as soft kisses were pressed against his skin. Her hand stroked his cheek lovingly. He felt his heart begin to beat faster and his breaths become more rapid and shallow. His head was feeling just a little bit dizzy when she finally stopped.

Hermione pulled her face away from his and asked softly in a low rumble, "Was that all right?"

He could now understand how Hermione talked about how he could seduce her with his voice alone. It was deep, and – with Hermione's own cadence and inflections – reassuring and warm. "Yes," he breathed.

Turning his face up, he returned her affections, kissing along her neck and cheek, twining his arms up around her neck as she had done many a time, and playing with her hair. He began raking his manicured nails along the base of her scalp. He was pleased for his efforts when she sighed and tipped her head back, humming almost as if she were a cat purring contently with a good scratch behind the ears.

Hermione enjoyed the reciprocation, wishing that back in her natural state her hair would not tangle so easily in Severus' fingers. Then he could play with her hair in the same manner as he currently was.

Smiling, she turned her face back to look at Severus and examined her own face from an outside perspective. She could see the small dark mole at the edge of her jaw that Severus now sported, the various shades of brown in her eyes ranging from amber to chocolate, the arch of her own brow (noting she should pluck her eyebrows yet once again), the slope her nose, and the shape of her lips as Severus smiled softly up at her.

Hermione didn't know why, but she had to kiss Severus suddenly, with a swift passion. If anything, she wanted him to feel how it was to be swept away and lose track of time with one of his kisses.

Tightening her one arm around Severus, her other hand cradled Severus' jaw and tipped his face up. She claimed his mouth with a firm kiss, seeking permission to enter his mouth with her tongue.

It wasn't that Hermione had never initiated intimacies before with such a possessive kiss, but now
that she was in his larger and stronger form, he could understand how she would swoon in the moment and talk about surrendering to him so willingly. He parted his lips and gave her permission with a teasing swipe of his tongue against hers, before her tongue entered his mouth with the growing passion that was matching the erection that was now growing between her legs.

Severus let one hand slide down her hard, flat chest. His touch skimmed along her stomach, grazing the soft ebony down until his hand gently took her now semi-erect length in his hand.

Just the sensation of Severus' hand on her length made her very suddenly aware of the spare appendage she now had, and how very damn good it felt for Severus to be touching her. Just the fact of Severus touching her made it very hard, quite suddenly.

Tearing her mouth away from his suddenly, she gasped, "Oh, fuck."

Severus smiled smugly, now glad that Hermione finally understood how his own body would react to her touch so urgently. "Yes, we'll get around to that in a little bit. But as we agreed, let's take it slowly at first."

Hermione was about to say something, but then stopped and then went to the bedside table, fetching something in the process. "Here, a breath mint. For each of us."

Severus gladly took one and popped it into his mouth. "That's fortuitous of you to think of that."

"Actually," Hermione confessed, taking Severus back into her arms once more as she sucked on her mint, "Ginny recommended them."

"You mentioned what we were going to do to Ginny?" Severus asked, a bit irritated Hermione had said anything to her friend.

"Well, they know you know about their own use of Polyjuice, so I asked for a few tips, should they prove useful."

"Which were?" he prompted her.
"Use breath mints and go slowly as if we were beginners, since we'll be using equipment neither of us are used to. And that was it," she answered him, talking around the mint in her mouth.

"Wise words, I must admit," he conceded. He was now not as peeved, since the breath mints idea was a splendid idea as he could taste the Polyjuice Potions still on her lips and especially her tongue when they kissed.

Hermione pulled Severus into another passionate kiss, feeling a bit more sexually aggressive now that she could bend down to capture his mouth – instead of trying to stand up upon her toes and sexually overpower him in her normal, shorter, and weaker form, if they were standing up. It was much easier to attack Severus with kisses if they were laying down or on the couch, but now she could scoop him up in her arms, and plant a firm kiss, pinning him for once up against the bed post.

Severus knew what she was doing, but that didn't stop him from wanting to make a game out of this, teasing her in the process. As Hermione's mouth plundered his, his hand went back down to grasp her member that had become hard once more and was pressing urgently against his stomach. Knowing all of Hermione's tricks, he began stroking her rigid cock, hearing her whimper with delight each time his hand slid down the hot shaft.

Wrenching her mouth away from Severus' again, with a strained gasp, she groaned, "Keep doing that and I will cum before we've even begun."

"And now you know how I feel," Severus said with a wicked smile.

Grabbing Severus' hands and pinning them above his head against the bedpost, like he was wont to do when he wanted to take control and slow things down or tease her mercilessly, Hermione said with a smile of her own, "What's the old trick? Think of Quidditch scores and aged Ministry officials naked?"

If Severus wanted to play this game, Hermione could as well, since she knew all the tricks Severus would use to put her into a frenzy quickly.

Keeping both of Severus' hands held above his head, Hermione held them at the wrist with one of her large hands and slid a hand down, grazing the inside of his arm until she reached his breast. Ignoring the silvery scar tissue, Hermione lightly stroked Severus' breasts. She was rewarded when Severus closed his eyes and sighed plaintively.
Hermione had played with her own breasts enough over the years so that she knew exactly what would feel good, and so she used a combination of her own and Severus' tried and true techniques. She eventually let go of Severus' wrists and began guiding him back on the bed, since it was easier than bending over to begin the next phase.

Reclining on the bed, Severus felt more at ease with the idea of Hermione and himself switching bodies. And when Hermione's mouth finally latched onto one of Severus' nipples, he closed his eyes shut and gently cradled Hermione's head against his chest as her mouth and fingers went to work on him. As much as Severus normally appreciated Hermione's attention to his nipples in his male form, he could definitely feel the difference in sensation from a female's perspective. No wonder Hermione praised him so earnestly on his attention to her breasts. Even now, he could feel the pull of sensation that went straight from his nipples down to that core now inside of him, low in his abdomen, more so than as a man.

Hermione wanted to press her now raging erection up along Severus' thigh and rock against it for some sensation of friction. However, she did not, for fear she would orgasm all too quickly, and all over Severus' leg like some over-eager teenage boy in a broom closet back at Hogwarts. But for Hermione, this was all so new, and for all intents and purposes, she was like a teenager by experiencing these physical sensations and urges for the first time.

Knowing that as a woman, it took much longer to arouse her than a man, and she wanted Severus to enjoy this instead of feeling the deep disappointment of it all ending so quickly like she had for years with Ron. So she decided to take the next step. Granted, there was the Sequoia potion she could take to give her an erection that would last for two hours, but they had decided to delay using that and try it naturally the first time, though Severus would take the Lubrication Potion so he would not have to experience the discomfort of dryness during intercourse.

Hermione's mouth began languidly trailing down Severus' stomach, her hand stroking his thigh, listening to the little gasps of pleasure, some in half surprise. Just as she came close to touching Severus between his legs, her hand skated away to caress some other part of him. It was all she could do to not laugh when she heard the brief huff of frustration when her hand was so close to brushing against Severus' labia before she trailed her fingers away. No doubt the ache between Severus' legs would begin throbbing soon, knowing how the body she was seducing would react.

Suddenly sitting up, Hermione grabbed Severus' foot and began to lick at his toes, something that had sometimes made her giggle and other times merely increased her desire, depending on her current state of mind. Taking his little toe in her mouth, she began to suck on it sensuously, running her tongue around it while looking at Severus with the same burning desire in her black eyes as when he would normally gaze upon her.

Severus watched, feeling the heat in Hermione's gaze. He returned her stare with an equally smoldering one, his eyes heavy with lust.
Inspired, Hermione trailed her tongue down the arch of Severus' foot. She was rewarded with a sudden squeal, since when she had licked Severus' arch in the past, he never found that particularly ticklish in his male form.

Severus tried to squirm away, but she had a solid grasp on his leg and foot. Fortunately, the tickling was brief and she continued on, trailing her tongue up his calf. When her tongue met the back of his knee, he melted, noting it was just as exquisite to experience that in the female form as when Hermione did it to him before.

"Oh, that does feel just as good," Severus noted aloud for Hermione's knowledge.

"I would lick your legs more often, but leg hair in the back of the throat can be annoying," Hermione confessed as to why she didn't do something more often to him herself. At least she shaved her legs earlier that day, so they were smooth for this little Polyjuice experiment.

Lying back down besides Severus, they went back to kissing. Severus snaked a leg up and over Hermione's hip and she in turn stroked Severus back, hip, and thigh with one hand.

Gently, Hermione pushed Severus onto his back and trailed a hand down to his thigh. With her other hand, she stroked the wavy tendrils away from his face while murmuring sweetly, "I want your first time to be everything mine wasn't."

"In what ways was it lacking?" Severus asked, already knowing the answer.

Hermione trailed her mouth to Severus' ear, nipping the earlobe with her lips as warm breath grazed his ear. "I want you aroused, and not nervous. I want you turned on, aching so badly, you have no reservations and can't wait to feel yourself being filled so completely."

It was not that these were foreign concepts to Severus. Hermione had often purred these words sweetly in his ear, as she licked his earlobes before, explaining how he turned her on to the point where she yearned so badly to be impaled on his cock, before climbing astride him and guiding himself into her. But now she was the one who would have to wait until he was ready and willing to accept her invading his female body.

As he mulled her words over in his mind, he felt her fingers brush against his curls and gently caress his outer labia. His body bucked and he took a sharp intake of breath, not realizing that in
this aroused state how much more sensitive that part of the body was now. With an elbow, Hermione encouraged Severus to part his legs a little wider as her fingers began to slowly finger him.

And when her fingers first stroked and glided along his clit, he grasped at her shoulder and arched his back, now knowing the difference between masturbation and someone else's hands, from Hermione's perspective. Yes, he'd understood the difference long before between masturbation and the feeling of someone else touching you for decades, but these sensations were wholly new to him despite having explored them himself while Polyjuiced as Hermione before.

Hermione knew she was proceeding at the right pace, for when her finger slipped between Severus' lips, she felt that slick wetness seeping from his entrance, even without the Lubrication Potion. Sliding her fingers along his lips, she coated her fingers before she began to stroke Severus between his lips and along his clit.

Severus closed his eyes and arched his neck as Hermione began the slow pace of rubbing him just so. He sighed and made quiet noises, indicating that she was doing it just right.

Stopping momentarily, Hermione lifted her hand up to her lips and licked Severus' essence from her fingers, noting that in Severus' body, she tasted much sweeter than when she had tasted herself before. The musk of her own taste that she was not particularly fond of tasted different, something pleasant, and she could better understand why Severus did not mind the taste of her, in the same way she did not mind the taste of Severus' cum.

With her fingers now thoroughly coated in saliva, Hermione placed them back down between Severus' legs and gently probed at his entrance, kindly seeking non-verbal permission to enter him with her fingers. Severus looked up at Hermione and nodded, parting his legs a bit wider for her.

Hermione watched as Severus' mouth went slack and his eyes shut tighter as she slipped one finger into him, slowly moving it in and out. Knowing that her body had already been stretched and accustomed to the intrusion from that week's sexual activities, she introduced a second finger. She was rewarded with an appreciative groan from Severus, who looked up at her in wonder.

When Hermione arched her fingers just so as she tried to find Severus' G-spot for the very first time, she knew she'd hit jackpot when he gasped and lurched, shouting a quick expletive at the sudden sensation of those nerves being stimulated for the very first time.

For Severus, it was like Hermione had just stroked his prostate, and he was not expecting it to feel that intense. Looking up at Hermione with a sense of intense longing, he pulled her face down
towards his and kissed her with a fierce intensity, spurring her on to keep stroking his G-spot, while her thumb began massaging his clit.

With each stroke of Hermione's fingers along that sacred spot, Severus could not hold back the growing rise in pitch and volume of his cries against her mouth. While normally not this vocal, he finally could understand why Hermione was.

Hermione mimicked the movement of her tongue with her fingers, something Severus had done to her many, many times before, building the anticipation of when his cock would finally enter her. She hoped he would respond similarly and be eager to feel her sink herself into him soon.

Pulling his mouth away from Hermione, Severus felt the heat in his lower abdomen begin to tighten more and more until a thrilling, floating euphoria swept through his body and he cried out, his back arched against the mattress and eyes shut tight. He had felt this before, when he masturbated alone Polyjuiced as Hermione, but this was far more intense and rewarding.

Hermione felt him clamp down around her fingers and could fully feel the pulsing and quivering of muscles, rippling in a pattern as if milking her fingers.

It was a short orgasm. Severus finally slumped back down against the bed, eyes gazing lazily at Hermione. She smiled down at him, stroking the hair from his face.

"And how was that?" Hermione asked, knowing what Severus' answer would be.

"Wonderful," he said, feeling a surge of energy return to him as if his first orgasm had recharged his batteries, something completely opposite of orgasming as a man, unless under the influence of the Sequoia Potion. Now he understood how Hermione would orgasm once and be ready and raring to go, as if that was just a warm-up.

"Good," she purred as she began kissing her way down his stomach once more, not stopping until she had her face squarely between his thighs. She hoped her first time at cunnilingus was going to be as deft and successful as her fingering of Severus.

After the first five minutes, Severus asked Hermione to stop for a moment. While Severus was enjoying everything she was doing to him, especially when her mouth latched onto his clit, he had to ask for a pause in the activities.
"Don't you find the beard a bit abrasive down there? I'm finding it a bit rough myself," Severus admitted.

"I'm sorry, I suppose I should be a little gentler since this is all new to you, but not for me," Hermione apologized.

Sensing that they were going to be talking for a while, Hermione climbed back up alongside Severus to entwine herself with him as they began discussing the pros and cons of Severus' beard.

"While I initially found the beard to be a bit scratchy on the skin, it is far softer than your five o'clock shadow, which was like being snogged with sandpaper, even between my legs," Hermione expounded.

Severus did remember that the few times he did not have time to shave in the evenings, Hermione did wind up having her cheeks thoroughly reddened by his scruff scraping away at her delicate skin. There was a definite pattern on her face and body where his day's rough growth scraped and abraded her. He had resigned himself to either shaving in the late afternoons only or shaving twice in one day. Even feasting between her legs she had complained about his day's growth.

"Maybe if you didn't keep it trimmed so short and let it grow out a bit longer, like another half inch, it might actually increase your beard's softness," she suggested. While Severus did not keep his beard so short as to have it look like a well-trimmed scouring pad attached to his face, he did not grow it longer and thicker like others did. It was neat and a respectable length, but should they do this again, then perhaps he should let to grow out a bit more.

Sitting up, Hermione suggested, "I have an idea since, it will be temporary for me."

"Stop laughing and hold still," Severus chastised her as he used his straight edge razor to scrape off her beard, after he helped her trim it as short as possible before shaving commenced.

Now devoid of facial hair, Hermione and Severus both noticed the very visible line demarcating where Severus' face had tanned since growing his beard last summer.

"Ginny was right, the beard does make my face more balanced," he remarked as his hand stroked the now smooth cheek Hermione now had.
"It's certainly a bit cooler without the beard," Hermione observed herself, before scooping Severus up in her arms and carrying him off to the bed like a captured princess about to be properly ravished. He didn't squeal as Hermione has done in the past, but he certainly made a noise indicating surprise.

Laying Severus back down on the bed once more, close to the edge, Hermione knelt on the floor as she placed her hands on his knees.

"Now," Hermione announced, trying to imitate the same vocal mannerisms Severus used when he was trying to do something sexual with her, but trying to inflect the academic tone into the situation as he would pretend to be disinterested, "we will have the alternate version of the experiment begin and thereby have a comparison with which to base itself upon."

Severus, sounding less authoritative with Hermione's now higher and more feminine voice, added, "A true experiment would also include the comparison to include the day's growth into the examination of this experiment, but as—" His words were cut off as Hermione dove back down between Severus' legs and began feasting on him, licking, sucking and devouring him as he had done to her so many times before.

"Oh fuck," was all Severus muttered before flopping on his back. He was enjoying Hermione putting her best efforts into making him orgasm once more by the work of her mouth alone, which she almost succeeded in doing, but not quite. Still, Severus' body was taut and thrumming with desire after Hermione brought him close to orgasm a few times.

As Severus tasted his own essence on Hermione's lips as she kissed him hungrily, he breathed, "I'm ready. I want you." He could feel the ache between his legs, pulsing in time to his own heartbeat, and he now understood that base desire to be filled.

Hermione reached across the bed and gave Severus a vial of the Lubrication Potion, and waited patiently until Severus nodded he was ready. She tenderly kissed his neck as the potion worked its magic on his body.

"How about you be on top, so it will be easier for you to control," Hermione suggested. She was afraid if she was on top in a missionary position, she might accidentally be a bit over-eager and hurt him their first time, despite her best efforts to be gentle in his male body.

Straddling Hermione, he grasped her cock and rubbed it around his entrance, spreading his wetness
around the tip to ease entry. Nervous, but still eager, Severus moved his hips and felt the head of her cock slowly pushing into him. He rose up a bit and slid back down a bit more, feeling the sensation of being spread open. Moving once more, he rose up and then further down a bit more, finally taking the head all the way in.

Severus closed his eyes and sighed, lost in the sudden glorious sensation that always sent Hermione into a frenzy whenever he first entered her.

What he didn't notice was Hermione panting frantically, though the death grip she had on his hips was becoming more apparent.

Finally, Severus rose up and impaled himself fully on Hermione and gave a strangled gasp.

Having a highly sensitive and currently engorged sexual organ suddenly being massaged by a warm, slick tunnel of flesh that seemed to clasp it too perfectly – it was just too much for Hermione.

Hermione began to unconsciously buck up from underneath, this other body knowing more than what Hermione knew what to do. By the fourth full stroke, Hermione let out a scream as she felt a match had been struck within her body that washed over her instantaneously. Her balls tightened and she sat up and held fast onto Severus, feeling the seed inside of her pumping though her and into Severus.

After she flopped back down on the bed, Severus continued to sit astride Hermione and looked down at her, a bemused smile tugging at his lips. "Well, you lasted one more stroke than I did my first time. An admirable attempt," he said wryly.

Her heart pounding as if it would leap out of her chest, Hermione was suddenly awash in sudden exhaustion. "I am so sorry for peaking too quickly, but damn. Does it always feel that fucking incredible?"

Severus leaned down and kissed her chin, as it was one of the few places on her body not suddenly coated all over with sweat. "Yes, but thinking of Quidditch scores and naked Ministry officials does help delay the sweet inevitable."

Hermione laughed heartily, and it was a rich laugh using his vocal cords. Once her laughter subsided, she suggested, "Do you want me to take the Sequoia potion and give you a proper
shagging, making you orgasm with me inside of you, since we're not going to be turning back for some time?"

Smirking, Severus crawled off of her and reached over for the box to fetch a vial of the male performance potion that would be running out about the same time as the Polyjuice. Holding the vial up, he asked, "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

Leaping forward and pinning Severus' female body to the bed, rocking her groin against Severus with a slowly returning erection, she countered, "Aren't I the one to be asking you that question? I want to make you scream as much as you make me. And it's a good thing that soothing salve is on the bedside table, as I want to shag you until you walk funny like you have done so many times to me."

Letting Hermione pluck the vial from his hands, he said, "You already make me walk funny after a long bout of fucking, I don't need to be a woman to do that."

"No, that's the walk of a worn-out man, not a woman who had ridden a broom on the wrong end all night long," she corrected him before downing the potion and feeling the effects hit her instantly.

With a slight adjustment, Hermione easily settled between Severus' thighs and slid back into him. She was able to take it much more slowly and leisurely this time, but was still overwhelmed at the feeling of having a cock and fucking her own vagina with it. Severus was urging her on as he learned to lift his legs and wrap them around her waist to open himself wider so she could go deeper.

After a few more rounds, and both getting used to the mechanics of shagging while inhabiting the body of the opposite gender, they decided to take a quick rinse-off in the shower, since Hermione had yet to enjoy the mind-blowing sensation of a good old-fashioned blowjob. And since the outdoor shower was one of Hermione's favorite new places to give Severus such favors, he decided it was as good a place as any for Hermione to have her first.

Smiling proudly, Severus wiped the pearls of white from the corner of his mouth, still kneeling before Hermione as she lay sprawled against the rock and wood of the shower enclosure as if it was the only thing holding her up.

"Oh, I have got to give you more blowjobs if they feel that good," she sighed. She also agreed that licking Severus' balls more often would also be on the "must do more" list as well.
"And that was without the prostate massage, which is similar to when I stroke your G-spot," he added as he rose and began soaping Hermione's body.

"And what do you think you might be doing more to me," Hermione asked, wondering what he took away from the evening's activities so far, her head still spinning a bit.

"A lot of everything, but especially if it arouses you to the point of that unbearable throbbing between your legs making you want to ride me like a wild witch on the wrong end of a broom all night long," he said with a humorous lilt in his voice.

Hermione gave a throaty chuckle and grabbed the soap from Severus, massaging his breasts with the bar until there was a lot of lather in her hands. She set the soap down and began playing with Severus' breasts, letting him enjoy the feeling of having his breasts played with the way he played with hers so often. His own hand grabbed Hermione's length and began stroking her, knowing the potion was still working fully when she eventually turned him around and had him brace his hands on the shower wall so she could take him from behind.

They kept it to the basics and did nothing too adventurous in terms of positions or other more advanced techniques, but that didn't meant they didn't thoroughly shag themselves rotten.

"I think I'm dead," Hermione grumbled lazily. She was barely able to focus on the ceiling in the dim light of the candles still lit.

"Yes, I think I can heartily agree with your prior assessment that a witch hasn't been thoroughly fucked unless she wants to fall asleep at badly as the wizard after sex," Severus said, the last few words changing in pitch suddenly, becoming much deeper.

Noticing the changes in their own bodies, they lay there quite still, both exhausted, as they reverted back to their natural forms.

Hermione dragged herself out of bed and forced herself to urinate to avoid a bladder infection, just in case. Sitting on the toilet, she brushed her teeth, since she didn't think she had the strength to do it while standing. Done with her hygiene needs, she stumbled back through the bedroom and collapsed into bed.

Severus was already snoring softly, so exhausted he was not even able to crawl under the covers before dropping off.
With her wand, Hermione extinguished the candles and yanked the covers out from underneath Severus' arse before they both settled into sleep, sheltered under the mosquito netting.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: As always, a round of applause to my wonderful betas, JuneW and Hope.

I found a Kyrgyzstan lullaby on Vimeo that has a similar feeling to the lullaby Zhubanysh sang to Hermione, and Hermione to Severus. While Hermione may not sing with the same sustained undulating and wavering notes, you can get a feel for the melody and tempo. Unfortunately, I do not have the English translation for this song: https://vimeo.com/120100453

Translations services for the lullaby performed by Hero Translating.
Chapter Summary

Hermione and Severus go out for drinks, where revenge is best served cold, with a twist of lime. Later, it's fantasy playtime in the tropical romantic getaway - NSFW FAN ART EMBEDDED TOWARD BOTTOM OF CHAPTER (Rated R for artistic nudity)!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter One Hundred Eight
"Dark Eyes: The Maenad and the Satyr Rejoined"

Disclaimer:
Haiku disclaimer
Rowling owns Harry Potter
I however don't

Gary tapped his wand to the blackboard and asked Severus to read the haiku poem in Japanese.

Severus read aloud:

"Onyx, this gem-black night.
Downcast, I await your return
like the morning sun, unrivaled in great likeness"

"The correct phrase is unrivaled in splendor. When you paused in the middle of the last word, you changed the meaning," Gary corrected Severus, knowing it was a common mistake to make for those learning the language.

"Splendor," Severus repeated, pronouncing it correctly a second time.
"Excellent." Turning to Hermione, he had her recite a poem from her primer. While she stumbled over the words, putting too much inflection into her accent, he corrected her as needed, pleased she was advancing through her first-level language book so quickly.

Wrapping up the morning's lesson, they decided since the next day was New Year's Eve, and they would all be going to the ball, they would forego tomorrow's lesson and pick up on the following Monday. Due to the difference in time zones, lessons would be held in the evening in Hawaii, which would be morning for Hermione, back in London.

Once Hermione and Severus saw their Sensei off, both went back to bed for a mid-morning nap, still in dire need of recuperating from the Polyjuice Potion the night before. Fortunately, Hermione and Draco didn't have to be at the builders to finalize the designs until two in the afternoon.

To fill the time, Severus took Hermione to visit Blanche Condre, and the operations he was helping her run with her Miniature Man-Eating Masdevallia farm in her backyard.

Finally meeting the witch Hermione was initially jealous over earlier in the year, Hermione suddenly felt a bit foolish in retrospect. In person, Blanche was merely a business partner who had no designs on Severus, and she even made a slight joke about Severus' stern demeanor. He parried it with a quick and witty retort of his own that she took in stride, acknowledging there was some truth to his remark. All in all, Blanche was a rather warm and gracious witch, if a bit flighty and easily distracted, but bright enough she was becoming better at running more and more of the business on her own, requiring less time from Severus to help run it, though he was still vital to the company.

After visiting Blanche, Severus took Hermione on a tour of a few orchid farms, since she had mentioned wanting to purchase and bring back a few specimens for Albert's own greenhouses, where he dabbled in cross-breeding.

Once done, they Apparated back to town and had a quick lunch at the local Chinese restaurant before Hermione met Draco at the builders' offices one last time.

It was nearly five o'clock when Hermione came back home with yet another armful of rolled-up blueprints. She would pack them up and take them back to London for Lavender and her architect to look over before construction would begin.

Knocking on the front door as she opened it, Hermione called out, "Severus? I'm home!" It was a simple phrase that made her quite happy to hear herself say. It was a pity that it would be a long time before she could use that phrase on a daily occurrence.
Severus emerged from the kitchen while wiping his hands on a towel. "I was wondering how long you were going to be stuck at the builders' office. And did you, the builders, and the local building codes officials reach some sort of compromise that is workable?"

Hermione sighed heavily and dumped the tubes of rolled-up parchment on the kitchen table. She threw herself into a chair, tilting her head back to stare at the ceiling, her mouth slack while her arms hung limply by her sides. "After this afternoon, I think I am quite ready for a proper booze-up at Bongo's."

Since Friday night, the usual day Severus and the others met up for drinks, was the same night as the New Year's Eve ball, it was agreed they would shift their social drinking night one day earlier in the week to Thursday.

"Well, eat up, as no doubt Rainbow will try and order you something to knock you for a loop like she did to me to have her own bit of fun," Severus said, his voice a bit tight as he remembered the incident with lingering bitterness.

"Oh, she can't surprise me with a Wipe-Out, since Albert had Draco surprise me with that concoction already back in August."

Hermione began diving into various dishes Severus served up, using up the last of the leftovers. They planned to go out shopping Saturday, when Severus showed her the local farmers' market that would be open on New Year's Day.

"She will try and get Bongo to mix up something to make a fool of yourself, especially since she knows you're a Potions apprentice," he warned her with a growl. "It seems I'm not the first person she's done that to. She has pulled that little stunt, hoping to get new arrivals for sanctuary to spill their secrets, since Mounga won't tell her anything."

"Oh, I think I can turn the tables on her and get Rainbow to get a taste of her own medicine." Hermione gave him a smug grin of confidence.

"Oh, you think so? The witch is a Healer and can certainly know when she has been poisoned," Severus countered, wondering if Hermione really could pull it off. He put a forkful of chicken salad in his mouth and began to chew as he regarded his lover carefully.
"Oh, I know so. Care to make a bet?" Hermione proposed, feeling inspired to make yet another bet which was a habit of theirs when food or alcohol was involved. Betting seemed to be something many Potions masters and mistresses seemed to engage in often to add a bit of fun, as many of the challenge tasks at the monthly meetings related to either drinking games, betting games involving Galleons, rare ingredients in their stores, or favors. The two lovers had graduated far beyond just simple tea blends.

This was certainly a bet Severus would be happy to lose, should Hermione succeed. He almost didn't want to win, but pride demanded he win for the honor of claiming he did.

As they ate, they settled on determining the condition of the bet and how it would be decided who won by what certain objectives had been met. Severus remembered Hermione was the same witch who caused Marietta Edgecombe to this day to have terrible acne scars across her face that spelled out the word "SNEAK." Hermione had agreed with Severus it was rather unfair for Rainbow to try and slip something into Severus in such a public forum, and he wondered what her inventive mind had planned for the evening.

Once they were done with dinner, they shook hands sealing the deal, fed the cat, and went off to get dressed for a night of drinking and socializing with friends.

As Hermione and Severus walked arm-in-arm down the broad sheltered wooden boardwalk towards Bongo's, they could hear that the place was already jumping. Out from the bar came the sounds of two dueling cellos playing something fast and loud.

Hermione could not name the song, but it sounded like something familiar. Severus was thankful they were coming in towards the end of it, hopeful they would play something a bit less raucous for the next song.

As the pair entered the bar, Bongo called out, "Aloha!" along with some of the other patrons. Severus returned the greeting, with Hermione joining in a beat later.

"Severus! Hermione!" Mounga called out, his arm waving above the crowd as he saved them a spot at the bar since the place was rather packed that night, especially for a Thursday night. Some people were taking the next day, New Year's Eve, off as well and were starting their end-of-the-year celebrating that night.

Jerry was playing on the piano, of course, now that the dueling cellists were back to playing a
cover of the standard jazz tune, "Take Five," along with the usual suspects. There was Maurice on accordion, Agnes on guitar, an Indian witch on sitar – Severus had met her only once before, Buddy who was playing his pair of tabla drums instead of his drum kit, plus a few others playing horns and stringed instruments.

"Welcome to Bongo's!" Rainbow said. She was a bit overly cheerful, her eyes flashing alternatively between gold and lavender, a sign she was obviously in a very good mood already.

"Double old-fashioned," Severus called out to Bongo, asking for his usual drink.

It was then Severus and Hermione turned around to spy Draco looking a little peaky. The blond groaned upon hearing Severus' drink order.

Ginny was sitting next to her husband, perched upon a stool while rubbing his back.

"Oh, my," was all Hermione could say upon seeing Draco looking still a bit green around the gills. Looking at his drink, she asked, "Is that just plain water?"
Draco nodded, his eyes slipping shut as he tried to be social, but he found the lights and noise a bit much. It seemed even with a vial of Hangover Relief down his gullet that morning, he was still not quite up to par.

Bongo came over to Hermione and asked, "What will it be for you, Hermione?" He knew who she was, having heard all the town gossip about the beautiful brunette Potions apprentice visiting who was mostly attached to Severus' side.

Before Rainbow could jump in and suggest something for Severus' paramour, Hermione leaned forward across the bar and put in her request, but Bongo said in reply as an invitation with a jerk of his head, "Why don't you come around and mix it up yourself."

Severus looked quizzically at the exchange since Bongo had never invited him behind the bar, but then again, he was not interested in playing bartender either. He was happy to have Bongo mix him up something to imbibe, remembering when Chuff forced him to play bartender at Potions master booze-ups he was dragged to.

Hermione ducked under the bar at the far end and made herself at home. With great interest, since no one heard what she requested as the band was playing loudly, Severus, Mounga, Rainbow, and Ginny watched, along with a few other patrons. Patiently, they waited while Hermione began
grating ginger, reaming some limes, muddling some peppermint, adding some seltzer water and honey, and placing a couple slices of banana along the rim.

"Here, drink this," she said as she slid it in front of Draco, who looked at her balefully. "This is what I drink the morning after a night of drinking far too much."

Draco took a tentative sip and then suddenly brightened, his stomach now feeling much more cooperative. In his hangover haze, neither he nor Ginny had thought to drink the same chilled ginger-lemon iced tea Ginny sucked down in great quantities during her morning sickness months.

"Is this what Hermione fixed you this morning, since you seemed to have recovered quite nicely after yesterday's binge?" Draco asked, noting how Severus was looking hale and healthy.

Severus looked away, replying, "Hermione had other remedies she employed." He refused to divulge anything else since he did not want to confess his bout of vomiting nor the intimate moment of Hermione singing to him.

"So what are you going to drink, Hermione?" Rainbow said, unable to suppress the mischievous quirk at the corner of her mouth. "There's a little specialty Bongo serves here that you've probably never heard of."

Turning to Rainbow in a bright and cheerful tone, Hermione said with all the sweet innocence she could muster, "How about we play a little game that's a favorite at the monthly Potions masters meetings back in England I go to with my master, Albert?"

Rainbow's smile faltered a bit, her initial plan obviously foiled, but thought she could salvage the situation. "Sure. What's that?"

"'Guess what's in this drink.' You're a trained Healer, so of course this should be easy for you," Hermione said in a very complimentary manner to boost Rainbow's ego and create a false air of camaraderie.

Sitting up a bit straighter, her pride obviously catered to, Rainbow said, "All righty then. Let's give this a whirl. This sounds fun."

Mounga was about to jump into the game as well, but Severus caught his eye and gave him the
most imperceptible shake of his head that no one else caught. Catching on, Mouna suppressed a smile and decided to watch how this would play out, curious to what Hermione had devised.

Hermione conjured a screen, just as she had in England when she played the game and was mixing, to make sure no one, not even Severus, could tell what she was doing. There was a flourish of activity as Hermione ground and minced and chopped, and poured from various unknown bottles she grabbed from the shelves behind her.

Severus did recall that Hermione had come out of their laboratory at home, tucking something into her pockets just before they left for Bongo's. He wondered what she was going to slip to Rainbow, but he kept his face a mask of mild curiosity so as not to tip the victim off.

When the activity subsided, Hermione flicked her wand and the screen disappeared. On the bar top was a tall, opaque tumbler holding an enticing libation garnished with various slices of fruits and a tall straw poking out of the top.

With two of her fingers, Hermione pushed it forward so it sat right under Rainbow's nose. She had a triumphant grin threatening to break through her detached demeanor.

"Name every ingredient in this drink, and you win," Hermione challenged, throwing down the gauntlet.

"What do I win if I name everything in this drink?" Rainbow asked before the game began.

"You name them all, I'll drink whatever you deign to throw at me," Hermione threw back, fingering one of the bezoars in her pocket. She then added, "But if you lose, you have to down the whole rest of the drink."

Now finding a way to have Hermione drink a Wipe-Out, Rainbow took up the challenge. She was sure she could win, having drunk most everything in this bar at one point. Of course, Rainbow had no clue that Hermione had brought a few things with her which were not stocked at Bongo's bar.

Sticking her nose over her drink, she inhaled. "Dark rum?"

Hermione nodded that indeed that was one of the ingredients.
"And?" she prompted her.

Inhaling once more, Rainbow added, "Almonds?"

"Almond what?" Hermione was surprised Rainbow wasn't more specific, for even she could easily discern the scent of Amaretto.

"Almond liqueur?" Rainbow said with some uncertainty.

Hermione nodded, willing to let her have that, without naming the specific brand. "Yes. What else?"

Severus was enjoying this immensely, watching Rainbow squirm while Hermione applied the third degree to her with this little drinking game, as more people were beginning to watch the exchange in earnest. Even Draco and Ginny were keenly watching, since they sensed this was going to result in something memorable which would be talked about for days later.

Unable to discern anything else by smell alone, Rainbow, in a manner like a finicky cat poking its nose about food trying to decide if it was good enough to eat, eventually wrapped her lips around the straw and drew her first sip.

Rainbow began giggling like a silly schoolgirl. She then hiccupped, with feathers suddenly coming out her ears, followed shortly by farting loudly, making the sound of a duck. The sound of her own flatulence only made Rainbow want to laugh only harder, not realizing she was the source of the amusing noise. She drank more, taking a few deeper draws on her straw, which resulted in more giggling and the announcement she was going to dance for everyone, followed by farting even louder, which sent her into more fits of laughing. Hermione could have included ingredients that would have made her sprout feathers all over her body and turn her nose into a duck's bill too, but she had decided to go easy on the witch who had tried to slip one on her lover.

Everyone else was laughing as well, but at her, not with her.

Mounga leaned over the bar, a bemused, yet puzzled look on his face. "Just what did you give her?"
Hermione shook her head and smiled with a hint of Severus' evil grin thrown in she had slowly begun to pick up. "Now, what sort of game would this be if I told you when she hasn't finished naming all the ingredients yet," she said with mock sincerity, gesturing to Mounga's wife who has now crawled up on top of the bar and was dancing rather enthusiastically to the tune that the band was currently playing. Other patrons grabbed their drinks off the bar in fear of Rainbow accidentally kicking them over in her obliviousness of her actions. They were covering their drinks with their hands so the feathers sprouting out of her ears wouldn't drift into their libations.

Mounga let out a long, tense breath, wondering how he was going to get his wife down off the bar, as she kept farting like a duck as she danced. People were now starting to move away from her, offended by the noise and not sticking around to find out if there was a smell associated with the loud flatulence.

Hermione looked over at Severus. He seemed to be immensely pleased, laughing freely at the entire scene. His laughter was nearly drowned out by the band which was beginning to morph their song into one befitting a burlesque show, with Rainbow gyrating her hips and still quacking like a duck out of her arse.

Even Draco turned to look at Hermione. He gave her a hearty thumbs-up at her choice of revenge of Severus' honor, knowing the Potions master had been long stewing over how to get back at Rainbow over that incident he'd never forgiven her for.

Severus turned to look at Hermione, his eyes glittering with delight, and mouthed to her silently, "I love you." There was a look of pure gratitude on his face as if he could not have served up this dish of revenge any colder or with more relish.

When Mounga noticed Rainbow was taking her cue from the band. They'd started playing a rousing and bawdy rendition of "The Mooche," a jazz song hearkening back to the days of burlesque and bathtub gin, and Rainbow was starting to unbutton her top. Mounga looked at Hermione, his facial expression telling her that fun was fun, but it was to end there. Hermione conceded it was fine, and she handed Mounga a bezoar, nudging her head in the direction of his wife.

Mounga coaxed his wife down from the bar and stopped her before she finished unbuttoning her top and anyone got a peek of her underthings. A few bar patrons made their displeasure known that the floor show was ending before it got interesting.

The band wrapped up their song, knowing the fun and prank had come to an end, with the drummer ending the song with a rim shot.
Mounga popped the bezoar into his wife's mouth and encouraged her to swallow it, which resulted in her immediately coming to her senses, unaware of what had just transpired.

Staggering back to the bar, Rainbow asked, "What the hell happened?" She was finding bits of down stuck in her ears and hair.

Hermione set her elbow on the bar and plopped her cheek into her hand, unaware Rainbow did the same gesture when about to dish out a heaping pile of sarcasm. "What the hell happened?‘ Gee, that's just what Severus thought when you slipped him that Wipe-Out drink his first night here in Malu Palekaiko."

Rainbow’s eyes went wide in the grim realization that her little joke – that she thought she had gotten away with – had come back to bite her in the ass, with interest.

"Don't worry," Hermione added, "I won’t make you finish the rest of the drink even though you failed to name the rest of the ingredients." She wiped her hands with a clean bar rag, and went back to sitting on the other side bar next to the wizard she felt obligated to defend against pranks that assaulted his dignity.

Severus wrapped a possessive arm around her waist and kissed the top of her head when she sidled up next to him. He murmured into her hair, admitting, "You won. And for the first time, I'm actually thrilled to lose to have witnessed that. Thank you."

Of course, Severus would ask Hermione what she had put in Rainbow's drink, but he would do that later. Maybe they could even make another wager if he could guess all the rest of the ingredients she’d brought from the lab at home, based on the behaviors Rainbow exhibited and the trail of feathers that now dusted the floor.

Hermione gave Severus a quick peck on the cheek in return for his flattering comment before asking Bongo for a 'Tall Cool Blond,' a drink Royston had introduced to Hermione and the other guests at the monthly social. It was a drink Hermione had lost on a round of 'Guess what's in this drink,' as it smelled and tasted like nothing more than lemonade mixed with soda. Since Bongo was unfamiliar with that drink as well, Hermione scribbled the directions down on a spare bit of parchment.

Her drink in hand, Severus asked if he could try a sip and said, "Is there any alcohol in this?"
"Oh, you bet there is, two-and-a-half ounces," Hermione assured him.

Severus was impressed, as the drink tasted quite smooth.

With Rainbow's pride stinging a bit, she was not quite as chatty as usual. The conversation between friends was mostly directed by everyone else in the circle for once.

Draco made to excuse himself from their circle. Severus and Hermione thought he was going to the loo, but were surprised when they heard Draco's voice coming from next to the piano with a Sonorous Charm so he could be heard above the usual chatter of the bar patrons.

"I would like to dedicate this song to two dear friends of mine, who have finally been reunited after a long time apart."

Draco turned to Jerry to speak for a second before the two cello players began with long and sweet notes that carried throughout the bar. He opened his mouth and began to sing.

"At last...  
My love has come along,  
My lonely days are over,  
And life is like a song..."

Hermione could not contain her smile at the sweetness of this song being sung in her and Severus' honor. Partly embarrassed at all the attention, she turned her head and buried it in Severus' shoulder, feeling the tears pricking behind her eyes.

The bar patrons, some familiar with the story about how Severus had been pining for his love, gave a whoop and cheer.

Hermione lifted her head from Severus' shoulder to gauge his reaction as she listened to the lyrics intently. She found him with a smile beaming down at her, also seemingly moved by the song. She rested her head-on Severus' shoulder as they continued to watch Draco belt out a very soulful rendition of the song, capturing the euphoric sentiment of love finally attained.

Severus was surprised by Draco's song dedicated to them, and would have initially asked that he not draw attention to himself and Hermione. But the look of adoration Hermione gave him and her
eyes brimming with tears of joy were worth it to suffer a bit of attention for once, as he sensed how his lover was moved by the moment as Draco sang on.

Hermione squeezed Severus' hand. He squeezed hers back even more firmly, his other arm still holding her even tighter around her waist. If the bar wasn't so cramped, Hermione would have asked Severus to dance with her right there and then.

"... You smiled, you smiled,  
Oh and then the spell was cast,  
And here we are in Heaven,  
For you are mine at last."

The strains of the cellos and the rest of the band wrapped up the song while the rest of the bar erupted in a cacophony of applause, whistles, and cheers.

Draco gave a humble bow and walked back toward his circle of friends.

Hermione dislodged herself from Severus. She went up to Draco as he rejoined them, standing up upon her toes and placing a peck on his cheek.

"Thank you, Draco. That was absolutely perfect and lovely," she said, wiping away more tears and sniffing, finally grabbing a bar napkin for her nose.

"You can thank, Jerry. It was his suggestion when I told him what Albert and I were planning," Draco admitted.

Rainbow, deciding she had sulked long enough in humility, decided to rejoin the conversation and praised Draco. "That was just too perfect." Turning to Hermione, she asked, "Do you think we can get one song out of you, since you won't be back for a while?"

Hermione shrugged, feeling a blush creep up her neck. "I don't know. I'm certainly not as good as Draco." It was one thing to sing in front of a small group of people she knew in a private home with a few drinks in her at those monthly meetings. It was another thing to sing for a bunch of strangers with a band that was as good as any professional band, with everyone staring at her, and in front of Severus; she'd only sang in front of him once, the night before.
"Come on," Rainbow tried to coax her. "We even got Severus to sing for us once."

Hermione, surprised, turned around with a slightly stunned look on her face and asked, "You sang once?"

Severus frowned, irritated Rainbow brought that moment up, but nodded reluctantly.

"Severus has a really lovely voice. It's a pity he doesn't sing more often for us, it's quite deep and rich," Rainbow added, hoping a bit of praise would get him in the mood to sing once more.

"I am not a trained monkey meant to sing for your amusement," Severus said in his old stern and acerbic tone that invoked memories of him in the Potions classroom for his former students who were watching the exchange between the two. "But if you want me to sing, I know one song—"

"Oh, no!" Rainbow protested. "Not that depressing Scottish ballad about the wizard who went off to war and his bride who killed herself!"

"Oh, I know that song," Hermione volunteered.

She began to half-sing, half-recite the lyrics,
"A wizard called Eòin Greumson
Of bonnie Blackbriar Dornoch..."

"No! You're not going to sing that. Please pick a different song. Anything but that," Rainbow implored.

"Hermione does not have to sing if she does not want to," Severus reminded Rainbow, with a steely arch of his brow.

"No, it's okay, Severus. I'll sing, I just need a few more drinks in me to have the gumption to get up and do it." Hermione put a calming hand on his upper arm conveying she didn't mind being requested to sing, having one song in mind. She was hoping at some point to sing it to him in private, but now was a good a time as any.
Turning around, while keeping Severus' arm still about her waist, she asked Bongo, "Can I have three shots of vodka?"

Hermione was not the only one who needed a bit of Aqueous Intrepidity to lubricate her courage to sing, much like Niles and Braxton back home during their gatherings. Much to Severus', and everyone else's surprise, Hermione slammed the three shots of vodka down like an old pro and said in about five minutes she'd be ready to sing.

As Jerry and the rest of the band were finishing up a Dixieland classic done with some honky-tonk flair, Hermione turned and gave Severus a quick buss on the lips. "Wish me luck," she said as she detached herself from Severus' side. She wended her way through the tables and chairs up towards the piano where Jerry sensed that someone else wanted to sing.

Hermione could feel the vodka work its own magic on her, easing her apprehension of singing in front of a crowd and loosening up her vocal cords as well, which would tighten up when she was nervous and sober.

"You gonna sing?" Jerry asked her, leaning sideways to hear her better over the thrum of the crowd.

"Yeah. Do you know *Ochi Chyornye*?"

Furrowing his brow momentarily, he replied, "Is that also called *Dark Eyes*?"

Hermione's face brightened. "Yes! That's it. Though I only know it in Russian."

"You speak Russian?" Jerry asked.

"No, just the lyrics for this song." Hermione shrugged, wishing she did know Russian as that would be one language closer to her and Severus being reunited permanently.

They talked for a few moments longer, with Jerry asking how many choruses she knew and instructing Hermione that they would be doing some solo bits after the second chorus, and to watch his hand signal for when she was to start the third and final chorus.
Severus was wondering what Hermione was planning on singing. He knew the types of songs they usually sang at the monthly Potions masters meeting, some of them quite bawdy. Even he still remembered one ditty in German about a particular barmaid which got more lewd with each chorus.

Finally, Agnes on guitar, a violin player, and the cello players began playing a slow and rich melody, something which would make one think of Gypsies and Eastern European folk songs. Severus finally recognized the melody as Hermione was about to sing. Sitting there, he felt a warm flush race through his chest in anticipation, smiling to himself.

Hermione closed her eyes momentarily to muster her courage and opened them up to stare at Severus and Severus alone through the crowd, for this song was for him, regardless of the others who would bear witness to her singing her heart to him.

"Ochi chyornaye..."

Hermione's voice, with the help of the alcohol, made it a bit huskier. She sang the words slowly at first, matching the pace of the band, as she tried to make her voice sound sultry and succeeded. Jerry joined in with flourishes on the piano appropriate for that style of folk song.

"Ochi zhguchie,"

Mounga leaned over and asked Severus, "Is that Russian?"

Severus merely nodded.

"Could you translate?"

"Dark eyes, burning eyes," he replied, never taking his eyes off Hermione as she gazed intently at him.

"Ochi strastnaye i prekrasnaye
Kak lyublyu ya vas, kak nuzhnay vay mne
Znaty, ya vstretila vas v chas otechaynaya..."
Severus was mildly surprised, knowing she had changed the words to suit her situation and their story.

Faithfully, he translated for Mouna, Rainbow, Draco, and Ginny who were listening to both Hermione sing and the words in English.

"Passionate and splendid eyes,
How I love you, How I need you,
Truly, I met you at my most desperate hour."

Hermione could see his lips move and discern that he was translating for the rest of their friends who did not understand Russian like Severus.

"Ochi chyornaye, zhguche plamennay
I manyat oni v stranay dalynie..."

Hermione held out her hand toward him, as if reaching for Severus for dramatic purpose to accentuate the intent of her feelings, as they truly mirrored her own.

"Gde tsarit lyubovy, gde tsarit pokoy
Gde stradanyya net, gde voyna v storone."

She closed her eyes, pulling her outstretched hand back to clutch at her heart, tilting her head back, singing the last line of the second stanza with bittersweetness.

As the band launched into the bridge, adding jazzy flourishes during short solos, Hermione opened her eyes to stare at Severus once more across the crowded bar, the beat speeding up and becoming something more lighthearted and contemporary. Some of the various musicians added their own virtuoso flourishes to their brief solos.

Still watching Hermione, Severus faithfully recited the latest verse for their friends, "Dark eyes, flaming eyes,
They implore me into faraway lands,
Where love reigns, where peace reigns,
Where there is no suffering, where war is behind us."
The band was beginning to wrap up, Hermione caught Jerry's hand movements to indicate the band was going to slow back down, and he let her finish the third and final verse.

"Ne vstretila b vas, tak stradala bay
Prozhila bay zhizny bez ulaybki
Ocharovali vay menya, ochi chyornaye
Podarili mne schastye navsegda."

With the change of a few words, Hermione had turned a song that was originally about the tragedy of a man falling in love with the wrong woman who tempted him far away to lead a life of suffering into a song that spoke about Hermione's longing to be by Severus' side and how he had brought joy into her life.

"If I hadn't met you, I would be suffering so,
I would have lived my life without smiling,
You have enthralled me, dark eyes,
You have given me glorious happiness forever."

The band wrapped up the song quickly with a short crescendo.

The bar erupted once more into a clamorous thunder of applause, cheers, and whistles, entertained by Hermione's romantic ballad. And while she was not the best of singers, she did a very good job, and her enthusiasm and sincerity she put into the song made it quite captivating to watch and listen.

Though most of the other patrons in the bar did not speak Russian, they understood the feelings behind the foreign words she sung.

Hermione smiled shyly and bowed timidly, making haste to rejoin Severus and their group. As she passed by one table, an old wizard reached up and clasped her hand, patting it, and saying in Russian – his native language, "Spasibo, spasibo! It's been too long since I've heard my mother tongue sung, and so sweetly. Spasibo!" He finished by kissing the top of her hand.

Hermione had no idea what the old wizard said, but saw the tears brimming in his eyes and merely answered with a humble, "You're welcome."

Severus pulled Hermione into his arms. He was sorely tempted to throw decorum aside so he could give her a proper kiss in appreciation of a song that was rather poignant. Instead he just cupped her
jaw with his hand, his thumb caressing her cheek as he gazed deeply into her eyes.

Hermione thought her heart would stop right there, with the way Severus was looking at her right now, his eyes ablaze and full of love.

Before Severus could find the right words to convey how he was moved by her song and her heartfelt rendering of it, Rainbow barged in, interrupting the moment between the two lovers.

"That was absolutely fantastic. Well, with a few vocal lessons it would be an absolute show-stopper at the Suds, Sausage, and Sounds Festival, but that was really good!" Rainbow praised Hermione, in her own special off-handed way.

Hermione nodded and mumbled, "Thanks," under her breath. Looking at Draco and Ginny, she saw Draco give a serious nod of approval and Ginny smiling at her brightly.

The rest of the night passed along with everyone chatting amicably, with even Hermione and Rainbow putting the night's earlier foolishness behind them. Rainbow was gracious enough to take the lumps she had coming to her and never made mention of the earlier scene.

Towards the end, Severus and Hermione were matching each other drink for drink, with them eventually stopping long before they reached their limit.

Draco, who stuck to strictly non-alcoholic drinks like his wife, decided to call it an early night as he was nearly as exhausted as Ginny.

The Malfoys left first, with a reminder from Ginny about the hair appointment she'd made for Hermione, since the pregnant witch wouldn't be able to do her friend's hair for the ball.

Soon afterwards, Severus and Hermione decided to bid the Finaus adieu, waving at Jerry as they left Bongo's.

Sauntering slowly, the alcohol still coursing through their systems, they finally reached home.

As Severus opened the door, both almost stumbling in, their footing a bit off from the alcohol,
Hermione asked, "I know you didn't want to sing for Rainbow when she asked, but based on her description, I would love to hear you sing once before I go back home. Could you sing something for me sometime?" she asked politely and as sweetly as she could without whinging.

Standing there in the middle of the living room, having not kicked off their shoes yet and as the unlit Christmas tree loomed in the dark recesses, with only the light in the foyer dimly highlighting their silhouettes, Severus wrapped his arms around Hermione's waist. He held her close as he looked down at her and began to sing.

"A wizard called Eòin Greumson
Of bonnie Blackbriar Dornoch
Was bid to fight the goblin hoarde
Rebellion rose an' duty call'd..."

Hermione gazed up at him, the faint light from the foyer accenting his hair and parts of his cheek, jawline, and nose. She was enchanted by the rich and soothing sound of his voice, which rang clear and true in a baritone register.

She stood there, enfolded in his arms, her own arms entwined about his neck, feeling the deep vibrations of his voice through his chest to where their bodies touched.

As he sang the fifth verse, tears began to well in Hermione's eyes.

"As Eòin came home, he found his bride
Light fading from her eyes
She thought she had join'd him beyond the veil
And pass'd to the other side"

She could only think of Draco's recounting of how Severus had nearly killed himself in some mad idea that his death would somehow protect her from any and all harm. She promised Draco she would not let Severus know she was aware of his intent when he'd flown out to sea on that dark and stormy night.

When Severus finished the seventh and last verse, tears were freely streaming down Hermione's cheeks. It was a maudlin song that was meant to evoke such strong and visceral melancholy.

Now done, Hermione buried her face against her chest and let the sobs come freely. "That was
beautiful," she choked out.

Severus conjured a handkerchief for her and pressed it into her hand, kissing the top of her head. He wiped away his own errant tear that came forth, remembering how close to death he had come less than six months before. He silently wondered if Hermione would go on with her own life, had he died, or would she attempt to join him beyond the veil as well. He did not want to contemplate such morose and frightening thoughts.

Pulling herself together, Hermione hugged Severus tightly once more before lifting her face away from his chest to look up at him, though a haze of teary eyes. "Promise me," she said, her voice thick with emotion, "that when we have children some year, you will sing lullabies to our children with your wonderful voice. Promise me." She reached up a hand and stroked Severus' cheek.

He tilted his head and leaned into her touch.

Severus' heart was feeling quite full and contented at that moment. He merely nodded that indeed he would sing for their children someday.

Shoes kicked off, Hermione began rummaging around the ice box for something sweet to eat. "Severus? We still haven't cracked open that Fairy Brandy Draco stocked for us, or touched that passion fruit juice," she announced with clear intent of what she was insinuating. "And there is a bottle of champagne that is already chilled we haven't opened yet either. How does Passion-Fairy-Champagne cocktails sound?"

Severus came up behind Hermione to wrap his arms around her as she began arranging everything on the kitchen counter. Speaking in a very low and deep voice, the same voice he'd used to seduce Hermione on a few occasions, he said, "You'd better take some lubrication potion before we begin drinking any of this," remembering what happened when they drank Fairy Brandy.

Kissing the side of her neck, as he momentarily distracted her, he complimented her, "Your Russian pronunciation was very good, considering you have yet to begin learning the language."

"Well, I found that knowing Greek helped a little," she admitted. "Plus Niles was very helpful in working with my pronunciation and changing the lyrics."

"You never did tell me all the details of your Dionysus' Fever potion. Did you wear the garment
made of fawn?" Severus asked, his hand snaking around to begin stroking her breasts through her clothes.

"Yes," she purred in kind as she began rubbing her bottom against Severus' growing erection, "but he charmed it so it wouldn't come off during the potion so I could retain some modesty as he observed."

"And what did you experience?" he probed, his breath a warm caress along her ear.

"After dancing with the trees, suddenly you were there, Severus the Satyr, with a beard and a very large and impressive erection, who chased me about the woods, or I him, until he caught me and ravished me quite thoroughly." She sighed and leaned her head back as Severus began kissing up her neck, both hands cupping her breasts from behind and slowly grinding himself into her bottom as she braced her hands on the edge of the kitchen counter.

She continued on with her tale as Severus listened, rubbing himself against her as she ground back. "When the twins gave me the portable tropical getaway, I can't tell you how many times I fantasized of you, as that satyr, chasing me about the enclosure, capturing, taking. So many times, I masturbated, dreaming of you in that lush getaway," she sighed.

"We still have yet to try out the one the twins gave me for Christmas," he suggested. "Perhaps instead of deer skins, you can wrap yourself in a pareo, and I'll do my best to fulfill the role as satyr."

Furniture was moved out of the way to make room for the tropical getaway. Hermione dressed in only a simple cotton pareo that mimicked she fawn-skin shift she'd worn in the way she tied it. After she drained a vial of lubrication potion, Hermione was ready.

Severus followed the getaway's instructions and opened his gift from the twins. It was very romantic, and the waterfall and adjoining soaking pool looked quite enticing.

Both holding flutes of champagne, passion fruit juice, and a full one-ounce shot of Fairy Brandy, the lovers clinked glasses and drank it down quickly.

Their pupils dilated and the chase was on. Hermione, familiar with the layout, ran off and hid behind a clump of bamboo plants, crawling on hands and knees. Meanwhile Severus quickly divested himself of his clothing and chased after her, his erection bobbing like the satyr's in
"Come out, my little water nymph," Severus called out.

Hermione, still drunk before she'd even drank the champagne, giggled – which gave away her location.

"There you are!" he said playfully and dove for Hermione.

Squealing with delight, Hermione got up and ran. Severus got up off the soft grassy floor and ran after her.

To her surprise, Severus was quite quick on his feet and was far faster than she'd anticipated, even slightly drunk. The enclosure was only so large and there were only so many routes she could evade Severus before he eventually cornered her.

Backed into a corner, Hermione grinned madly, eager to have Severus take her, yet still wanting the chase to continue, her eyes darting to an escape route.

As she lunged and tried to duck past Severus on his left, he caught her. In the process of her attempt to flee, she dragged him and herself down in the process. Severus, now partially sprawled on top of Hermione, slowly climbed atop of her, pinning her arms down. Their eyes locked.

He growled dangerously, "You are mine." Severus quickly leaned down and captured her mouth with a possessive kiss. His legs quickly pried her legs apart, and he thrusted into her without preamble, shoving himself deeply into her. Hermione's desire, in conjunction with the potion, made her so slick he slid with ease.

Yes, this was very close to the fantasy Hermione had many times, though the real Severus was a bit more patient, but no less erotic than the one she envisioned alone.

She cried out and clawed at his back.

He moved his face down and his teeth clamped down on her neck, biting her in the process as he
continued to savagely thrust into her. He growled and howled and grunted like some beast, and Hermione met his vocalizations sound for sound, her own guttural scream ringing through the enclosure.

"I'm yours!" Hermione cried out.

The alcohol that Severus consumed earlier prolonged the eventual release to come, much to Hermione's pleasure and benefit.

As they lay there on the grass, panting heavily, Hermione reached out and plucked a fragrant cream-colored puakenikeni flower from a nearby shrub. Rolling over onto her stomach as she lay next to him, she tucked it into his hair, behind his left ear. "Greek gods should sometimes wear flowers in their hair, especially my darling Himeroes."
"I thought I was a satyr," he questioned her.

"You are definitely as gorgeous as any Greek god to me. You are my Himeros and I am your Langia." Casting her eyes over to the enticing pool, she asked, "Care to slip into my waters, my lover?"

The Fairy Brandy was still having a strong effect as they made love once more in the pool. The water from the waterfall splashed across Hermione's breasts as she rode Severus with abandon.

After a leisurely soak to recuperate, Hermione crawled out of the pool. Severus, still feeling the Fairy Brandy coursing through his veins coupled with the passion fruit juice, could not resist the sight of Hermione on her hands and knees. He took her once more roughly from behind, much to her delight and satisfaction.

As they enjoyed a post-coitus cuddle, with Hermione propped up against a convenient, vertical grassy knoll and Severus resting his head on her lap, she pulled off another piece of Ginny's banana chocolate chip bread and popped it into Severus' mouth before enjoying a piece for herself. She lovingly stroked his forehead, which lulled him into a restful state of mind as he reclined against her.
"I think based on those romantic post-Renaissance paintings, I'm supposed to be feeding you grapes." Hermione tore off another small morsel of the sweet bread and held it aloft above Severus' mouth before he opened it. She gently fed him, letting his lips brush her fingers.

Severus merely hummed in passive agreement, feeling too blissfully relaxed to argue or debate that if the Greek gods had Ginny's banana chocolate chip bread, the paintings might have been rendered differently. He was lulled into this sweet other state of completely happy lassitude, and the loving touch of Hermione's hand across his forehead was just too perfect.

The music box was charmed to play something soft and restful as they lay there, enjoying their mini-secret rendezvous.

They both lay there in comfortable silence, both wishing the night would go on forever. For each night that passed was yet another day closer to when Hermione would go home, and this wonderful respite from daily life and realities would end.

Severus woke with a start, realizing they had dropped off while still in the tropical getaway. Nudging Hermione awake, he helped her up and put the lovely present from the twins away, appreciative they'd built something so wonderful for him and Hermione to enjoy. It was just as he'd always imagined it.

As they both drifted off to sleep in a proper bed this time, they were both still drunk; drunk on bliss and the euphoria of love.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks and praise to my glorious betas, JuneW and Cygnuz.

There is fanart for this chapter: Hermione feeding Severus banana chocolate chip bread, both nude I commissioned, by Ulafish (http://ulafish.deviantart.com/), R-rated due to nudity, NSFW. It is done in homage to Jean-Honoré Fragonard's painting, “The Happy Lovers”

You can view Ulafish's modern day version of “The Happy Lovers” here: http://68.media.tumblr.com/b9469daf707019db19ddf64d5940b2b3/tumblr_inline_okk4sf0gor1tcck

And now compare to Fragonard's “The Happy Lovers” here: https://www.wikiart.org/en/jean-honore-fragonard/the-happy-lovers-1765?

utm_source=returned&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=referral
The haiku at the top of this chapter is an actual one written over 1,000 years ago. 
_Onyx, this gem-black night._
Downcast, I await your return
like the morning sun, unrivaled in splendor.
— Ō no Yasumaro (circa 711), loose translation by Michael R. Burch
http://www.thehypertexts.com/Best%20Haiku.htm

I played around with an online translator. "Splendor": 素晴らしさ, becomes "Great likeness" if you put a space between the second and third character.

And in the spirit of the Suds, Sausage, and Sounds Festival they have alongside Oktoberfest in Malu Palekaiko where they play various songs, but in different styles, of course they would play something like heavy metal music with classical instruments. If you caught the song I was referencing when Severus and Hermione first arrived at Bongo's, you might have correctly guessed it was "Thunderstruck" by 2Cellos. Here is the official video for the song: https://youtu.be/uT3SBzmDxGk

"The Mooche" was composed by Duke Ellington and Irving Mills.

If you want the recipe for the Tall Cool Blond, it's a drink I developed for the Harry Potter conference, Leviosa, that was held in July 2016. The drink is actually called "The Draco." Here is the recipe, and it is a very smooth drink.

Image with drink recipe:
https://scontent.fsnc1-2.fna.fbcdn.net/v/t1.0-9/11109446_765835530200319_8069223161365822792_n.jpg?
The Draco

Ingredients:

2 oz Lemon-Lime Soda
2 oz Lemonade
1 oz Bacardi Dragon Berry Rum
1 oz Skyy Dragon Fruit Vodka
1/2 oz Triple Sec
Maraschino Cherry

Directions:

1) Fill highball or pint glass with ice.
2) In a shaker, mix all ingredients and pour over ice.
3) Garnish with a cherry.
4

Yes, I am thinking of Draco doing a very good impression of Etta James, but in his natural lower tenor voice. "At Last" was written by Mack Gordon and Harry Warren. http://www.metrolyrics.com/at-last-lyrics-etta-james.html
Chapter Summary

Hermione and Severus ring in the New Year, and enjoy tea at the Malfoys'. Then it is time for bittersweet partings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter One Hundred Nine
‘Dreams Can Come True’

Disclaimer: Rowling owns Harry Potter, the universe, and most of the concepts in this fic. She just lets me play with her things, and neither a brass Knut nor Muggle brass farthing are being made by me.

Hermione was applying her lipstick last. She was using one of the other bathrooms in their home, since she and Severus had agreed to separately dress and prepare for the ball. It was partly to surprise one another, and partly so they would be able to be ready on time by keeping their hands off each other.

She had heard Severus pacing about the foyer, no doubt waiting for her.

Turning her cheek to one side, she was glad that she was able to completely heal up that scratch from the bougainvillea she got when she decided to give it a thorough trim job. Severus' healing paste was an improvement of the one he'd helped Lavender develop to heal up fresh acne scars.

Hermione and Severus had spent the day engaged in domestic bliss of the mundane kind, doing laundry, cleaning, gardening and such, besides the odd roll or three in the hay. It was nice for Hermione to get a peek of how daily life would play out on the weekend when neither of them had to be at work and they could be together in a regular every-day kind of way.

And now they would be going out mingling with other couples in public at a social function.
Hermione's mind briefly flitted back to the Ministry Ball, and she wondered what would have been the reaction had she shown up at the Halloween masked ball on Severus' arm instead of Ron's. No doubt she would have had to divorce Ron by that point, and Severus' alternate Delgado persona was far older and obnoxious, but at least she could have danced with him in public instead of watching him from across a crowded room, feeling lonelier than ever.

Closing her tube of lipstick, she tucked it into the discreet charmed pocket on her snugly fitting blue halter dress. She checked one last time for her wand before going to meet Severus in the foyer for an evening of dinner, dancing, and frivolity.

Glancing at the clock on the mantle, he knew they were not running that late, but the clock had already struck seven and the ball had officially begun. Dinner was not going to be served until eight, but he hoped she would not dally much longer.

Hearing the thump of her heels on the wooden floor signaling her approach, he took his place in the foyer, ready to greet the love of his life and escort her to the ball.

As she emerged from the stairwell, Severus felt his breath catch in his throat. Each time he saw Hermione dressed up, he did not think he could imagine her any lovelier, yet she was. Her hair was done by a local beauty parlor, and these locals knew how to deal with wavy and curly hair that few back in England knew how to tame and style flatteringly, with the except of Ginny. It was piled up and off her neck with large soft curls, and a small cluster of white plumeria was set in her artfully arranged curls, on the left side. Her royal blue halter dress showed off her figure, and the accent of the sapphire necklace and earrings just completed the ensemble that made her a vision in blue.

She slowly walked toward Severus with a shy smile upon her lips, her hand nervously adjusting the jeweled necklace one last time before she stopped before him.

Finally finding his voice, he bowed deeply, purring in his deepest and most seductive voice, "Madam, never have I seen a more enchanting vision as you. I am your servant."

Hermione felt the blush suddenly flood her cheeks. She had seen the way Severus stared at her and knew he was not exaggerating in his praise. She briefly curtsied.

"Thank you, sir. And may I say you are looking quite dapper and elegant yourself," she complimented him.
Severus was dressed in his habitual formal long black frock coat with high-necked collar, and black trousers and boots, but given he'd recently had them tailored and altered, they fit his trimmer and slightly more muscular frame to a tee, showing off his form in a most flattering fashion.

Severus turned and extended his arm. "Shall we?"

They strolled into the community center that had been transformed for the event. Severus handed the two tickets over to the maître d', who bowed briefly before showing them to their table. Severus let go of Hermione's arm only when the tables prevented them from walking two abreast, and allowed her to go before him.

Hermione glanced about noting they had completely cleaned up and reset the community center. There was an earlier New Year's Eve Ball that day held for the teenaged set on Malu Palekaiko, with a balloon drop and a live Wireless Wizarding Network feed from Times Square in New York City. The event finished up at 6:15 pm., since it was a six-hour difference between Hawaii and New York. While Hermione was getting her hair done at the salon earlier, she could hear the loud thump of a whole lot of bass as wizard and Muggle rock and dance music blared.

Once at their table that sat eight, Severus pulled out Hermione's chair.

Draco and Ginny had made all the arrangements regarding seating. Severus and Hermione were both surprised to find Pat Vallier, Severus' office manager, already seated at the table, along with a young wizard.

"Severus, I'd like to introduce you to my son, Orin. He came out to spend a few days and visit from Dallas, Texas." Turning to her son, she said, "This is Severus Snape, my boss."

Orin rose and reached over, offering his hand, "A pleasure, Mr. Snape. My mother has said nothing but good things about you, a vast improvement from some of her previous employers. I'm glad she's happy working for you, and she's not quite as stressed anymore."

"Orin! Shh!" Pat gave her son a stern stare. "We're not here to disparage others who cannot speak in their defense, and those incidents are not to be repeated publicly. Besides, it's in the past, and that is drama I no longer have to deal with. Let's keep to pleasant conversation and avoid topics not fit for the occasion."
"Your mother is a wise woman, which is why I am glad to have her and her common sense in my employ," Severus said to the young wizard. Turning, he said, "And this is Hermione Weasley."

Hermione and Severus never did iron out how they would introduce each other in public, as the term companion had a coldness about it, lover seemed salacious, and girlfriend/boyfriend was certainly sophomoric. They weren't formally engaged, so the term fiancée/fiancé would send tongues wagging once more, and Hermione would be deluged by every witch at the ball wanting to harangue her for details about how Severus proposed to her, why didn't she have a ring yet, when the wedding date would be, and other such nettlesome nuisance neither wanted to deal with.

Hermione rose partially out of her seat and briefly shook Orin's hand. "It's a pleasure, Mr. Vallier."

"Weasley? I notice by your accent that you're from England," Orin noted.

'Well, that's a first. Someone guessed the country correctly,' Severus noted.

"Yes, I'm visiting for the week as well before I return to London on Sunday," she volunteered.

Leaning forward, Orin asked, "You wouldn't happen to be related to Ron Weasley, the Quidditch player?"

Hermione mused to herself that no one besides the most loyal and die-hard Chudley Cannon fans would have known the name Ron Weasley over a year ago. Now that he was first-string Keeper and had his face and body plastered all over that calendar, it seemed that nearly everyone had heard of him.

Placing a soothing hand on Severus' knee under the table, for she could almost hear the grinding of his teeth even with the band on the stage playing, she replied, "That would be my ex-husband."

Orin had the grace to look abashed. "I'm sorry if I caused any embarrassment by my question."

Hermione nodded her head in acceptance of his apology and added, "It was an amicable split and is long behind me."
Before an awkward silence could descend upon the table, Draco and Ginny showed up.

"Sorry for being late, but Ginny was attacked by a rather vicious nap and would not yield until she rested enough," Draco said in jest as a way to excuse their tardiness.

"Yes, quite sorry," Ginny added, stifling a yawn as Draco pulled her chair out and helped her into her seat. He gave her a strong arm to hold on to while she lowered herself carefully into her chair.

Pat introduced her son to the Malfoys, finishing up just when Jerry and his date showed up.

Jerry had brought Svetlana as his date to the ball. She was the same witch who, along with Justina, Antonia, Tina, and Miyuki, were in hot pursuit of Severus when he first arrived on the island until many of them had long given up or had heard the nasty rumors from Maria about his sexual performance.

It seemed Svetlana had glommed onto the current most eligible bachelor on the island, since Severus was definitely not on the market.

Hermione thought the blonde witch on Jerry's arm was quite pretty, but did not understand why she was glaring down her nose imperiously at Hermione and looking her over with great scrutiny. It then struck Hermione – remembering Ginny's tale that Severus had been the hottest thing on the island, and several of the witches were trying to snag Severus for themselves – and she correctly surmised Svetlana was probably one of those witches. Ginny had told her about how Severus has spurned their advances, much to their consternation, so Svetlana was probably trying to figure out what Hermione had that she didn't in order to land Severus herself.

With great grace, Hermione introduced herself to Svetlana, who seemed to melt her icy attitude towards Hermione a bit.

Now that everyone was at the table, Severus suggested that the gentlemen should fetch drinks for their female companions and themselves.

When they returned with refreshments, it seemed all the witches were chatting amicably. Sitting down, Hermione leaned sideways and asked very quietly, doing her best to remember and parroting what she heard in Russian, "Severus, what does 'Maria said he is small and soft like a little worm. Is that true?' mean?"
Fortunately, Severus had not sipped his drink, for surely he would have choked on it. Sitting up with his back ramrod straight, he glared at Svetlana with a look that could freeze even the hottest fires in hell.

Hermione didn't know what she repeated, but it must not have been good for Severus to give the blonde witch that look he only reserved for those that had truly raised his ire.

"Mr. Smokski," Severus said addressing Jerry, but his eyes still glaring at Svetlana, "please instruct your companion that such comments are not appropriate nor welcomed."

Jerry turned on his date and asked with a mixture of confusion and accusation, "What did you say?"

Svetlana shrugged, looking flustered as she feebly explained, "It was a little joke. I thought Hermione-nonny spoke Russian since I heard she can sing in Russian."

Ginny cleared her throat and said, "Well, Pat and I don't speak Russian, and neither does Hermione, so if it was a joke, we certainly missed the punchline."

Svetlana glared daggers at Ginny. "I don't have to take that talk from a fat korova like you."

Even Draco knew enough Russian to order from menus to know that she just called his wife a fat cow. Rising from his seat, his jaw clenched, his hand twitching to go to his wand and hex this offensive cunt across the Pacific and back, Draco hissed, "Jerry, I suggest you remove Miss Pushkin from our table and sight otherwise Rainbow will be spending the rest of the night reversing some rather unpleasant curses."

"That's okay," the Russian witch spat, "I wouldn't want to spend the rest of my night with a bunch of..." Before she could find the right word in English, she stormed off, muttering "Oslayob," under her breath.

Severus thought about saying to her retreating back in Russian that she would know better than him about such matters, but decided that probably would be a breach of the Potions master's code of ethics, since that might let others know about her possible proclivities. He had his suspicions. One thing was for certain, the next time Svetlana came to him for a commission to take care of a small and delicate matter regarding some peculiar tenderness she had obtained through unnamed means in one particular area of her body, he would refuse. Instead, he would send her off to Arnold, in which case she would balk and suffer, or pay him the commission and risk him telling the island
just what she got up to in the privacy of her own bedroom, or maybe it was the barn.

"I am so sorry. She seemed like a nice person, but there is a bug up her ass evidently. My apologies." Jerry ran a hand through his hair, puffing out a breath of air, glad that at least it did not come to wands being drawn.

Draco sat back down, now assured Svetlana was not going to be a problem for at least a little while, as he watched her retreat back over to the maître d’, no doubt to ask for a different table to be assigned to.

When planning the ball with the town council members, Draco had prepared for such an instance. There were indeed a few spare tables off in the far corner, which she was escorted to. Hopefully, she would stay out from underfoot the rest of the night.

For part of the cocktail hour, Hermione and Severus circulated around the room, where he was able to formally introduce her to other members of the community she had not yet met.

"And this is Mr. Loddy," Severus said, introducing the free elf.

"Congratulations on your recent election to town council member, Mr. Loddy," Hermione greeted him, bending over a little to shake his hand.

"And you must be the indomitable Miss Granger, or is it Mrs. Weasley, forgive me. Some of the elves that live here now in Malu Palekaiko made it here after you freed so many of them from service during the war with You-Know-Who. They still refer to you so fondly by your maiden name," the elf explained.

"Call me Hermione, please," she insisted.

Severus, Hermione, and Mr. Loddy conversed for a bit before Mr. Loddy made to excuse himself to speak to a fellow town council member regarding something that was not quite fully resolved at the last meeting.

When a vampire and his half-human/half-goblin wife spotted the lovely witch on Severus’ arm, they walked up to the couple.
"Why, Severus, who is this enchanting vision that you are escorting?" Dariusz asked. He took Hermione's hand and bowed low before her, keeping his lips, and fangs, politely away from her instead of kissing her hand.

Hermione knew a vampire when she saw one, but was surprised there were any in Malu Palekaiko.

"May I introduce Hermione Weasley. And this is Pan Dariusz Król and his charming wife, Glomp," Severus said, using the Polish honorific for the vampire, indicating his place of origin.

"Very pleased to meet you both," Hermione said. She curtsied briefly to Dariusz and Glomp, noting that they were probably far older than her and from Europe, so formality should be employed.

"Quite charming," said Glomp in response upon observing Hermione's manners and grace.

"Dariusz and Glomp have a farm on the north side of the island, and raise some of the finest pork in the Hawaiian islands," Severus informed her.

This surprised Hermione even more than discovering a vampire in Malu Palekaiko – that a vampire and a half-goblin would be involved in raising livestock – but she figured that it was probably a venture that suited them both. They discussed some matters regarding the building of the new school, since Severus was on the Board of Governors, before Dariusz and his wife excused themselves.

As they were leaving, Dariusz paused and leaned over and said in parting, "Oh, Severus, that last batch? Just perfect. No need to make any more adjustments."

Severus nodded and the couples went their separate ways.

Hermione was curious as to what potion Severus could have supplied the vampire or his wife. However, she knew from her thorough study of her code of ethics tome that it was a private matter that was none of her business, and she did not question Severus about the parting comment.

On their way back to their table, Hermione finally had a chance to meet Ranjit.
Severus cleared his throat before introducing the pair. "Hermione, I would like to introduce you to Ranjit Singh, a fellow Potions master. Ranjit, I would like to introduce you to Hermione Weasley, Potions apprentice."

"Madam Weasley, it is a pleasure to finally meet you. I'm sorry I have not stopped by to introduce myself sooner, but I usually spend the week between Christmas and New Years in quiet meditation in order to clear my mind and spiritually recharge my battery, so to speak," Ranjit said with a formal bow to her.

"I'm here visiting Severus for a similar reason, to take a break from my apprenticeship – mostly – in order do the same, so I completely understand, Mr. Singh," she assured him.

"Have you had a chance to meet the other Potions master here in Malu Palekaiko, Arnold Ogawa?" the Indian Potions master asked.

"No," Severus answered on her behalf a bit curtly.

"Still not speaking to Arnold?" Ranjit asked, an amused lilt in his voice.

"His issue is with me, not I with him," Severus sneered, lifting his chin up a bit as when he would get that certain air about him when vexed. "He thinks I poached his assistant and companion. I refute his assertions. For the fact he refuses to speak to me and continues to sulk like a petulant, pouting, pubescent prat is his problem, not mine. I am open to resuming lines of communication between us when he realizes the folly of his accusations and ceases making such charges."

Ranjit rolled his eyes while sighing. "Well, knowing Arnold's pride and his temper it looks like that won't happen any time soon." Turning to Hermione, Ranjit apologized, "I'm sorry that it looks like you won't have a chance to meet Arnold during your trip, but when these two are no longer bickering perhaps you'll have a chance to meet him on your next trip."

Hermione said she looked forward to spending more time to chat on her next visit to the island, before she and Severus continued walking back to their table.

They returned to their seats just as dinner was being served.
It was a limited menu with a choice of two salads to choose from, two soups, and a choice of either the seafood, chicken, beef, pork, or vegetarian dish for the entrée.

Of course, with the price of admission to the event, all food and beverage was included.

When Severus said, "Pork presented three ways," the dish appeared right in front of him. It reminded Hermione of when she'd ordered food at the Grand Royal Supper Club and it suddenly appeared.

Severus could tell Mario was behind the creation of that night's menu, based on his particular flare, but noted that Mario was one of the guests enjoying the evening's festivities. They had spoken to Mario earlier that night; he'd informed them that he'd let his regular kitchen staff, along with some elves he hired, cook and serve so he could enjoy the night off.

On Severus' plate was slow-braised pork cheek served with a Mexican mole sauce, pork shoulder wrapped and steamed Hawaiian style with cabbage leaves, and pork belly prepared Chinese style.

Hermione ordered the Rock Cornish Game Hen stuffed with a wild rice pilaf.

During dinner, Orin told tales about adjusting to life in Dallas and how there were some things he missed about Chicago, and some things – like the miserable winters – he certainly did not miss. There was some talk regarding Hermione's apprenticeship, how Severus' business might be affected with the opening of the school with less tutoring and more commissions making up his business, and Ginny having one of her more advanced students take over belly dance classes while she recovered after the children were born, as well as a variety of other topics.

Once dinner finished, the plates disappeared off to the kitchen in the back of the community center.

Mounga was up on stage. He had been sitting at another table with his wife, Rainbow, his eldest daughter, Akela, and her beau, Tristan, who had given Akela tickets to the New Year's Eve Ball as her Christmas present. There were also other town council members and their spouses at their table. The town judge and town council member was now standing on stage with his wand to his throat performing the Sonorous Charm.

"Good evening everyone, aloha!"
The crowd responded in typical fashion, with Hermione picking up the cue that she was to say "aloha" back with the rest of the crowd.

"I would like to welcome you all to the first formal New Year's Eve Ball for Malu Palekaiko," Mounga continued. "At this time I would like to thank Mr. Draco Malfoy for his wonderful suggestion to the town council for such an event, and his invaluable knowledge and help in organizing this affair," Mounga announced, gesturing with his hand toward the aforementioned wizard.

Draco stood and waved, bowing slightly before sitting back down once more as people applauded – some politely, some with more enthusiasm.

"You suggested the ball?" Hermione asked quietly, leaning closer towards Draco.

Speaking just low enough for her and Severus to hear, he replied, "Well, Severus was complaining how he did not have the chance to dance with you at the Ministry Halloween ball at all, and how it was wholly unfair Weasley did. So, when Albert and I planned to bring you here, I figured this was a chance to rectify what Severus called an injustice."

Severus knew of Draco's involvement with the planning of the ball and his plan for them to attend it together. It certainly explained why the younger wizard had asked Severus about the favorite songs he and Hermione had danced to since his return from India.

"Thank you," Hermione said gratefully. She patted his hand before going back to listening to Mounga, and rubbed Severus' upper arm briefly.

Others stood up and bowed, upon being recognized for their efforts to bring together all the planning needed to make the ball happen. There was the flash of a camera bulb here and there as the photographer from The Daily Times & Tides was there.

Mounga kept his remarks brief and wrapped it up shortly by introducing the main act, who would lead the band already on the stage. "And now I would like to present to you, straight from San Francisco, Tommy and his Two-Bit Strung-Out Pluckers!"

Hermione turned to see Severus' face fall. He nearly reared back like a skittish horse.
Draco tapped Jerry's arms rather firmly, nearly grabbing him by the arm and said loud enough for even Hermione to hear, "You said you were going to book an old friend from Juilliard – piano school – whatever, who got his wizarding school letter a year before you!"

"Yeah, Tommy and I are old friends. We go way back. Why, is there a problem?" Jerry asked. He was confused as to why Draco looked a bit stunned and Severus like he had been slapped across the face with a ten-pound mackerel.

Draco shook his head, indicating it was not a problem. Looking back over his shoulder at his mentor, he rolled his eyes and gave him a meek look of apology and a shrug that what was done was done.

"Severus? Is there a problem?" Hermione asked diplomatically.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he leaned over and quietly whispered into Hermione's ear, "When I was fleeing Polyjuiced as you, we stopped in San Francisco. Tommy was rather blatant as he tried to come on to me and played various songs, no doubt in an attempt to woo what he thought was a female back to his bed that night."

Hermione pulled back from Severus to gauge if he was serious or not, but given his reaction, there was no doubt to the veracity of his story. Unable to help herself, she suddenly burst out laughing, imagining Severus there, in her image, scowling at Tommy who was trying to pick him up.

"I'm so sorry, Severus, but that is kind of funny," she said, then amended quickly when Severus didn't smile, "well, at least from my perspective."

They were going to start out the dancing part of the ball with a waltz, as the large card by the edge of the stage indicated what the next song would be.

Severus, figuring that Tommy would most probably not recognize Hermione, and there were plenty of other witches he could flirt with that night, deemed it safe to take her out on the dance floor. Standing, he held out his hand and said rather formally, "Madam, may I have the first dance of the night with you?"

Before Hermione could reply, Pat piped up with the comment, "See, Orin? That's how it's done. Maybe you'd have a nice girlfriend by now if you employed better manners like that."
Ignoring the familial bickering, Hermione placed her hand in Severus’ and said, as he helped her rise, "I would be delighted, Mr. Snape."

Draco turned to his wife. With a fleeting look between them, he gauged her willingness to dance in order to avoid embarrassing her, before he rose. "Mrs. Malfoy, would you do me the honor?" He extended his hand, and she placed her hand in his before she proceeded to leverage herself up out of her seat as gracefully as she could, with her husband helping. The Malfoys followed behind Severus and Hermione to the dance floor.

"Maybe I ought to have sent you off to England for those etiquette lessons instead of letting your Aunt Harriett teach you," Pat nagged her son gently before dropping the subject.

Severus bowed to Hermione, and she curtsied in kind. Hermione had not curtsied so much since the Yule Ball in her fourth year.

Tommy and the whole rest of the band began with a very brief intro before the sweep strains of a quick-paced waltz began. It was a wizarding Viennese waltz, which was only slightly different from a Muggle Viennese waltz in that there was a short extra beat added after four, eight, or sometimes sixteen counts of three. The extra beat signaled a change in direction of dancing and spinning from one direction into a reversed direction.

Spinning around in Severus' arms, Hermione felt on top of the world. Severus was looking quite dashing, his hair even pulled back into a queue, looking as if he could fit right into a formal Viennese wizards' ball or something straight out of the Regency era. She was deliriously happy, as she had longed to dance with Severus in public, and here they were in the midst of a crowd twirling about as if they were in some grand romance novel where he would sweep her off her feet. Hermione had already been swept off her feet by Severus and she was floating, dancing as if on a cloud.

Severus spun Hermione about, his posture perfect and straight, his chest puffed with pride as he danced with the most lovely witch at any ball that had ever been held. And while he knew it was romantic nonsense and sentimental drivel to think such a thing, it certainly felt like it was an absolute fact. For once he let himself be carried away with such a thought by this glorious night of Hermione on his arm, looking magnificent, a picture of poise and refinement, and gazing at him with pure adoration and radiating love directed solely toward him and him alone.

As the first song came to an end, Severus spun Hermione about under his arm before they ended with him bowing and her curtsying once more.
Draco and Ginny excused themselves from the dance floor, Mrs. Malfoy only having so much stamina and lung capacity with triplets battling for space in her abdomen. As they walked back, the one hand that wasn't holding on to Draco's arm was moving a silk fan back and forth furiously to cool the overheated witch.

The next song was a moderately-paced foxtrot. Hermione and Severus danced, moving about the floor, with him leading in order to avoid them bumping into other couples. Still, that did not stop some couples, where the man or wizard was not as well practiced in leading, from bumping into the pair and offering their apologies.

When the song finished, Severus indicated he wanted to go back to the table. Once there, he removed his long coat, since it was still a rather balmy night. Hermione decided some cool water would be good, since she was still adjusting to the temperature; she decided to rest until she didn't feel quite so flushed. Also, dinner had not quite completely settled, and she wanted to pace herself and avoid a stitch in her side.

As they rested, Ginny had a chance to finally admire Hermione's new necklace close up and praised Severus for his excellent taste. Draco and Severus exchanged glances briefly with their witches none the wiser to their silent banter. Hermione admired the large, beautiful diamond-encrusted brooch, a Malfoy family heirloom, that was pinned in the middle of Ginny's chest at the top of the bust line. It looked perfect with her forest green dress, which had an empire waistline to minimize her rather prominent baby bump.

Had Severus known he would be going to the ball with Hermione, he would have taken some of the free dance courses Draco, Halulu, and Jerry had organized for the community at large in the weeks leading up to the ball. He had yet to learn how to polka, rhumba, and mambo, and in addition, they were going to feature songs suited for the quickstep and Peabody dance. While Severus did know the quickstep and had taught Hermione the basics, it was a fast-moving dance, and neither of them had practiced it much. The Peabody was an American Muggle dance that was quite popular with the wizarding community in the states, but it had never caught on back in England. Draco and Ginny had taken lessons to learn the Peabody, as it was evidently invented by a rather "large" American Muggle who was too fat to dance with his partner in front of him. Given Ginny's current waistline, they decided to learn the new dance.

When the card by the side of the stage indicated the next dance would be a tango, Severus stood once more and invited Hermione to the dance floor.

As they moved about the floor smoothly as one, Hermione recognized the melody and smiled broadly.

"What an appropriate song," she mused aloud.
"How so?" Severus asked as he pulled her close to his chest.

"This song is called, 'I Could Have Danced All Night,' but this arrangement is set to a tango instead," she clarified.

Severus suddenly remembered the song from the movie he'd watched last summer and recalled Draco's remarks afterward. "Draco made sure this song was on the play list, to be sure. After our first night of dance lessons, oh so long ago, Draco watched you descend the stairs afterwards hearing you sing about how you 'could have danced all night and begged for more.' He did not volunteer that the next morning Draco accused him of seducing Hermione, surmising that only a thoroughly fucked witch would sing such a song so dreamily with a beaming smile upon her face.

Hermione got a faraway look on her face as she inwardly smiled to herself upon remembering that night. "Yes, I could have danced all night and almost did beg for more, had I not been married to Ron at the time," she said with some somber reflection.

"But you knew me only as Calleo at the time. Neither of us were ready to end the enchantment with my true identity quite yet," he reminded her.

"Too true, too true," she agreed with a sigh. "But here we are now. In a tropical paradise, dancing the night away, with the prospect of a long future together. Despite everything that has happened, it was worth it so that we could eventually be together."

Well, they weren't entirely together, as Hermione had to go back to England to finish her apprenticeship, and they could have done without the mishaps of last summer, but for the sake of argument, it was a done deal and they were solidly a couple. Those misfortunes were in the past and behind them.

The song card indicated that the next one would be a slow foxtrot, so they decided to stay on the floor for another dance.

At the familiar introduction to the song, Hermione and Severus smiled at each other. They were playing her favorite song.

Once the introduction had finished, Tommy began to croon sweetly, "I left my heart in San Francisco..."
They hardly noticed the other dancers on the floor moving about them as they gazed so intently into each other's eyes.

Severus stroked Hermione's cheek and confessed, "That day I fled for sanctuary, I requested they play this in that San Francisco lounge while we were waiting for our last Portkey. I really did feel like I was leaving my heart in San Francisco, as it rained buckets outside."

Figuring this was as good a time as any regarding something that had been bothering Hermione all week long, since the mood seemed right, she admitted, "I want to apologize."

Severus briefly furrowed his brow in confusion.

"When you proposed to me in the hot springs, I should have just said yes instead of screaming at you and getting hysterical."

Severus said nothing in response. He knew her well enough to realize that she was not done talking, and he would not interrupt her in the midst of her apology to him.

"I should have been more gracious, but all I could think of was all the hassle involved, instead of thinking about the good and wonderful aspects of it. Yes, Severus, I would love to marry you and be your wife. And I will endeavor, when that time comes and we can take that step and plan that day, to not put myself into a tizzy nor make you and myself miserable in the process."

She laid her head against Severus' chest as she said with a resigned sigh, "When we do marry, I want it to be a day I look forward to, not dread. I want us to think back and remember it as a joyous day, not one where I was too tired to enjoy it."

Pulling her head up from his chest, she looked him in the eye to gauge his reaction to her apology.

He only continued smiling, saying, "I know." Severus had understood her initial reaction, but was pleased Hermione had tried to make amends for her less than gracious acceptance of his proposal. "You know, Draco suggested that perhaps we should elope to avoid the fuss and bother."

"Yes, but I have to make sure Draco can run the business before we leave, and you have to make
sure you don't have any commissions simmering away or tutoring appointments on your calendar, so there would be some planning required," she reminded him.

He laughed lightly, as that was exactly what he had pointed out to Draco. He kissed her temple, for having read his mind.

"You know," she said in that particular tone she used when she made some interesting observation, "if it wasn't for the fact we've had to interrupt our time together this week with language lessons and my work for Lavender and Albert, this week would have been a splendid honeymoon."

Severus gave her a bemused smile, countering, "And that time you abandoned me for your girls' lunch out with Ginny? Would you have done that were we truly on our honeymoon as well?"

Looking up at the ceiling innocently, she replied, "Well, how else was I supposed to get away from you to buy you your birthday present without you knowing what it is?"

Severus stopped dancing for a moment, just as the song finished and before the next one had started. "You bought me a birthday present?"

The next song began, and they started moving in a slow waltz.

"Of course I did. Since your birthday is coming up in less than two weeks, I figured now was as good a time as any. I was planning on leaving it for you to find after I've left, but that surprise is gone; however, you'll still have the surprise of unwrapping it."

"Christmas and birthday presents. I think I may actually start enjoying this time of year," Severus said a bit dryly.

They danced the rest of the waltz in silence with Hermione's head upon his chest.

As the song ended, she gazed up into his face lovingly as he reached up to brush his hand against her cheek, a slight smile tugging at his lips. They were both drunk on love, their foreheads almost touching.
Just then a camera flash went off near them.

The photographer for *The Daily Times & Tides* had been taking photos of people and couples around the ball that night and captured a tender moment between the two lovers.

"Oh, that was just beautiful. Put you in white dress robes and you two look like a bride and groom in love," the photographer quipped. "If you want copies for yourself, I'll have prints available for purchase towards the end of the night," he added in the last-minute sales pitch for a bit of extra money.

"I'd like a copy," Hermione said, realizing that there were no photos of her and Severus together.

"Make that two copies," Severus amended, wanting one for himself. Looking at Hermione, he said, "Until you can move here permanently, I'll need something to remind myself this isn't a dream."

Since the next dance was a polka, the pair left the floor and took in the cool night air.

A waning gibbous moon was just rising in the east as it started to cast its silvery glow. Its light set off the white plumeria in her hair, making it appear as if a sliver of the moon itself was adorning her crown.

Seeing the moonlight highlighting her cheeks and reflecting in her large brown eyes, Severus could not restrain himself any longer. He swept Hermione up into his arms, circling one arm behind her neck, and kissed her passionately.

Hermione no longer felt the earth beneath her feet, and she let herself be carried away by Severus' sudden and claiming kiss.

When he finally pulled his lips away from hers, she said in a whisper, her voice quaking with emotion, "Just when I think I cannot love you any more than it is possible, I am yet proven wrong once more. How I do love you, Severus. Beyond words or comprehension, I do love you so completely."

"As do I," was all he could say to let her know she had read his own heart as well, before kissing her once more.
Had there not been over a hundred people a mere twenty feet away, Severus would have taken Hermione to the nearest darkest corner and ravished her up against a wall, but he was able to restrain himself. With so many people milling about to seek a bit of fresh air, especially since the community center was an open-sided venue and everyone could spot them if they looked hard enough, it was not prudent to engage in such risky amorous pursuits.

If anything, the denial to satisfy their building ardor only fueled their passion for one another as they danced on the floor as the night progressed.

As they danced a foxtrot, Akela and Tristan came up alongside the couple.

"May I have the next dance with Madam Weasley?" Tristan asked, looking to Severus since it seemed the couple could hardly be pried apart that night.

Severus quickly glanced to Hermione, who nodded. He replied, "If I may be allowed the honor of dancing with Miss Finau in turn?"

The young couple nodded, and Akela almost blushed at Severus' formal manners.

When they swapped partners, as the next song, another foxtrot, began, Tristan and Hermione began dancing.

"I was wondering if I could ask you something, Madam Weasley?"

"Please, call me Hermione."

"Hermione." Tristan's eyes darted back toward where Akela and the Potions master were dancing, before he turned his nervous gaze back to his dance partner. "I may have an apprenticeship starting in the spring, but it's all the way in Salem, Massachusetts."

Hermione nodded, encouraging him to go on.
"Knowing that you and Mr. Snape have had a long-distance relationship, I was wondering if you could give me some advice or at least some pointers on what to expect. You know, with dating or at least staying together when you're so far apart for long periods of time." Tristan quirked a feeble smile.

Hermione's face became very somber. "I will be frank with you, Tristan. It is not easy. And when Severus first came here, we made no promises to each other. He asked me to come with him, but I had my reasons for staying. And while coming with him may have solved some problems regarding our relationship, it would not have solved some other issues, like eventually his exoneration. Also, I had already begun my apprenticeship when Severus asked me to come with him and I could not change masters. But he understood how important this apprenticeship was to me, just as I understood how important his freedom was to him."

Heaving a troubled sigh, she added, "Akela has already asked me for a possible apprenticeship under me once I have become a mistress and have moved here. That would mean two to three years apart until one of you finishes your apprenticeship, unless she can find a Potions mistress in Salem who would take her – and no, I recommend that she not study under a master unless he is very, very old. And unless your relationship is serious enough that you've already considered marriage, I will warn you that the distance may strain the bonds between you greatly and that it may not last. I have no easy answer for you, but I can tell you from personal experience, it can be quite lonely and difficult being apart from the one you love," she finished as she looked over Tristan's shoulder at Severus, who was engaged in conversation with Akela.

"So, Uncle Severus, Tristan is wondering if he should take the apprenticeship in Salem or look for something closer. What do you think?" Akela asked, seeking similar guidance from him.

"I will tell you that if he truly does love you and falls into the arms of another witch, it is not to hurt you, but that it is likely that he misses you so much he is willing to imagine the other witch is you in order to fill the emptiness of you gone," Severus admitted with a hint of ruefulness. It was a very round-about way of admitting his own faltering without outright confessing, as his own eyes glanced over at Hermione dancing with the young wizard.

"But let's say that we stay true to each other and we really do love each other very much. Do you think our relationship could stand us being apart for so long?" she asked, her eyes pleading for him to provide some answer to calm her troubled heart.

"Should you discourage him from seeking an apprenticeship as prestigious as the one he has been offered, in time he may grow to resent you keeping him away from such an opportunity and from reaching his potential," he warned her. "As for if your relationship is strong enough to deal with the strain of being parted, only you and Tristan know how deep your love has bound you together. I
cannot judge on that matter, as only you two can."

Severus and Akela danced in silence for a bit longer when Severus added, "And do not rush to marry. Ginny married too young, as well as Hermione, and that led to much misery for them both. Each married for different reasons, but both married before they were ready."

"Yeah, I heard all about Ginny and Draco's courtship and Ginny's marriage to some Harry guy, but you never did say much about Hermione's marriage other than she married a big fat jerk that is married to her boss now." Akela suppressed a smirk, trying not to laugh. "My mom said something about you rescuing Hermione from some giant octopus and a love potion?"

"Giant squid, and that was to get your mother off my back with her incessant pestering about how the romantic aspect of our relationship began," Severus corrected her. "How our relationship in its present form began is not important. What matters is that Hermione and I have gone through our trials and have realized that we are willing to wait until she finishes her apprenticeship for us to be together. I understand how important this apprenticeship is to her and would do nothing to take it away from her, for that would be selfish of me, no matter how much I wish for her to be by my side and move here as soon as possible. And you should take into consideration Tristan's career and needs, just as I've taken Hermione's into consideration. I am willing to wait. Are you?"

"Tristan said he was willing to wait until my seventeenth birthday before taking things further – you know, like contraceptive potions – so he's patient. But I guess if I had an opportunity like what Tristan has, I wouldn't want him holding me back. So I guess we'll just have to see in time if is meant to last or not," Akela admitted with resignation, her brow slightly furrowed with worry.

"Love is patient. It will still be there waiting for you if it is meant to be," Severus said, just as the song ended. It was sentimental, but it was also quite realistic that if their love was not meant to be, then they would eventually part.

As Hermione and Severus sat, sipping on some champagne, the editor of The Daily Times & Tides, Rick Chen, came over and introduced himself to Hermione.

While they talked, Hermione deferring questions about the new Lovely Lavender facility to Draco Malfoy, much to the consternation of the editor, Severus noticed that one of the few centaurs on the island, Magnus, had shown up to the celebration. Since he was not going to eat, as he showed up long after dinner and dessert were served and it was highly unlikely he would dance, Severus mused he might have been let in without a ticket. It was then he spotted Svetlana talking with Magnus. It did not surprise him when Svetlana went up to Magnus and began conversing with him like they were old friends. Nor did it escape his attention when she very tenderly stroked his flank as they talked in a darker corner of the community center near the side. By the way that Magnus' tail twitched, Severus' suspicions were confirmed.
Draco and Ginny came over, having danced the Peabody, grateful there was at least one dance that worked to Ginny's advantage with her current body shape. She needed to get off her feet yet again and drink some more chilled beverage.

"Severus?" Draco said, noticing Severus looking quite distracted as he picked up his own flute of champagne to drink.

"Oh, nothing. Just noticing Catherine the Great leaving with her new date," the Potions master said offhandedly before turning his attention back to Hermione.

Draco turned around as he swigged a mouthful of champagne, and saw the figures of Svetlana and Magnus leaving the party together. Picking up on Severus' dig and the old nasty rumor started by the Polish about the Russian monarch and how she died when the horse fell, Draco began choking on his drink. His eyes were watering as a little champagne went up into his sinuses, as he began laughing, much to the confusion of his wife, Hermione, and Rick, the editor of The Daily Times & Tides.

"Are you okay, Draco?" his wife asked, seeing him still choking on the sparkling wine that went down the wrong way. She began patting him on the back.

"Yeah, (COUGH!) I just (HACK!), oh my..." He burst into fits of laughter once more, still amused by how casually Severus threw out that remark and all that it implied. Wiping away his tears, he said, "I'll be fine. Never mind me." It took him a few more moments to school his features.

Rick, seeing that Draco was in no condition to answer questions at the moment, turned to Severus regarding a business proposition. "So Severus, I was thinking I would like you to write a column for the paper. Maybe a weekly article in which you give tips on how to brew things at home. You know, common sort of questions a housewitch might have on brewing something. I was thinking you could call it 'Home Brew Tips,' so it sounds sort of homey. You could answer questions from readers about problems they are having or however. Maybe answer a letter or two, and give one tip that you didn't cover in the letter. Something like that? If it does well, I know a witch in New York who might like to syndicate your column, if you are interested in something like that."

Before Severus could think on the matter, Ginny insisted, "Oh Severus, that would be wonderful. My mum loved reading all those columns on how to do a spell or charm better and such, especially cooking spells. I think it would be a big hit, and given how vast your knowledge is. I think it would be great!"
Thinking about how his business might drop off in terms of tutoring with the opening of the new school, hopefully within the year, he viewed this as an opportunity to increase his sources of revenue, even though he still had a very healthy royalty income from Lavender that was filling his vault quite nicely. Still, it was good to diversify.

Looking as if he was still mulling over the offer, Severus said, "After the New Year, I will stop by your offices, and we can discuss the possibility of this column."

"Excellent, I look forward to it," Rick said. He shook Severus' hand before going off to get a quote by Mounga about the ball for the next day's edition.

"That's wonderful, Severus," Hermione said earnestly. She was glad that he was doing so well and was well respected. This was an opportunity that would have never been presented to him back in England, even with his exoneration.

Hermione and Severus danced some more, even dancing with a few other partners before taking a break, then going back out onto the floor to dance some more. When the song "At Last" began to play, they took to the floor again, dancing to a song that truly captured the feeling of them now being joined together again and deeply in love. That song was quickly becoming Hermione's new favorite song.

When it was almost midnight, Tommy launched into a new song, singing, "She got big red lips, she got big brown eyes..." Severus insisted they leave the dance floor to fetch fresh glasses of champagne for midnight.

That song still irked him to no end as he recalled Tommy crooning that song to him – while he was Polyjuiced as Hermione – in order to woo him.

With fresh glasses of champagne in hand, Severus, Hermione, Draco, and Ginny stood together on the dance floor and counted down aloud with all the party revelers.

At the stroke of midnight, Severus kissed Hermione, not caring if anyone saw them snogging away, since most everyone else was kissing as well, as balloons cascaded down from above.

Breathless from his kisses, Hermione beamed at Severus as the confetti drifted down like a multihued shower of snowflakes, alighting in his hair, peppering it with bright colors. One or two bits of confetti caught on his black eyelashes before he blinked them away as he smiled openly, his
face alight with joy and happiness.

Some people held their wands aloft, sending shimmering sparks of every color to fill the air above their heads in the community center in celebration of the New Year.

Hermione stood up on her toes and kissed Severus this time, feeling overwhelmed with a warm glow in her.

Finally, they stopped kissing long enough to clink glasses with the Malfoys, and drank before spelling their empty glasses away. Then they joined with the crowd in singing "Auld Lang Syne."

Hermione and Severus toasted to a happy year ahead filled with so many plans they looked forward to.

Away in a dark corner, trying to be discreet, someone was busy scribbling away some quick notes on parchment. They had to take a Portkey home very soon if they were to make deadline.

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Rolling over in bed, Hermione reached out and picked up the photograph of her and Severus at the ball to study it closer.

"You look so handsome," she sighed.

"Incomparable to your radiance, still," Severus said as he snuggled up behind her, looking at the photo she was holding while pressing himself into her bottom. They had just finished making love after waking that morning, and she wanted to look at the photograph yet again.

"That photo is perfect. We look so in love." she observed.

"We are so in love, so the photograph actually represents something accurately for once," he noted dryly, reminding Hermione about her own experience of photographs of her being taken out of context.

"Well, at least the photographer will give us that second copy free, since he couldn't find it, and he swore he made two prints," Hermione said.
"You should take this one home then. I can get the second copy next week when I swing by the paper to talk with Rick," Severus offered.

Setting the photo down, they finally got up out of bed to have a light breakfast, since it was already ten o'clock and they had to be over at the Malfoys' by noon for the formal Japanese tea ceremony.

After tea and fruit, Hermione set about writing up more scrolls for Albert while Severus read by himself until it was time to leave.

Arriving at the Malfoys' home, they were greeted at the door by Ginny. She was already wearing a kimono in a spring green color accented with plum blossoms for the New Year.

She bowed deeply, saying, "Youkoso."

Severus and Hermione bowed in kind.

"Thank you for inviting us to your home," Severus said. He could have said it in Japanese, but he knew Ginny only knew a few words.

"Come. I'll help you both with your kimonos," Ginny said, gesturing them to come inside. "Draco is almost ready for you. By the time you finish dressing he should be ready."

Ginny helped Hermione into a pink kimono and tied her contrasting obi for her, and gave her a new pair of tabi socks and zori sandals to wear. Once done, she went to Severus who was in the other spare bedroom and helped him with his black kimono and obi, and presented him with his own new tabi and zori set.

Once they were all dressed, Ginny guided them along a pathway around the outside of the house to a bench where they could sit and rest before the ceremony would begin.

Gary had walked Hermione and Severus though the tea ceremony as part of Thursday's lesson. He reviewed the parts of the ceremony, what they were expected to do as guests, the symbolism
behind the various acts and movements, what they were to say and when, how to bow, and other proper etiquette.

Draco was going to perform *Chaji*, a full tea ceremony that involved a meal, with both thick tea and thin tea being served. Severus and Hermione had been warned by Gary that the full tea ceremony can take up to four hours, so they were prepared mentally for the ceremony.

As they sat on a bench that afforded them a view of the garden off of the living room area, they noticed one of the sliding glass doors had been Transfigured into a small door, that was now shunted aside. Draco emerged and approached his guests. After a silent bow in greeting they proceeded to the *tsukubai* in which to ritually rinse their hands and mouths with the water from the stone basin.

After removing their footwear, they crawled through the small opening and took their places in the middle of the living room. Draco had transformed it into a tea room for the occasion, having installed fresh tatami mats on the floor and a beautiful scroll hanging in the *tokonoma* alcove off to one side that had always been there.

Since Hermione was visiting, she was given the guest of honor spot, followed by Severus, then Ginny last. Draco finally entered the room and greeted each guest formally.

Hermione asked Draco about the scroll hanging, knowing this was expected of her.

Draco explained the scroll featured the first sunrise of the New Year, auspicious for that day.

Severus then asked Draco about a few of the tea items he had on display.

Once that part of the ceremony was complete, Draco began laying the charcoal fire. Their host then called for the elf to bring the food and sake. The elf was originally from Japan, and Draco had hired him to help with all the preparations.

The food was specifically chosen to reflect the season and time of day for the tea ceremony. It was all beautifully laid out as if presenting a highly choreographed scene to admire. Hermione noted that it was so beautiful it was almost a pity to eat the three-course lunch presented to her, including a small sweet at the end. They used their special *kaishi* paper to hold the dessert as they ate it; Ginny had given them the paper to keep tucked into their kimonos until it was time.
Draco poured sake to go with the meal in little cups featuring a muted green glaze. Each cup had some lightly contracting color brushed on in a manner that seemed spontaneous, yet purposeful in its pattern.

After the meal, the guests went outside to wait once more on the garden bench while Draco prepared the tea room once again. With the sound of the bell, Hermione, Severus, and Ginny ritually purified themselves once more by the tsukubai. They re-entered the tea room where the flower arrangement had now been placed in the tokonoma, replacing the scroll that hung there before.

Draco entered and performed the thick tea ceremony, ritually cleaning each utensil with very slow and careful movement. Hermione noted how Draco focused on each utensil as he handled it, the way he snapped the cloth before folding it a certain way, then wiping. By the position of his hands and body, she saw he was solely focused on each moment and the moment alone. She silently wondered if through studying the tea ceremony he had learned to be more patient and calm, as there seemed to be a serenity exuded while in the act of performing these simple movements.

Severus could admire the beauty of each careful movement of Draco's hands as they followed a specific order, noting the similarities between brewing and the ceremony.

Draco's hand moved with precision as he whisked the tea until it was ready. Turning, he and Hermione bowed to each other as he presented her the bowl of thick tea that everyone would share, exchanging polite phrases of gratitude in Japanese.

Being coached by Gary, Hermione knew to bow to Severus, the second guest, before drinking the tea. It was very strong and bitter, but she did not wince and made sure to turn the bowl as to not sip from the front of it.

Down the line, the etiquette of bowing to the next guest was observed as Severus drank from the bowl and passed it to Ginny.

Once the sharing of the thick tea was done, Draco cleaned his utensils, followed by more ritualized movements until the utensils were clean, and he laid them out for his guests to admire. Hermione asked for permission to view the bowl from which they drank, bowing to Draco as it was presented to her. Severus also took this opportunity to inspect the bowl, admiring the weathered and rustic state of the bowl, since Gary had discussed that week the aspect of imperfection, asymmetry, simplicity, and naturalness embodied in the concept of Wabi-sabi. Afterwards, Draco removed the utensils used for the thick tea ceremony and brought in a completely different set for the thin tea ceremony in which everyone would have their own bowl of tea to sip from.
It was during the thin tea ceremony that casual conversation could commence. As they drank tea, they talked. Ginny, who could not bear sitting on her knees for hours in her condition, was sitting on a low stool. Hermione and Severus wound up sitting sideways eventually, unaccustomed to kneeling for long periods as well.

Eventually, everyone had their fill of tea and Draco performed the same utensil cleaning ritual once again, allowing his guests to handle and view the tea-making objects closer until he packed them away. Before he left the room, Hermione thanked him in Japanese for his wonderful hospitality and how honored she was to have been his guest. Draco merely smiled and bowed before exiting the room, signaling the end of the tea ceremony.

The ceremony now complete, Ginny guided Hermione and Severus back out the small sliding door, through the garden, and to their respective rooms to change back into their clothes. She offered for them to keep their kimonos, obis, and footwear as a gift.

Standing on the front porch, Hermione said, not sure that Draco understood what she said earlier, "Draco, I am truly honored by all the effort you put into your tea ceremony. That was quite beautiful and your hospitality magnificent. Truly, thank you."

Draco bowed to Hermione, and she and Severus bowed back before they left to walk home.

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Ginny and Hermione were both blubbering messes as they said goodbye at the Portkey office. The Malfoys had come to see Hermione off.

"I wish you could be here when the babies are born," Ginny sobbed. She gave a great sniff as she smiled weakly through her tears.

Draco and Severus both discreetly pressed handkerchiefs into their respective witches' hands.

"I know. But I might be coming out during the last week in March for a quick visit to check up on construction, if it has begun yet," she added with an exasperated growl, annoyed by the local building commission and their Byzantine building codes. She finished blotting her face.

"Luckily, you have a Slytherin on staff for such matters," Draco added, without saying too much more, since Halulu was standing nearby and she was on the town council. He did not want to damn the building project by disparaging various government officials in front of her.
Draco gave Hermione a hug before the Malfoys left so that Hermione and Severus could say their farewells in private. Halulu was hovering about the Portkey office trying to pretend she wasn't there, though she had seen many tearful goodbyes before.

As Hermione stood with her arms wrapped around Severus' neck, and her trunk by her side and waiting, she could hardly find the courage to look up at him. Swallowing thickly, she choked on her words. "It's been like some wonderful dream that has finally come true, being here with you."

Severus, who had his arms wrapped around her waist, reached up and pushed aside one tendril of hair that had fallen into her face, tucking it tenderly behind her ear. He then straightened the necklace Harry had given her for protection should she be in trouble again. Severus was thankful Potter was still looking out for her, and she remembered to finally put it back on that morning before she left.

"It has been a dream for me as well," Severus said. "I fear it is time for the dreamer to awaken. However, this has not been some dream, but a reality far sweeter than I could have imagined. I have never been happier," he said, his voice becoming a whisper, finding it hard himself to continue speaking.

The last, and only time, he had cried in Hermione's presence was when they parted, while he was Polyjuiced as Hermione.

"I don't want to go," she said. Her voice warbled as she tried to stop herself from outright crying it aloud, seeing Severus' eyes begin to look glassy as they were beginning to fill with tears.

Severus pulled her tighter to him, one arm wrapping around her shoulder as his hand cupped the back of her head and cradled it, clutching her to his chest. He squinted his eyes shut tight and damned himself as he felt tears quickly slide down his cheeks, his heart rent by the plaintive sound of her voice begging not to go.

Hermione held on with equal fervor, wrapping her arms around his chest and squeezing with all her might, in some vain hope that they could not be pried apart. She felt his chest heave and one of his tears land on her forehead. Just knowing Severus was crying too broke her, for she had hoped he would be her rock of stoic sensibility telling her that it was not forever and that they had the mirrors to converse with one another so they could talk daily. But it also moved her that Severus was equally undone by the fact they were to be divided once more from each other's presence.

"We'll have the mirrors," she said, as she tried to keep the sound of her voice light.
"Yes, we will." Severus kissed the top of her head. Tipping her chin to look up at him, he gazed down at her. "I will miss you."

Seeing the tears on his cheeks nearly sent Hermione into fits of wailing.

"Here," he said as he reached into his pocket. "You're not the only one who did a little shopping while away."

In his palm sat a very large misshapen pearl, that was about the size of his thumbnail, with a greenish iridescent hue, until Hermione looked at it closer and realized the pearl was in the shape of a frog resting. The tiny frog readjusted the positions of its legs, then continued resting once more.

Placing it carefully in her palm so that she could look at it, he said, "In Japanese, the word frog is kaeru, which sounds very close to the verb 'to return'. It is a custom in Japan to give a small frog to loved ones for safe travels and to return home soon, also for the return of wealth and fortune. You are everything to me, Hermione. Return home to me."

Severus captured Hermione in a kiss. She returned his kiss with all her heart, tasting the salt of their tears as they kissed, the small pearl frog clutched desperately in her hand.

Knowing that if she did not go, her resolve would falter and she'd never leave this island, Hermione let go of Severus and bent to pick up her trunk.

As she walked to the Portkey area on the other side of the desk where Halulu was waiting, she stopped to speak to Severus one last time and said somberly, "I will return, I promise."

Standing in the Portkey area that had a small protective railing demarcating the area for travel, she watched Severus as her hand blindly reached out and touched the Muggle telephone turned into a Portkey.

Severus would not let his eyes leave her until she was gone with a blue flash and the Portkey area was empty.
Halulu blew her nose very loudly into her own handkerchief. "You know, I've seen a lot of goodbyes, but few broke my heart like that."

Severus wanted to tell her to stuff it, but knew she was just being nice and her pregnancy hormones were making her especially sentimental.

Now he had to walk back home and sit in front of the mirror waiting for Hermione to arrive at the London Portkey office and Floo home. She would then unpack her own matching charmed mirror and they would see if the mirrors really did work over such vast distances. Then they could see and talk to each other every day until she came back to his arms once more.

As Hermione approached her destination in London, she prepared herself for landing, making sure she would not sprawl herself all over the floor like she had done once or twice when she was distracted or unprepared.

Upon landing, she was then suddenly blinded by a flash of camera bulbs all popping off at once. There was a clamor of people yelling and some screaming.

Hermione threw her hand up to shield herself from the flashes of light that made it hard to tell which Portkey arrival area she'd landed in, much less focus.

Before she could get her bearings, she heard Lavender say in haste, "Quick, get under here!"

Suddenly, Hermione was able to focus, and she realized she was under Harry's Invisibility Cloak.

Lavender had a firm grip of her arm through the cloak and was guiding her. Hermione dragged her trunk with her, pulling it under the cloak as she moved along.

Looking about, she saw the backs of familiar friends; Harry, the twins, Ron, Bill, Tonks, Kingsley, Fastrada, Trevor, Viktor and his wife, Anne, Niles, Braxton, Royston, John Leyster, Neville, Luna, even Arthur Weasley. All of them were creating a corridor and protective barrier in which Hermione was being guided through to prevent the throngs of people who had crowded the Portkey office from seeing Hermione and casting hexes at her.

"Harlot!" one witch with a purple velvet hat with a stuffed hedgehog attached to the brim screamed in the general direction of Hermione.
"Death Eater Fucker!" shouted a wizard about Hermione's age.

"How could you! And after everything that happened during the war!" bellowed another witch.

"What's going on?" asked Hermione, bewildered as to what had happened to cause this raucous melee.

"We'll talk once we get back to your flat," Lavender said under her breath as she guided Hermione to a Floo.

As they reached the Floo, Lavender called out for Hermione's flat and also said a spell to unlock it, something Hermione had not done when she had left.

Emerging from the fireplace back in her flat, Hermione set her trunk down and pulled off Harry's cloak.

"What in Merlin's name is going on!" Hermione asked, confused as to why the wizarding world in England had suddenly turned upside down and she was the sole target of its ire.

"This is what's happened," Lavender said as she produced the Sunday edition of the *Daily Prophet*.

There on the front cover was the photograph of Hermione and Severus looking into each others' eyes adoringly at the ball. Above it, the headline in large block letters screamed about their relationship in a manner that was not very complimentary.

Hermione felt her legs go out from underneath her. Fortunately, Marf had been appraised of the situation and was able to charm one of the wingback chairs to move quickly enough so that she fell into it instead of onto the floor.

She felt the bile in her throat rise, especially with the *Daily Prophet*'s use of that very inappropriate term regarding her magical lineage, on the front page no less.
Looking at the by-lines, she noticed who wrote it. "Rita Skeeter, Marietta Edgecombe, and on special assignment in the middle of the Pacific, Colin Creevey." Hermione closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose in a manner very similar to Severus and sighed, "Oh, fuck."

The three people who had a grudge against her had conspired together to create a story meant to shock and stir up the public's anger, directing said anger towards Hermione with language meant to incite hatred and disgust.

There was only one person she wanted to talk to now. She opened her trunk and began digging through it.

Severus sat in a kitchen chair with a cup of tea, waiting patiently by the free-standing mirror for Hermione. As he sat there, he saw the black drape of fabric on her side begin to move and flashes of candlelight luminescence as the protective cloth – charmed to prevent breakage – was moved aside.

A smile began to break across his face that the charm had indeed worked and the mirrors could allow them to see one another. But then his face fell as he saw the look of distress etched on her face, a fresh wave of tears now streaming down her face.

"Hermione? What's the matter?" Severus asked. He now stood in front of the mirror.

"This," was all she said, and she held up the front page of the *Daily Prophet* for him to clearly read: "**SCANDALOUS AFFAIR: The Death Eater and the Mudblood!**"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: ~o0o~ END of SEASON IV ~o0o~

Looks like lemon season is over. But how much longer will it be before our two lovers are reunited again? How will it take Hermione to finish her apprenticeship? And just how did those hacks at the *Daily Prophet* get tipped off about Hermione and Severus? Stay tuned and keep reading.
Thank you to my always helpful and talented betas, JuneW and Hope.

Smok is Polish for dragon, so I gave Jerry, who is of Polish background, a name, Smokski, that intones that somewhere there is something to do with dragons in his lineage, which explains why his Animagus form is a dragon.

Oslayob is a Russian swear word meaning "donkey fucker."

If you've seen the movie, "My Fair Lady," they do play an instrumental tango version of "I Could Have Danced All Night." It is played at the Embassy Ball scene where gossip is being spread by the character Zoltan Karpathy, Professor Higgin's former pupil.

Yes, I named the centaur Magnus, since the other centaur we're familiar with beside Firenze is Bane. Magnus Bane, yes, is the warlock from the Cassandra Clare Mortal Instrument series, but that's just how the name came to me.

Frogs are ascribed magical powers by the Japanese. They are popular lucky amulets, because the word for frog in Japanese – "kaeru" – sounds like the word for "return." Therefore, it implies many happy returns (of money and fortune), a safe return journey, etc. The website "Symbology" explains it thus:

"Twenty-seven species of frog are found in Japan. Due to an agricultural economy based on the flooded rice paddy, the presence of frogs is considered to bring good fortune. Additionally, the frog has become a creature much beloved in poetry and art. Ceramic frogs are often sold at shrines as the Japanese word for ‘frog’ is the same as ‘to return’.

https://japanesemythology.wordpress.com/frog-solar-symbolism-and-other-meanings/
Chapter Summary

Hermione and Severus work together to fight the Daily Prophet's twisted lies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter One Hundred Ten
"Welcome to My Nightmare"

Disclaimer:
Just a fanfic hack
Writing till the sky turns black
I took Rowling's work and played with it
Just an English girl
Born and raised in south Tutshill
She took the midday train to Edinburgh
A wizard in a pair of jeans
Butterbeer and Betrie Bott's Beans
I just borrow them for just the night
It goes on and on, and on, and on

Strangers reading
Up and down the Internet
Their keywords searching in the night
Disclaimers for people
Setting straight that I don't own this
Rowling sleeps peacefully through the night

A/N: Disclaimer a parody of "Don't Stop Believing" Songwriters: CAIN, JONATHAN / PERRY, STEVE / SCHON, NEAL Published by Lyrics © Journey - Weedhigh Nightmare Music

"January 2, 2005 -- This past August, Hermione Weasley, the divorced ex-wife of famous Chudley Cannons Keeper and 2004 Mercury Broom calendar beefcake pinup Ron Weasley, took on the seemingly impossible and monumental task of clearing the names of renown Death Eaters, Severus Snape, disgraced former Potions master of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and Draco Malfoy, son of the infamous Death Eaters, Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, for crimes they
were accused of, but never convicted.

During the trial, the former Mrs. Weasley produced two memories procured from Mr. Snape for the purpose of presenting as evidence, proof that he and young Malfoy did not personally kill the doddering and senile Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore, nor let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts. The discovery of Albus Dumbledore's rather rambling and poorly written will proved additional so-called proof.

The will's presence hidden as a common lemon at Dumbledore's graveside makes these reporters, who wrote this article in collaboration, wonder if the former Mrs. Weasley somehow tampered with the will to suit her purposes at the trial.

The valiant war hero and at the time of trial, Senior Head Auror, Alastor Moody rightfully questioned the source of these memories and insisted that they might have been tampered with by providing false memories.

And at no point, when questioned, did the former Mrs. Weasley admit to how she obtained those memories. Now in light of a long investigative process that has taken months to pull together, we will attempt to illuminate Hermione Weasley's dubious actions and alliances. In addition, we will provide eyewitness accounts from Colin Creevey who observed Hermione Weasley and Severus Snape engaged in some uncivilized ritual involving the consumption of strange food that may have even been cannibal in origin, lascivious dancing and who knows what other dark and forbidden eccentricities on the savage island populated by criminals and the dregs of society lorded over by a swarthy half-giant where Snape and Malfoy now reside.

It is quite evident now Snape willingly gave these memories to the former Mrs. Weasley, but what price of the flesh was she willing to yield to his demands to obtain those memories for her social justice endeavors? Quite a lot, by the look of it from the featured photo, to the point of probably becoming addicted to his probably perverse sexual desires, by the way they were found to be gazing at each other wantonly throughout the New Year’s Eve unseemly ritual. Everyone who has read or heard testimony about what went on at Dark Revels during post-war trials can probably safely assume that Snape has continued on with such disgusting habits in this backward island culture.

No doubt, Hermione Weasley sought to clear Snape and Malfoy’s names in yet another try to correct some perceived social injustice, similar to her rather laughable attempt to work for house-elves' rights at Hogwarts with the creation of her organization, S.P.E.W.: Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare.

Then as to how Snape and Malfoy escaped England, one wonders if in an effort to break the law once more, the former Mrs. Weasley, known within circles to flaunt the law and bend the rules to
her whims, helped the Death Eaters escape while they were still being restricted under the Death Eater Decree. And if she did, that would explain her impassioned plea to exonerate them in order to avoid a lengthy stint in Azkaban herself had her possible crimes been exposed as they are about to be in this article.

Upon asking Minister Bones if any charges would be brought against the former Mrs. Weasley should the conjecture provided in this exposition prove true, the Minister said that if she did indeed help, there was no crime in anything she might have done regarding two wizards who have been since proven innocent.

As for how we discovered Hermione Weasley being seduced into such depravity, let us chronicle those who have helped us uncover her path from upstanding married witch with an honorable job in the Ministry to disgraced, divorced, sterile witch working for the mistress of her ex-husband willing to entertain the perversities of a known Death Eater in his bed..."

"I think I'm just going to vomit," Hermione stated with indignation, hating the fact she had to read the article to Severus aloud since he could not read it clearly through their two-way mirror.

What made this even more humiliating was the fact that her Aunt Christine was there in her flat, needing to hear first-hand every detail the paper got wrong in order to counter those claims and conjecture with counter statements, accusing the Daily Prophet of libel. Her Muggle aunt was responsible for marketing and advertising for The Lovely Lavender Company.

It was a less than ideal situation for Hermione to introduce the love of her life to her family. She was thankful her parents weren't there, but no doubt they had read the trash that was published about their daughter.

Hermione had to point out to her aunt that the Daily Prophet had a long history of publishing falsehoods when it suited their agenda, and no amount of protesting could force them to print corrections unless strong-armed by other influential members of the Ministry. Minister Bones was supportive of Hermione, knowing full well everything she had done, but there was doubt even she could force a full retraction of the story, even if there were small threads of truth plastered over with thick layers of innuendo and derogatory remarks so that none of the truth could be discerned amongst the false rhetoric.

On she read while Severus held his head in his hands, periodically groaning and grinding his teeth, as Aunt Christine scribbled furiously away on her Muggle yellow legal pad making copious notes. Lavender just sat in one of the wingback chairs feeling equally sick to her stomach.
There was the account from the floral delivery boy, Vradian Bumbershoot, about delivering the wrong flowers to Hermione with a note featuring the initials "S.S.," implicating Severus as the sender of that note, though the other florist customer Stephen Stronder had the same initials, and so did another dozen or so witches and wizards in England. Vradian gave a lengthy account of Draco Malfoy threatening him and making some very unkind remarks that he had to later look up in the dictionary to understand. The simple and "honest" floral order mix-up eventually resulted in him losing his job. It was all painted in a very sympathetic light for the poor boy wizard who had lost a job he needed since his parents were too poor to afford a proper broom for him, which was of course a big fat lie; they did not fact check with the parents, taking his word solely. Or if they did check with the parents, they omitted the truth that they indeed were not poor, and he was a spoilt child who ruined his broom in a temper tantrum in order to try and wheedle his parents into buying him a newer model that was a mere one year newer.

Then there was the interview with Alastair Moody regarding Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy. When asked about their means of employment while residing in England under the Death Eater Decree, the article noted that the former Auror seemed to be unable to disclose much of anything as if cast under a spell to prevent talking about the subject. He was able to name Lavender Weasley as their employer though what they did under her employ his mouth was unable to form the words. This was a huge relief to both Hermione, Severus, and Lavender, for none of them wanted the seedier side of Lavender's business made public. Hermione could not imagine explaining to her Aunt Christine about Severus and his former side career as a gigolo or the public fall-out if that became public knowledge.

When Moody was asked by one the of the reporters about the means the two Death Eaters might have used to escape England, he listed the usual routes of illegal Portkeys, which was easy enough for most people to create, Apparating across to France or Ireland even with a revoked license, the usual Muggle means, and of course Polyjuice Potion.

Since the three reporters had it in for Hermione, and given her previous job prior to working for Lavender Weasley, they automatically glommed into the idea that Hermione Weasley pilfered the restricted ingredients at her Ministry job needed to brew a batch of Polyjuice Potion.

Of course, of the many lines of conjecture they threw out there, that one was spot on, much to Aunt Christine's distress when Hermione admitted to it. But Minister Bones had already given the sly nod and wink that it was acceptable, especially since Severus and Draco were proven innocent. If anything, Hermione was guilty of some small petty theft the Minister deemed to be something she was willing to not press changes on given the greater good of two wizards proven innocent and no longer under false persecution. Hermione even suggested paying for the pilfered materials, plus interest in a gesture of good faith, which Aunt Christine deemed a good public relations act to add as a side note.
There were nasty comments by Madam Dushka about Hermione's performance on the job while at the Department of Standards & Regulations. When pressed for comments about the possible accusation of theft on the job, Madam Dushka was quick to add in more insults saying she did not put such reckless and irredeemable behavior beyond Hermione.

Reginald Chuff, Severus' old Potions master, was interviewed as well. While he had no recollection of meeting Hermione Weasley, and could not say if her Muggle heritage influenced her character to be an unfit Potions apprentice, he did have a few choice words about his own former apprentice Snape. It was during a lengthy diatribe when he brought up the fact that Snape was once married, but then his wife had died. When pressed for how his wife died, Chuff could not bother to recall except for the fact that she seemed to have had a proclivity in copulating with Muggles before her arranged marriage to Snape.

Severus was mortified, hoping that part of his past was long buried, but it seems now it was being dug up and aired for all to see.

When pressed by Christine about his first wife, Severus said it was not a matter for discussion, to which Hermione agreed and deemed the topic closed.

As for the tip as to how someone at the Daily Prophet had learned of Hermione's trip to Hawaii where she would "clandestinely rendezvous with the Death Eater in his jungle love lair," it turned out there was a disgruntled former employee at the Weasley Wizarding Wheezes. Of course, the article noted that accusations of pilfering the till and stealing stock were unsubstantiated regarding the cause for his recent dismissal. The former employee had gone to the paper with a tip after he had been sacked.

There was an account of the twins' former employee supposedly looking for some materials to restock when he had overheard – with the assistance of a pair of Extendable Ears that happened to be lying about – Messrs. Weasley discuss Mrs. Weasley and Mr. Snape in hushed tones in the back room. This former employee read a few drafts of a letter the twins had "casually" left laying about that they were going to enclose with some items they were going to have shipped. The former employee also heard the twins talk of Mrs. Weasley's upcoming visit to the location, although the newspaper still had trouble printing this without the words scrambling due to Dumbledore's enduring spell. It was from the "innocently overheard" conversation that suspicions of the three reporters working in the expose confirmed the illicit affair between the disgraced Muggle-born witch and Death Eater Potions master, who was once her professor, the article added a last jab regarding their former academic relationship in an insidious way. That passage further implied that perhaps detentions for some female students, especially Mrs. Weasley when she was still his student, was doing more than just scrubbing cauldrons.

Severus had never been so humiliated in his entire life. This was worse than the many embarrassing incidents during his teen years, now printed with a false light for thousands to read.
and absorb as irrefutable truth.

There was an account from Colin Creevey and his observations of the New Year's Ball that Rita Skeeter decided needed a bit of spicing up, as Hermione recognized her trademark literary flair. The derogatory remarks about a place that would "... deem to elect a house-elf to the town council tells of just how far gone and uncivilized this far-flung refuge for the refuse of the wizarding world is," had all the hallmarks of that gossiping cunt's quill.

"Mr. Loddy is a free elf. Not that Rita Skeeter could even conceive of such a concept!" Hermione huffed, irritated and fuming at the tripe that had been published.

The article wrapped up by saying that Albert Dobmeir, the former Mrs. Weasley's Potions master, was unavailable for comment. However, it did note the time and date indicating when Hermione was due to arrive from her week away in the company of her Death Eater lover, which explained why there was an angry mob to greet her upon her return.

"But of course Lavender was available for comment, but they didn't seem to want to contact her to refute the piles of filthy lies they spewed!" Hermione thundered as she grew more incensed.

The dream had morphed into a nightmare for Hermione and Severus. Gone were all the warm fuzzy feelings they rode on, replaced with the stomach-twisting dread of the publication of that article.

"There is only one thing left to do," Lavender announced, finally saying something after sitting in the chair quietly all the while Hermione, Severus, and Christine growled, yelled, spat, and fumed with indignation. "Hermione and Severus, you must do an interview with Luna Lovegood. She'll print the truth in The Quibbler and we can certainly spin this to our advantage. Besides, we can out Rita, Marietta, and Colin as reporters with a grudge to settle with their muck-raking."

"No!" Severus refused firmly.

Hermione's shoulders slumped, knowing his tone indicated he could not be moved.

Christine had dealt with some very stubborn and obstinate CEOs and company presidents during her many years of tenure in Muggle advertising and marketing. She knew with the right words; she could get this wizard, who seemed to truly love Hermione, to come around to her point of view, as Christine was in complete agreement with Lavender.
"Listen, dearie," Christine began in a patient tone as she sat in front of the mirror to address Severus, who was close enough to her age that she felt she could talk to him as a reasonable peer. "This is my specialty, fixing public relations disasters that would make your head spin with bad press and the reporting of false accusations, and some not-so-false in print and TV that had been read and watched by over a billion people. That's billion with a 'B,' so this my forte, and this is what Lavender pays me for. She's right. Do the interview, or you can sit back in your little tropical shack on the other side of the world and watch as all those royalties she deposits into your Gringotts account dry up like a fleeting sprinkle of rain in the Atacama Desert. I've already fielded over a dozen Howlers since this morning with talk of boycotts of all Lovely Lavender products and all subsidiaries, which means Sirens' Secrets products as well."

Severus sat there listening to this woman who most probably would have been sorted into Slytherin, had she been born magical like her niece.

"So, let's say you and Hermione sit there and do nothing to address these lies and half-truths printed in this fish-wrap rag," Christine continued on with her persuasive argument. "That will only make people think that they are the truth, and the boycott of Lavender's company will move forward. It could easily spread internationally to other countries if their press reprint this tripe. Eventually, the business may close, in which case, no more royalties for you. No more job for Albert, and I'm aware of the circumstances in which you helped arrange for this job for him. And that would also mean no more money or job for Hermione. So you would have to support her financially, or she would have to live on whatever royalties she has currently accumulated until her apprenticeship ends.

"And with the shutting down of Lovely Lavender, that means no funds to finish the school there or the facility for which construction is about to start. Then there are the jobs in Malu Palekaiko that will not be filled because the company shut down. Then you'll have your own local community upset at you, thinking that you could have done something to redress the situation instead of sulking in silence. They may even grow to resent you for the belief that you have taken away the chance for better jobs besides working on farms, and taking away a chance for a better and formalized education for their children. You'd have your own public relations nightmare to deal with, Severus. Then they might start boycotting your little Potions shop as well."

Christine was laying out a very frightening and very realistic situation that might turn his little slice of happiness into yet a new nightmare, just when he had his life sorted out to his liking. Severus hated to admit it, but the Muggle was right.

"All right. I'll do it if Hermione is willing to do it," Severus grumbled.

He remembered Hermione telling him about how Luna's article in *The Quibbler* certainly provided
a fresh and truthful perspective about Hermione and Ron's divorce that seemed to take the wind out of the gossip rage sales, diffusing the situation. Severus just hoped that Luna could write an article in which they could turn this around to their advantage without Severus having to lay bare too many embarrassing facts, especially regarding his dead wife.

"Yes, I'll do it. As much as I hate having my personal life splashed across the printed page yet again, I'll do it," Hermione said with resignation before excusing herself to fetch a vial of Headache Relief Potion. Lavender asked for her to bring two vials as she needed at least one as well.

"Okay. Then it's settled. Hermione will draft a letter, since she's friends with this Luna," Christine said to restate what was agreed upon. She checked a few things off on her yellow notepad. "It'll be better coming from Hermione – and we will arrange it for here at the flat so Luna can talk to you as well, Severus." With a great breath, Christine exhaled slowly. Looking at the clock and noting it was almost eleven o'clock and they had been going at this for nearly three hours, she asked, "Now, before we wrap this up, is there anything I need to know that hasn't been covered in this article. Not that we'll bring it up or tell this Luna about it, but any more potential public relations bombs that might be discovered? It's better to be prepared for a statement and not have to issue a press release than to be caught off-guard like I was with some of these things that Hermione and Lavender had failed to disclose to me before. I won't say piddly squat, but I need to know so that I'm prepared to be proactive, instead of reactive."

Lavender, Hermione, and Severus all exchanged glances at one another briefly before Lavender said, "No, nothing more."

"Cut the bullshit," Christine demanded, catching the brief nonverbal exchange. "Spill it. I know crap on executives that would get them sent away to prison on various charges for years. Fortunately I've never had to write a press release for many of those. Come on. This is some very unpleasant shit we've just sorted through tonight. What could be worse? Tell me and my lips are sealed, but I have to know so I can be prepared and spin whatever skeletons you have in your closets."

Lavender looked to Severus who shook his head. "Severus, she won't say anything, but if it comes out, we're all f***ed. She needs to know to be prepared just in case."

"This involves not only me, but Draco, Zabini and let's not forget your own business relationship with Macnair," he reminded her.

"And if Draco and Ginny come back and we're playing catch-up to the gossip rags instead of nipping it in the bud, should it come out, how would Ginny's reputation be affected as well, as well as the fact she was married to Harry at the time?" Lavender countered. "They could never show their face in England again, and I knew Draco and Ginny want to come back periodically and even
let their own children attend Hogwarts some day, if they choose. Christine won't tell anyone, but she has to know to be prepared in case."

"Fine," Severus said reluctantly.

Hermione could do nothing but listen with her face red as a beet and buried in her hands. She peered through her fingers in dread of what was about to be disclosed to her aunt.

"Marf!" Lavender called out. The house-elf appeared before his employer with a bow. "Please bring us some strong tea, and maybe something strong from the liquor cabinet as well."

As the president of The Lovely Lavender Company sat in her chair with a cup of tea now firmly in her hand, she said, "Because of the Death Eater Decree, there were some certain ways I worked around the restriction of having Severus as my Potions master, even with the restriction against him brewing any potions. While he was secretly my Potions master, working under the false name of Sebastian Delgado, officially on the books with the Ministry he was employed as a gigolo, and I was his madam."

Christine listened, her mouth hanging open, periodically having to remember she was supposed to be taking notes while Lavender disclosed her role as madam and the fact that Hermione's block of flats was, until recently, a brothel. Lavender listed some of the notable clients she had on her books, which Christine said was good because she noted that powerful people would keep such a news item suppressed, as they did in the Muggle world. Lavender omitted Anne's name in Hermione's presence. She even disclosed the arrangement she had with Macnair, which horrified Christine, even with the back-story of why, which made the situation all the more tragic and twisted. Christine agreed that it was better for Macnair to avoid the Dementor's Kiss in exchange for letting Healers use his memories and his wand to try to fix some of the damage he'd done to Lavender's friend Parvati.

When it was all said and done, Christine turned to her niece and asked in an accusatory tone, "You were fucking a gigolo?"

"I didn't pay him to fuck me, if that's what you are implying. We had already fallen in love by the time anything happened between us!" Hermione retorted hotly.

This seemed to be a source of great relief to Christine. "Good. The fact is that if this ever comes out, this would just be a complete nightmare that would make the Profumo Affair look like a proper Edwardian tea dance by comparison." Christine took a swig of her tea before saying, "I feel like my head is going to split open from all this. My God." Looking over at the mantle clock, she
said, "It's almost midnight and I've had a very, very long day. I need sleep in order to face the next
day or I will be worth shit."

Rising from her seat with some difficulty since she was just one month from her due date, Christine
went over to the mirror and said, "I'm very sorry you were forced into such circumstances, Severus;
you seem like a nice bloke. I just wish we had initially met under better circumstances, and rest
assured I won't breathe a word about what I heard in confidence."

Severus, already worn out as it was only one in the afternoon in Hawaii, said he wished he had met
her under better circumstances as well.

Lavender, who had a young infant at home who was probably in need of a bit of nursing by now,
had to make her farewells.

"Albert is supposed to arrive sometime tonight. No doubt we'll have to rehash this all over again in
the morning with him," Lavender sighed. "Owl Luna tonight if you have the energy so she'll be
able to read it first thing in the morning."

Hermione nodded. She did have the energy, since her body was telling her was time for lunch, not
time for bed.

Lavender escorted Christine through Diagon Alley to her car before taking the Floo at the Leaky
Cauldron home to Ron and Josephine.

Now it was just Hermione and Severus' reflection in the mirror.

"Oh, Severus," she whinged pitifully, "I wish I never came back."

"I know, but then that would have looked just as bad, if not worse. Then there is the matter
regarding your apprenticeship," Severus reminded her.

"Niles, Braxton, Royston. and James were there to protect me, along with others, from the angry
mob that greeted me for a welcome-home at the Portkey office," Hermione told him, trying to keep
the tone light despite the gravity of the situation.
It pleased him that his fellow Potions masters were looking out for their own, especially Hermione. The fact they had not been quoted for comment, with a note in the article they had no comments to give, indicated they would help protect her.

Hermione drafted her letter to Luna, with Severus making some suggestions. Of his suggested edits, she took some – and of others, she said that the choice of words would appear to be a bit too ingratiating. She was trying to relay the idea that Luna was an extremely perceptive witch who could easily see through such rhetoric.

Severus took Hermione's lead, since she did know the Ravenclaw editor of *The Quibbler* far better than he did.

Once her owl Calleo, who had been nesting in the company's offices during Hermione's visit to Hawaii, took off with Hermione's letter, it was time for Hermione to go to bed. Pulling out the other half of her Potions apprenticeship experiment, she drank most of the dusky-hued liquid in the vial and suddenly felt quite sleepy, which reset her body clock to local time.

"I wish you were here to tuck me in, Severus." She yawned, stretching before scrubbing her face with her hands.

"I know. One day. Soon," he assured her.

"Should I cover the mirror, or can I leave it uncovered for a while so I can see you and the house as I drift off?" she asked.

"I'll sit here for a while longer if you want," he said, patting the book on the kitchen table that he'd been reading while waiting for Hermione to unpack her mirror. "After you fall asleep, I'll cover my side until about seven in the morning your time."

"Thank you," she mumbled sleepily as she undressed and slid under the covers.

Before he even finished reading the first page, he heard Hermione breathing deeply, indicating she had fallen to sleep. He did not cover the mirror just yet, as he wanted to watch her sleep. As he read, he would stop once in a while to gaze at her sleeping form.

Severus placed a marker in his book and set it down on the kitchen table. He was just about to
cover his side of the mirror when he heard Hermione begin to turn over and thrash about in the bed, calling out in a panicked voice, her words indistinguishable.

Hermione's nightmares had returned, and with the day's events, it was no wonder.

"Hermione, wake up," Severus called out through the mirror.

His voice was enough to rouse her from her sleep. "Oh, Severus, you were being attacked by Alan, and Rita Skeeter was there taking detailed notes while I was getting hexed by a hedgehog that called me names," she said with some confusion.

"Shh, it's just a nightmare. Go to sleep. You need your rest."

Severus waited and watched until Hermione fell asleep before he pulled the black drape over his own mirror to give her privacy as she slept. He wasn't afraid she would have a second nightmare, as she'd told him before that usually, it was just one nightmare for the night.

It was time for lunch, but he had no appetite. Instead he put on his shoes and walked down the street.

Knocking on the door, he saw Draco greet him with a smile.

"Come to have a drink to drown your sorrows?" Draco ribbed lightly.

"No, but you may want to," Severus countered quite somberly. "Come, we need to talk. Something serious has happened back in England. Tell Ginny you're heading out for a bit. You'll probably want to avoid telling her about what I'm about to tell you until after the children are born. Given her hormonal state, she will not take this well at all."

Draco sensed it was something quite serious for Severus to suggest withholding information from Ginny, but he knew that if it was bad enough, he would wait. They went back to Severus' house as that was the only place that could ensure complete privacy, with Severus placing a silencing barrier charm on the mirror so Hermione did not have to hear Draco.
And it was a good thing Severus thought of that spell, since Draco did have quite the conniption fit, especially after Severus told him that Christine knew almost everything, just in case that part about him working as a gigolo came out as well.

Despite Draco's deep tan, he looked pale.

Severus was now in full warpath mode. He would talk to Mounga, who had been referred to as a "swarthy half-giant" in the article, about a counter public relations campaign showing Malu Palekaiko as a peaceful and civilized place filled with a warm sense of community and a diverse blend of cultures, including Muggles. This would be one way to counter such claims of the place being a third-world rat-hole populated by "criminals and the dregs of society." By proving some aspects of the article being false, it would further cause the rest of the expose's veracity to come into question and show it for the biased piece of tripe that it was. That was phase one. Of course, he would have to coordinate something with Christine, since she was the expert on press wrangling and campaigns.

"No, wear the dark wine-colored Hawaiian shirt The green one would be to reminiscent of your Slytherin House affiliation," Christine directed Severus through the mirror as they prepared for Luna's visit.

Severus rolled his eyes, but he knew she was the expert and even silently agreed with her, though he would not say it aloud.

Away from the mirror he changed, coming back to stand before it and ask, "Better?"

"Yes, but it's a pity I could not get a stylist I used to work with to trim your hair a whole lot shorter," she added.

"I'm not cutting my hair. Potions masters are not supposed to cut their hair short until after reaching the age of fifty. This is as a sign of competence – to show they had not burnt their own hair off in a Potions explosion," he informed her tersely.

"Oh, really?" she asked, unaware of that little cultural difference.

Hermione gave him a look to be patient with her Muggle aunt. Christine did not know all these little things, but in a short amount of time she had studied up on wizarding culture to be able to understand most of the cultural peculiarities.
Right on time, there was a knock at the door.

Opening it, Hermione found Luna standing there. She also suddenly noticed the large red letters spelling out "HARLOT TRAITOR" that now vandalized her front door, something that must have happened between when she brought her Aunt Christine to her apartment an hour ago and now.

Hermione looked to Luna with deep embarrassment.

Luna, with her usual casual aplomb, said calmly, "Here, I'll get rid of this for you." With a sweep of her wand, the letters were gone. "And I added an anti-graffiti spell so it shouldn't happen again."

Hermione hugged Luna and asked her to come in.

Luna was introduced to Christine Taylor, with the explanation that because of the Daily Prophet article, it had become a matter of concern for Lavender's business, which is why Christine would be present during the interview.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Christine," Luna said, extending her hand and shaking it.

"Hermione told me that you were once divorced. At some time in the future, would you mind if I interview you? Since divorce is rather rare in the wizarding world, I think it would be rather informative, considering how many in our world do not understand how it works for Muggles, beyond what Hermione briefly told me before."

Christine nodded, saying, "Yes, I would be happy to do an interview at a future time."

"Excellent." Luna turned on the spot and saw the large mirror propped up on an easel across from the settee. Walking over to it, she saw Severus' image in the mirror. "Hello, Professor Snape. Well, actually now it is Mr. Snape. Or would you prefer I call you Severus, since it would make the article more personal and perhaps more sympathetic toward you and Hermione if we do without addressing each other formally. This is why you invited me here, right? To tell your side of the story which seems to be painted in a very one-sided biased light and you want to repair the damage done to both your characters and prevent a backlash against Lavender's company. Am I right?"
Christine had to shut her mouth closed. Because of Luna's vocal mannerisms and slightly vacant stare, she had originally dismissed her as a ditsy airhead who was a touch flighty, but the blonde was just as perceptive and bluntly honest as Hermione had warned her.

"Yes," Hermione spoke for all of them, "this was not a matter we wanted to share with the press for all the world to read, but since the *Daily Prophet* reported on it and in such a slanted matter and false light, it appears that once again we must come to you to report the truth. Something that has been an on-going habit since the start of the second war, it seems."

Luna sighed to herself. "It does seem that happens quite a lot."

Hermione called for tea, which Marf put on the low table in front of the settee before the interview started.

Hermione began, "Let me preface the beginning of this interview that I believe part of the reason the *Daily Prophet* article was written in such an unflattering light was the fact that all three reporters who collaborated in that article have a long-standing grudge against me."

"Oh, I am fully aware of Marietta's acne scars and how she received them, and that photo of you posted at the end of your seventh year taken by Colin Creevey resulted in you hexing him," Luna recalled with perfect clarity. Her face then took on a look of befuddled curiosity when she added, "What puzzles me is that Rita would put her name on an article that is blatantly a character assassination piece when you have knowledge of her being an unregistered Animagus, but given that her name is one of three she can claim that she didn't write any of the more unflattering segments, and thus try and get away with it."

"Oh, she's probably still angry I kept her locked up in a jar while she was transformed into a beetle when I caught her trying to eavesdrop on me for another slanderous piece of yellow journalism at the end of the Triwizard Tournament. I forced her to write that article for *The Quibbler* when your father was still the editor," Hermione surmised. "Maybe it's time to out Rita Skeeter's unknown talent for getting those scoops – put it in a side-bar, then."

Hermione had kept Rita's secret for all those years since she did write the article for *The Quibbler* that informed the public of Voldemort's return, thus allowing Harry to finally tell his side of the story. However, her casual snipes over the years – at Hermione's job, her divorce, and trial coverage of her case to exonerate Severus and Draco – were bad enough. This latest piece just wiped away the last of Hermione's good will towards the bleached blonde hack.

Turning to the mirror, Luna asked, "Let's start with you, Severus. Since it is obvious the *Daily
Prophet's insinuations of you and Hermione having a relationship while you were still her professor are obviously untrue, as anyone who has ever attended Hogwarts and had you as a professor can attest, how did your romantic relationship with Hermione begin?

Severus and Hermione had briefly discussed how they would address this question. They were both thankful Luna directed the question to him first, since he was better at telling partial truths than Hermione.

"Hermione had stumbled across Draco Malfoy one day," he said, which was the truth, though the spying of Draco fucking Ginny Potter was entirely left out. "Hermione had previously thought that he had left the country after the end of the war, having neither seen nor heard about him over the years. It was upon further research she learned about the finer details of the Death Eater Decree and how it was applied to us in equal measure despite our work for the Order and as spies for Dumbledore. She had not known of the details as the Decree was passed while she was out of the country. It was then she began to search for me, and we eventually met." Though the original circumstances under which they met were left out of course, it was the truth, in a very round-about way, and Hermione was asking Ginny questions about Severus and how to find him before she had even met him as Calleo.

With the deftness that would make any lawyer from Slytherin House proud, Severus laid out the tale of how they met, and their subsequent meetings on how to free Draco and Severus from being persecuted under the Death Eater Decree. In actuality, those particular discussions they had were after she found out that Calleo was actually Severus and had already fallen in love with him, but Luna did not need to be privy to those specific details.

"Well, that cassoulet you made could easily win a witch's heart," Hermione added when she mentioned that he had invited her to dine with him during their many discussions in the evenings on how she could help Severus and Draco.

They admitted that their talks began varying to include talking about Arithmancy, Potions, Runes, and other academic topics and current events, in addition to their weekly dinners.

"And given our previous interview regarding your marriage to Ron, when did you realize that your marriage to Ron was ending? Was it before or after you fell in love with Severus?" Luna asked rather bluntly, but with no malice.

"I hated myself for falling in love with Severus while I was still married to Ron, but it was while falling in love with Severus, I realized what a hollow and futile thing it was to stay in my marriage," Hermione admitted. "I suppose you could say that I had never been in love until I fell for Severus."
Hermione turned to give him a smile, which he returned, until he noticed Luna observing him and he schooled his features once more.

During the interview, Hermione said that upon exhausting all other avenues through which to clear their names, since Severus and Draco's plea to confess their innocence under Veritaserum was denied, they realized they had no other choice but for Hermione to pilfer ingredients from her job at the Ministry.

It was also decided before Luna arrived that Severus would confess that he secretly worked as Lavender's Potions master, and Draco was the head of Marketing and Advertising before Christine Taylor took over the position. Since they were now exonerated, Lavender would be free from prosecution of employing them in a non-sanctioned manner. There was no mention of Blaise Zabini as interim director. As for the jobs they were officially on file doing with the Ministry, Severus said it was a low-level position he was still even too embarrassed to admit.

Luna did ask about his wife, to which Severus merely replied that it was an arranged marriage. Upon You-Know-Who becoming aware of his wife's affair with a Muggle from before they married, he ordered her killed. That was the end of the matter, and no other questions regarding Severus' wife were posed.

It was then that Mounga arrived at Severus' house, during the middle of the interview.

Luna learned that Mounga was not a half-giant, but that because he took after his father's side of the family, which was originally from Tonga, he was just naturally a large and tall person. He even cited several famous Muggle athletes of Tongan and Samoan descent who also were of large frame.

Regarding allegations in the *Daily Prophet* regarding lascivious dancing and dark rituals at the New Year's Eve ball, Mounga laughed, "Well, Severus is not too fond of Mambo or Rhumba dancing, and he thinks it undignified, but as for lascivious? Hardly."

Hermione piped up, "What I find interesting is that Colin Creevey, who is Muggle-born, gave this eye-witness account of 'lascivious dancing' – yet these are all dances that are common Muggle ballroom dancing steps. For a Muggle-born, it is quite surprising he would call Muggle dancing such derogatory names. I'm sure there are some Muggle-borns who have parents who engage in the hobby of ballroom dancing and would be quite upset that Colin called what their parents do in public 'lascivious.'"
Severus smiled, loving how she turned the tables on Colin, who would probably be fielding some Howlers from Muggle-borns and half-breeds about making such accusations about their parents' and grandparents' dancing activities.

The interview progressed with Mouna explaining how some of the residents were considered criminals in their home countries, but as in many cases, are eventually proven innocent, such as Severus and Draco, or were persecuted for political reasons. Then there were some escaping abuse by a spouse or family. With many of the mixed marriages on the island, in which one spouse is a Muggle, the couple had been shunned by the local populations, both wizarding and Muggle. It seemed that in some countries and even some areas, people were still not comfortable with what they called "inter-breeding."

Severus did tell of how the sanctuary's Muggle population was quite helpful during the recent ice pox break-out and that even one Muggle-born's Muggle family flew all the way out from the southern United States to come and help until the town was back on its feet again. He also told of the free elves on the island working tirelessly to help, which is how Mr. Loddy won a seat on the town council after helping coordinate help to those who needed it most during the outbreak.

It was a rather lengthy interview.

At the end, Luna said, "I could do a lengthy article on Malu Palekaiko alone, based on all the information I've learned today."

"We'd love to have you come out and do one. We'd even pay to put you up at the local hotel for a week, if you want," Mouna offered.

"Oh no," Luna refused. "That would appear that you paid me off to give the place a glowing review with free room and board." Turning to Hermione, she asked, "Is Malu Palekaiko a romantic place?"

Hermione could not stop the broad grin that graced her face, and she began to blush furiously. "Oh, my. It most certainly is," she said with a bit of a longing sigh, her eyes flitting to Severus, who also seemed to be unable to stop the smile from tugging at the corners of his lips.

"I wholeheartedly agree, it can be romantic with the right person," he said, a bit of wistfulness slipping into his reply.
"That's wonderful. Neville and I haven't made arrangements for our honeymoon yet, and the wedding is in less than a month. Maybe a week there would be just the place to go," Luna said brightly. "Is the island completely booked up?"

Mounga laughed, assuring her she would find accommodations easily, while Severus said he would get rates for the honeymoon suite at Justina's hotel for her.

"In closing, Severus, is there anything about England you miss that would make you come back here?" Luna asked, then amended with, "Besides Hermione being here?"

Severus' eyes glanced up towards the ceiling as he said with longing, "A good Stilton. And also access to a broad variety of European wines. It seems they stock mostly wines from the States' West Coast, South America, Australia, and New Zealand. European wines get a rather small shelf space at my local grocery store. But I can have Stilton and my choices for wines Portkeyed in from abroad. We have a shopper who brings back good English teas. I would not return except if Hermione needed me for some reason."

"Now Severus," interjected Hermione a bit shortly, but playfully, "that Riesling from California was as good as any from Germany or France you have served me. And that Malbec from Chile was I think better than the one from the South of France you served one time."

He sniffed haughtily. "That Riesling was passable at best, and the Malbec was a bit too bold--"

"I think you can't bear to admit that other regions can make wines just as good as the Europeans," Hermione threw back lightly as a challenge. "Next time I come back, we'll do a blind taste-test and prove you wrong."

"Care to make a wager for such a serious claim?"

"Gladly, especially if it means I'll win another back-rub or see you doing the dishes," she threw back with a playful smile.

Severus was about to make a retort when he caught Luna gazing at the pair of them with a rather sweet and dreamy look on her face.

"Is something amusing you, Luna?" he asked a bit defensively, still feeling awkward about using
her first name in such a casual fashion with a former student he was not good friends with.

She sighed longingly. "You two already sound like an old married couple. It's quite sweet, really."

Christine had the audacity to laugh aloud. "Yes, they do seem like quite the smitten couple, don't they," she said, adding fuel to the fire.

Hermione and Severus both looked a bit abashed and toned down their playful banter since it would no doubt be include in the article one way or another. As much as they wanted to show the world that there was nothing wrong about their love for one another, they did not want to put too much of their affection and relationship on display for the amusement of others.

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Severus had Hermione read over the paragraph one more time. Katrina was been mewling rather loudly, demanding more ear-scratching while sitting on his lap, so he'd missed that last part.

Hermione turned the page of the latest edition of The Quibbler rather pleased that it certainly seemed to paint their love affair in a rather sympathetic and non-scandalous light. There was even a quote by Ron saying that while he and Snape had always been at odds with one another due to House rivalry and his close association with Harry Potter, he had no qualms about them being in love and supported their relationship since it made Hermione happy, something neither of them were when they were married to each other.

She had no idea Luna had gone to her ex-husband for a quote, but was thrilled that Ron's quote seemed to remove some of the sting of them beginning their affair while Hermione was still married.

Once she was done reading the article, Severus asked if there was any other interesting news featured in The Quibbler that day.

"Nargle thefts are up, according to Ministry accounts," Hermione said blandly as she began rattling off the various headlines. "In Godric's Hollow, there was an apothecary shop that had a break-in. Ooh, there is talk about repaving the cobblestones down the high street in Hogsmeade and whether such a construction project might disturb any long sleeping and possibly forgotten magical creatures or entities that may have taken up residence under the stones that were first laid in the early 1200's."

Severus and Hermione discussed the pros and cons of such a construction project until Gary
showed up and they began their Japanese language lesson.

Luna's article did cast Hermione and Severus' relationship in an entirely different light. The threatened boycott was fortunately averted, public opinion once swayed again with the truth presented with Luna's deft turn of a phrase and acute insight. The occasional Howler still came addressed to Hermione, wondering how she could betray her Muggle-born background and be involved with a Death Eater, despite all his work for the Order. Hermione went through the symbolic gesture of paying for ingredients she'd pilfered through her job at the Ministry, for a show of good faith that she was not a thief.

Near the end of January, Christine gave birth to a very healthy baby boy that she named Auberon, after Hermione's maternal grandfather that she never knew, since he died when Hermione was still a baby.

Severus was mildly interested in the baby photo of Hermione's new cousin, a cousin who was young enough to be her own son, as well as the latest photos of Josephine, Lavender and Ron's child. He supposed that one day he would have children, and he would no doubt be showing off photos of his own son or daughter with great pride. For the fact that Severus was not close to Lavender and was only briefly acquainted with Christine, he could not feign much interest. They were merely children of people with whom he was not particularly close to. And while Lavender was once his boss, theirs was a tenuous friendship, and Christine was a relation of Hermione that until recently she was rather distant to as well.

Of course, when Katrina birthed her kittens, Severus was happy to show Hermione each kitten in the mirror with parental-like pride. Hermione was taken with the kittens, asking Severus to not give away the one calico in the litter of five, since he had offers from many to adopt the kittens once they were born.

He supposed his own attitude towards human babies would change to something more positive upon the birth of Ginny and Draco's impending triplets.

It was during the Japanese tea ceremony that the Malfoys had asked Severus and Hermione to be the children's godparents. Hermione and Severus knew of many people, besides Harry, who had been or knew of children currently being raised by godparents, since both wars claimed many adults. They accepted the offer, humbled the Malfoys would entrust their children to them, should anything happen.

"All right, Hermione. Read to us the haiku poem you have composed," Gary requested, peering at her through the charmed mirror.
Finally finding the right piece of parchment on which she’d completed the assignment, she read,

"Steam rises curling
Fragrant tea perfumes the air
I wait patiently"

Severus smiled to himself, remembering the evenings together and their game of her guessing the ingredients in his latest brew.

"Excellent," her Sensei praised her, but then discussed her choice of the pronoun she’d used – *Watashi*, for "I" – and instructed her in the finer points of that particular pronoun. He gave her a suggestion that she might change it to *Uchi* given the reflective tone of the haiku while remaining gender-neutral so the poem could be read by either gender. Of course she would have to rewrite it as it no longer had five syllables at the end.

"Severus, care to share you haiku?" Gary prompted his other student.

The Potions master cleared his throat before reading aloud in Japanese,

"Petals in a stream
Slowly floating to the sea
Thoughts lost in the breeze"

He had been inspired to write that on a recent evening hike to clear his mind, and had seen the yellow blossoms of the buttercup tree floating down the stream.

Severus was praised for his haiku, but his mind was momentarily lost recalling at the time how he wished Hermione was there with him to enjoy the vision of flower petals gliding along the water.

"Hermione, I would like by week’s end a scroll on pronoun usage, and one on Japanese flora and fauna symbolism and how they differ from European symbolism. Severus, I want you to begin reading that book on Japanese ‘fairy’ tales and write an analysis on the symbolism in those stories,” Gary instructed them, both assignments very relevant to understand Japanese Potions texts.

Once Gary left, Hermione said a bit morosely, "Perhaps I should have read him the other haiku I wrote instead," feeling a bit let down that the haiku she’d worked so hard on was criticized for her
particular pronoun choice.

"Why did you read this one instead?" asked Severus.

"I don't know," Hermione lied before finally admitting, "I guess it seemed a bit personal, and Gary would have read right through me if I'd read it aloud.

"Sun sets on the day
Waiting to knock on the door
Of sanctuary"

Severus smiled. "Yes, given your inability to keep a poker face, that was wise of you. I could have kept a straighter face, but given my second haiku, it would have been far more obvious," he admitted.

"Oh, really? Read on, Severus. Read on," she said with great interest.

"Her moonlit shadow
Cast upon my rumpled sheets
I dream when she's near"

"I think I would have outright blushed had you read that aloud," Hermione confessed.

"And that is why I read the other one." He smiled at her again until he noticed she'd put her hand momentarily to her head as if to steady herself. "Have you eaten breakfast yet?" His tone was not kind, but accusatory, knowing that with the stress of the past month and having to deal with the fallout of the *Daily Prophet* article, she was not eating. He did not like how she was getting too thin yet again.

"I'll eat when I have the stomach for it, Severus. You know how my stomach gets into knots and I can hardly have the appetite to choke something down when I'm this upset," she bit back more harshly than she intended. Public harassment of her had mellowed quite considerably after Luna's article, but it was still ever present with the looks people gave her if she ventured down Diagon Alley with her cloak hood down.

"You ate just fine when I'd fix you something when you came over, despite how stressed you were
then," he countered a bit hotly referring to their summer together.

"Because I was happy when I was with you," Hermione yelled, suddenly breaking down into tears.

Even with the mirrors that allowed Hermione and Severus to see and talk to each other every day, and even engage in a little long distance "mirror sex," the stress of them being kept apart strained their relationship and it would flare up like an old wound, twanging when suddenly provoked for no reason. They did not bicker often or yell at each other much, but periodically the strain rose up like a sea monster, breaking the surface to be seen briefly before disappearing once more into the unfathomable depths of their subconscious.

While living apart from one another, Hermione would periodically wake with a start in the middle of the night, her brow soaked in a cold sweat. She could not roll over and reach out across the bed to find the comforting presence of Severus, and that is when nightmares returned like malevolent poltergeists in the dark of night.

Severus would not admit it, but when he and Hermione had been briefly reunited, he did not mind being woken up in the middle of the night. The pressure of a small, warm hand in the middle of his back, or placed upon the expanse of his chest suddenly in the quiet hours, would soon be followed by Hermione's fleeting unconscious sigh of relief that he was there to protect and love her. Then she would give a snuffling noise and turn to fall back to sleep, her even breaths telling him that she was slumbering once more. Without Severus in her bed, it was obviously harder for Hermione to fall back asleep.

It did not help that the Potions apprentice was beginning to push herself harder once more, making her more tired and taxed.

Bracing her elbows on her kitchen table, her head in her hands, she heaved a sob before she apologized. "I'm sorry, Severus. It's been a rather stressful month. So stressful, I skipped my period."

There was no chance of Hermione being pregnant since she already had her cycle once since returning from Malu Palekaiko, but some part of Severus deep down inside wanted her to be pregnant. At least then there would be a reason for him to petition the Potions certification board for Hermione to finish her apprenticeship with him and they could be together and possibly married, even if she wasn't finished with her apprenticeship. Of course he did not share this secret wish, but it was there in his heart, wanting any reason for her to be there back with him.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you. I know you're concerned. I'll eat something before I go into work, I
promise," she said before rising from the kitchen table to set the kettle on for another cup of tea and to finally eat something.

"For your visit for Valentine's Day next week, as brief as it may be, I would prefer you fully nourished. It is preferable than having the visit spent brewing restorative potions because you're too tired," he said, insinuating she would need her strength for their brief rejoining.

"Sleep, eat, and making love, and not necessarily in that order," she said, a bit more softly, looking forward to her Portkey to Hawaii on Sunday night. She just wished she didn't have to leave Tuesday.

Severus had even arranged to be entirely out of the shop for Valentine's Day. He had scheduled appointments and commissions so that he could spend a solid forty-eight hours with Hermione without having to emerge from their home during her brief stay, similar to the Malfoys' honeymoon.

Hermione couldn't wait to see Severus again. She even bought him a Valentine's Day present that she knew he would appreciate. It was an antique wizarding book of erotic Japanese shunga prints where the figures moved, interspersed with sexually suggestive haiku. When buying it, she imagined that after Severus unwrapped it she would suggest they could practice their pronunciation while reading poems to one another in bed.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to my wonderfully talented betas, JuneW and Cygnuz. And sorry for the long delay uploading this chapter, I was hit with a very bad case of the flu with chest infection and laid out for a full week, though still recovering with massive lung hacking right now. I am getting better, but worst chest infection I've had in three decades.
Chapter Summary

Back in London, Draco and Ginny join Hermione for dinner, but dinner plans go awry with an unexpected guest.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter One Hundred Eleven
"Don't Worry, Baby"

Disclaimer:
Well, I've been disclaiming a whole lot
For oh I don't know how long
I don't know why
But I keep insisting
Rowling's owned Potter for so long
But she lets me go play
With her characters my own way
And she says "Don't worry, baby"
Don't worry, baby
Don't worry, baby
I won't sue you for infringement tonight
Don't worry, baby

A/N: Disclaimer a parody of "Don't Worry Baby" Songwriters: WILSON, BRIAN DOUGLAS / CHRISTIAN, ROGER VAL / MARGO, MITCHELL STUART / MARGO, PHILIP / MEDRESS, HENRY / SIEGEL, JAY
Don't Worry Baby lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group

Severus practically flew out the front door of his shop when he heard the news Ginny and Draco's babies had arrived.

The medical clinic was decorated with obnoxious St. Patrick's Day paper décor that was more insidiously "cute" than the ones Bongo put up in his bar. Ignoring the tasteless decorating for the holiday, Severus walked back to the recovery room to find Ginny resting comfortably in bed, looking quite exhausted, but joyous. Draco was looking a bit haggard and unshaven, but he looked
elated beyond even the day they had been granted sanctuary in Malu Palekaiko.

In his arms, Draco held one of his new triplet infants. "I have never seen anything so beautiful in my life. All three of them are perfect," he said in a reverent whisper.

Severus was thrilled for them. Now they were truly bound, and both of them could not be happier for it. And with the blessings of three healthy, beautiful babies, they were ecstatic.

"Congratulations," Severus said with deep sincerity as he entered the small room where Ginny was recuperating.

Rainbow had brought a specialist over from Sydney to help with the birth, since triplets were a rarity in the wizarding world. Everything went smoothly, thanks to the Healer's experience in birthing twins, which was his specialty.

"Ginny, how are you faring?" Severus asked with concern. He knew all the Potions required to help witches in postpartum, and he had already brewed many in advance of the slew of impending births on the island. Even Halulu had given birth to twin girls a few weeks prior.

"Wonderfully, all things considering, though a bit worn out."

Severus nodded, knowing all too well why she would be.

"So is it three boys, three girls, a mix?" Severus asked. When he received the news at work, he had not heard any more information than Ginny had finally finished giving birth. He was actually excited to know.

"Two girls and a boy," Draco informed him, looking up from gazing adoringly at one of his daughters that he was still gently rocking in his arms, but she began to fuss.

Ginny asked for her daughter, so Draco brought her over and Ginny began breastfeeding her.

As she nursed, Ginny said, "Draco and I have not entirely settled on all the names yet. And though we have debated, there is one name we would like to use, but only if you are all right with it,"
Ginny began.

"We would like to name our son Sebastian in honor of you," Draco announced. "We all know how life would have turned out differently had you not been there for me, Severus."

Severus felt his throat close up. "I would be honored," he choked out, suddenly feeling a bit overwhelmed. "Thank you."

Seeing Severus a bit overcome, Ginny asked, "Would you like to hold one of them?"

He nodded dumbly, sitting down. It had not escaped his memory that had his wife and child lived, he could have been a grandfather by now, as Ginny and his child would have been classmates from the same school year.

Draco got up and fetched one infant who was just waking up. As he cradled the babe in his arms, he cooed softly, "Come meet your godfather."

Severus had never held a child before, especially one so newly born, but he knew how to place his arms to rest the child comfortably in his arms, having seen it enough times.

"Severus, I'd like to introduce you to Libra, one of the twin girls," he said with great pride.

Severus stared down at the infant who gazed back up at him quietly with great intensity. "Hello, Libra. It is a pleasure to finally meet you." He wished more than anything that Hermione was here to share in this moment.

Libra began to squirm, which made Severus wonder what he did wrong to make her start to cry until it was explained she was probably hungry again. It was then he was introduced to his other goddaughter, Phoenix, and finally to Sebastian.

When Sebastian began to cry, Ginny suggested Severus try humming or singing to soothe him, since the baby was just fed and he wasn't in need of a nappy change. Severus began to rock his godson in his arms and hum softly, which caused Sebastian to calm down and begin to yawn. Eventually Sebastian drifted off to sleep. When Draco offered to take Sebastian and lay him down, Severus asked if he could hold him for a bit longer.
Severus missed the very meaningful glance exchanged between Draco and Ginny, since he could hardly pry his eyes away from this tiny being.

Now more than anything, Severus wished he could have seen Hermione hold her new cousin, Auberon, or Lavender's infant, Josephine, or even Potter and Zhubanysh's new child who was unfortunately named after Severus' old nemesis. Now he would be trying to imagine what Hermione would look like with their own child held in her arms some day.

Perhaps when the Malfoys went back to England next month, in April – for a spring party to introduce their children to Ginny's family and the rest of wizarding society, in addition to showing off the newly refurbished Malfoy manor – they might swing by Hermione's flat and she could finally hold one of their godchildren.

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Hermione hated reading the gossip rags, but she was curious as to what the tone was regarding the Malfoys coming back to England. If anything, she was doing reconnaissance to see if there would be something close to a public lynching, which was damn near what she faced upon her return. To her surprise, the news of the Malfoy family return was met with fanfare and growing excitement of a positive nature, especially regarding the one-month old triplets. She complained about this to Severus through their mirrors.

"Why is it Draco – who is also an exonerated ex-Death Eater who worked for the Order, and even ran off with Harry's wife – is welcomed home like the prodigal son, yet you are treated with such disdain and my association with you is comparable to selling one's soul to the devil?" Hermione queried, pretending to be bored reading while her disgust was thinly veiled at best. She took a sip of her morning tea, trying not to slam down the china cup on its saucer when she put it down.

"I took my mark willingly, as foolish as I was as a lad, and was a willing Death Eater for a few years before I came to my senses. In contrast, Draco took his mark against his will and joined the Order immediately," Severus reminded her as he ate dinner. "And let's not forget the fact that I taught Potions to most of the witches and wizards in Great Britain who were born between 1970 and 1988, and their memories of me as their professor are not fond ones, nor are the memories from my former classmates."

Hermione made more grumbling remarks under her breath, but Severus did not prompt her to speak more clearly, allowing her to mutter to herself in peace.

"Besides, Malfoy is an old name with wealth and prestige attached to it, while the Snape name is nothing more than a soiled name that has no money associated with it nor any clout," Severus went on as if reciting dry historical facts from a dusty tome. "My last name has long been a house
renown for alcoholic abusive husbands, feeble-minded, weak-willed wives and progeny of no social standing and bad tempers. Ginny's family, of course, is poor but well-known, with one son a Quidditch player and two sons successful businessmen.

"And let's not forget that Draco and Ginny will be feeding the masses who come in hopes of getting a photo in the society pages. Of the simpering masses, who doesn't love a night of free food and drink on someone else's Sickle in hopes of ingratiating themselves to be invited to another fete filled with more free food and drink?"

Hermione knew exactly that type of people. They were the people in the neighborhood who only socialized with her parents when they threw a party at which the Grangers provided food and refreshments for everyone. She remembered a few of those parties her parents had thrown when she was a child, until her parents realized they were not being invited to other neighborhood parties in reciprocation.

It was a slightly underhanded way of buying the public's good will, with a spring party at Malfoy Manor. However, if that was what was needed to help turn public sentiment such that he did not have to worry about his family being hexed, Draco was willing to do so.

"Then there is the fact that the Malfoy family helped build the Grand Royal Supper Club," Severus added.

"Well, that explains why they put bread crumbs in their cassoulet if the kitchen staff used to work at Malfoy Manor," Hermione said as an aside, which made Severus smirk. He had told her about his bet with Draco and the beard-growing competition between them. "I wish you were going to be here for the party, Severus. You could see me wear those pearls you gave me for Valentine's Day with that new green dress I told you about, in person. A known Gryffindor wearing green in public on the arm of the former Head of Slytherin House; I'm sure it will be quite the scandal, and you would love to watch everyone squirm with discomfort."

"I know, but with the upcoming SATs, this is the worst time of year. Extra tutoring sessions and brewing classes had been booked long before Draco and Ginny picked the date; I can't leave." Severus was still rather reluctant to go back to England despite his December attempt to return, and even without the upcoming tutoring schedule he would have preferred not to, as tempting as the scenario Hermione presented was.

Hermione would have complained that Draco and Ginny could have picked another week, but that also was something that could not have been worked around. Portkey travel for infants under a month was strongly discouraged, especially for international travel, so they had to wait a month after the triplets were born before they could travel back to England. And they couldn't arrange their trip at a later date since the Lovely Lavender Company's new plant was finally going to begin
construction and Draco had to be present to supervise. The week of April 17th was the only option, unfortunately.

"Speaking of tests, how do you feel about your upcoming code of ethics test tomorrow?" he asked, hoping to change topics and brighten her mood.

Scrubbing her face with her hands, she said, "Honestly, at this point, I don't know. I mean, I read any random passage or rule or section and it all seems like I've committed them to heart, but when I try to recall specifically word for word, I find myself faltering."

"It's not so much a word-for-word recitation they want; it's whether you understand the concept stated in various codes," he reminded her. "The purpose of the test for code of ethics is not to train you to be a parrot and regurgitate on demand, but to understand the meaning and intent of each code in the book."

"I know, I know," she sighed. She looked a bit worn out despite having almost seven hours of sleep after staying up late studying. "It's just I fear I'll freeze, jumble the words, and I'll wind up sounding like a drunken troll."

"Maybe a Calming Draught would be in order before you take your test then?" Severus proposed. He knew that it was skirting the bounds and was an allowable potion to take before some Potions tests, but he also knew Hermione would pass on it based on principle.

Hermione shook her head, just as he thought she would. "No, I have to do this on the up-and-up all the way, or I won't respect myself."

Rising from the kitchen table, she blew a kiss to Severus before reaching out and pressing her hand to the glass of the mirror, as he went to the mirror to press his hand to hers. This was a ritual during their daily farewells.

Smiling, Severus mused, "You know what Jerry would say at this point?"

Hermione shook her head, wondering what other pearl of wisdom Jerry would have added.

Severus tried his best at a falsetto, singing, "Don't worry, baby. Everything will turn out all right."
Hermione laughed, having never heard Severus attempt singing in a high voice, much less a song by The Beach Boys, but glad to hear him sing more often. Since her return in January, she had been able to get Severus to sing to her at least once every few weeks. It was nice to see him be a bit lighthearted. His musical comment was even optimistic instead of his usual dose of pessimism, which was a sign that Severus was learning that the future was not always going to be bleak and disappointing.

In closing, Severus said, "I'll see Draco and Ginny off tomorrow morning. Let me know that Draco and Ginny make it there all right."

"I will. I can't wait to finally meet our godchildren," Hermione nearly squealed with excitement, finally finding a topic to be happy about, her mood lightened by Severus' singing.

She had seen the babies through the mirror when the Malfoys came over to their house. Seeing Severus hold little Phoenix in his arms like he was an old pro certainly made her heart glow and her stomach flutter pleasantly, actually looking forward to the day when she and Severus could start trying for children. They hadn't talked about it since her trip back in December, but the idea of having children was becoming a much less intimidating concept for her.

Before Hermione went to work, she decided to swing by the Ministry. After walking up the stairs where the Auror offices were, she rounded the corner next to Harry's office and was nearly bowled over by someone fully concealed in a cloak. By the size and frame of the person, it was most likely another witch.

"Pardon!" Hermione exclaimed, shocked at the sudden bodily contact. She grabbed at her shoulder that now felt heat bloom across the joint, knowing that it was going to develop into a lovely bruise.

The other person kept plowing on as if they didn't notice the collision, though Hermione distinctly heard the person growl, "Bitch," under their breath.

Hermione scowled at the rudeness of the other person, wishing people would get over the fact she was in a relationship with Severus and move on.

Walking up to the entrance to Harry's office, she knocked on the open door. She saw Harry bent over his desk, his hand fisted in his hair as he stared blankly at the pile of parchments scattered across his desktop. Hermione asked, "Is this a bad time?"
"No, no, come in," he invited her as he exhaled. Harry glanced up at the doorjamb where Hermione stood and waved his wand to shut the door with a bit more force than necessary. She also heard him put up a Silencing Spell to prevent anyone eavesdropping at the door.

Hermione didn't like the look of concern on Harry's face and asked, "Is everything all right?" Out of habit, when she began to fret herself, her hand reached for the pendant around her neck and began to worry at it with her thumb.

"Yeah. Just, had a short row with an old friend," he said dismissively.

Hermione glanced back and wondered if the person who had nearly knocked her over in the hall was the same person Harry just had words with.

She was about to ask who it was when Harry noticed her nervous tic. "I'm glad to see you are still wearing that necklace I gave you. More than ever now," he said a bit darkly, reaching down his shirt to pull out his pendant, showing her he still wore its match night and day.

"Yes, it seems that despite Severus working for the Order and having proven he was in no way involved with the attack on Hogwarts, and that Dumbledore knowingly sent him and Draco away when he knew the school might be attacked in order to protect their loyalty to him until the final battle, are not enough to convince others of their innocence." Hermione sighed. Then she finally remembered something she had been meaning to ask him for some time, prompted by his comment. "That night Alan Parker attacked me. My mind was so muddled. I can't recall if I ever called for you by grabbing onto the pendant before I was hit with that Stunning Spell."

"Actually, the one you are wearing has an enhanced call for distress spell imbued in it. You merely have to be wearing it and call for me in your mind. It seems I gave you one of the new prototypes by accident. It was developed after one incident where someone was hit with a curse before they could grab their pendant," he confessed. "Good thing, too. If you had been wearing one of the older Auror pendants that night, if you didn't grab hold of the necklace before you got hit, I would have never known to come find you."

"Yes, that is a good thing, for I think I didn't grab hold of it at all, or maybe I did. The whole night was a big blur." Hermione looked at Harry's desk as she tried to not let her mind go down the rabbit hole of remembering her night of terror. Instead, she focused on all the items on his desk, noticing the piles of clutter here and there, and how one could easily lose a multitude of items amongst the scrolls, parchments, new family photos featuring himself, Zhubanysh and little James, an empty Chocolate Frog box, a half-drunk cup of tea that was stone cold, the latest copy of Quidditch Weekly, and old make-up mirror compact already buried under a sheaf of parchment. Many items
were most probably left behind by Zhubanysh when she brought James by the office recently.

"Well," she said, trying to get back to the reason why she came by Harry's office in the first place, "I've been reading the society pages and gossip rags, and it seems sentiment toward Draco and Ginny has thawed considerably. People are even looking forward to their returning, with the spring ball they're throwing. So I think for the most part, the general sentiment is that this is a good thing."

"Thanks for taking time to read those articles for me. I've had such a heavy work load, as I've been staying late a lot of nights, and Zhubanysh is fit to be tied with these late nights this week and me coming home late for dinner. I know how busy you are with work and your apprenticeship. I truly appreciate it," Harry said gratefully.

"Well, they are my godchildren," Hermione replied, sitting up straighter with a more serious look on her face. "Severus and I would do anything to protect them, and if it means reading some twaddle on people guessing what Ginny will wear to the party, and if she has reached her pre-pregnancy weight already, it's worth it.

"So, has the entire staff at the Portkey office been briefed that further leaks to the press when people return result in getting sacked?" Hermione asked pointedly, glad the person who leaked her return in January to Rita Skeeter was fired.

"Yes. When are they arriving?"

"They leave in the morning at nine, which means they arrive here at eight this evening. I thought I would welcome them, since Severus is concerned about them arriving safely." Hermione noticed the time after glancing at the clock. "Well, I better be heading off to work. Albert has me initiating research on a new project today, and I have to deal with some accounting matters with the company goblin later."

"Have a good day then, and let Lavender know we're free this weekend to bring James over for a play date with Josephine." Harry rose to give Hermione a hug good-bye.

"Harry, they're only a few months old," she pointed out.

"Yes, but Zhubanysh says it's nice to have some adult conversation and trade mothering tips with Lavender."
Hermione laughed, wondering if she'd ever find herself trading tips with another mother. She had already heard most of the tips when she was married to Ron, as all the other Weasley women swapped ideas and tips for everything from diaper rash to gas to the children's magic kicking in at the most inopportune times, such as their diapers suddenly disappearing off their bottoms.

In the atrium of the Ministry, Hermione Floo'ed directly to work. She emerged from the fireplace in the company's main reception area, since she didn't have a fireplace in her office. After taking the lift up, she opened the lift door and heard a shriek behind Lavender's door.

Hermione had been told by Severus that some of the times he had heard screaming from behind her office door, it had been Lavender having a snit of epic proportions, and in one instance it was that time he had discovered Lavender with Ron in flagrante delicto. Hermione was about to let Lavender have her temper tantrum in peace when she distinctly heard a second voice screaming and a loud thump.

Bursting through the door, Hermione found Lavender and Padma Patil rolling about the floor like a couple of first years engaging in good old-fashioned fisticuffs. It seems their wands had been discarded, as they lay on the floor haphazardly forgotten as the witches scratched at and pummeled each other.

"What is going on here!" bellowed Hermione, feeling like a mother who had come in on two children causing mischief – instead of two grown witches in the midst of a bare-knuckle brawl.

Padma gave one last good yank of Lavender's thoroughly skewed hairdo before separating herself from the other witch. With a face of utter loathing, Padma turned to Hermione as she sat partially upright and screeched, "Nothing of your concern, you Death Eater fucking whore!"

As Hermione whipped out her wand, should she need to defend herself, Padma Summoned her wand and Disapparated from the spot with a crack.

Lavender still lay inelegantly sprawled on the floor, rubbing her jaw that was beginning to bloom with a lovely swelling where Padma's right hook had made contact. Hermione rushed over and helped Lavender go to her bathroom to begin cleaning up.

The bruised witch removed all her make-up with her wand, since her face was too sore to use the make-up removing cloth she'd developed with Severus years ago. Brushing out her hair, she hissed, "Feels like that bitch took a hunk of my hair out. Damn."
Once Lavender's hair was brushed, Hermione began tending to her employer's injuries.

"Care to tell me what that was all about?" Hermione asked.

"Just another periodic visit from Padma who still blames me for Parvati's condition. Seems the visits happen more frequently since that *Quibbler* article came out, the one where Severus told the world he and Draco worked for me all along. Padma has been calling me a hypocritical traitor and worse. She continues to insist that I should have been the one raped and Crucio'ed until my mind was like scrambled eggs," Lavender said while trying to avoid talking out of one side of her mouth, where she had a split lip.

Hermione had always known the story about Lavender and Parvati being kidnapped and Parvati's long-term condition, but only years later learned that Lavender had been able to escape thanks to Blaise while Parvati was dumped off at the gates of Hogwarts after being abused so terribly for a few days.

"She's pressing forward with trying to get the Wizengamot to block my ability to visit Parvati at St. Mungo's, despite the fact that I'm the one who visits her every week ever since I finished my seventh year and who pays all her extra care bills," Lavender ground out, trying best not to move her lips too much. "Padma visits but a few times a year at best, yet the Wizengamot is willing to hear her case given that she is Parvati's only family, since her parents disowned her after she was attacked."

Hermione knew about Lavender's financial actions – taking care of Parvati's bills at St. Mungo's full-time, and funding additional research to try and find a cure for her friend's condition – but did not know about this latest legal development until just now.

"Today, Padma came over to serve me legal papers to cease and desist seeing Parvati, which I'll contest in court, of course." Lavender turned her face to the side and began applying a cream to make the swelling on her face go down. "And then it all devolved from there. You came in right after we disarmed each other, and she launched herself at me like a banshee possessed."

Looking over her shoulder to the office, Hermione suggested, "Maybe you should lock the Floo in your office for safe measure. After coming home from my Christmas trip, I keep my Floo locked all the time, even if the Howlers have mostly stopped."

"Well, after Luna wrote that article about her honeymoon in Malu Palekaiko, and how people
come there for a fresh start and all that rigmarole, the Howlers directed to me personally and the Lovely Lavender Company seemed to drop off entirely."

"What I don't get is, it was briefly covered in the press about Draco becoming your Vice President for Advertising and Marketing for Asia Pacific back in October, yet no one thought it was the same person or didn't care until that Daily Prophet tripe came out at New Year's. That's what bothers me." Hermione sighed, not understanding the mercurial nature of public opinion when swayed by a few choice words placed in print.

As Lavender dabbed on more potions and gel-like substances, the damage done to her face began to fade. "I've got it from here. Why don't you go back to your office? Albert is anxious to talk with you about the cellulite cream project."

Hermione walked though Lavender's office and noticed some items had been knocked off her desk. Using her wand, she repaired a broken figurine with a quick spell and levitated it to sit once more on the edge of Lavender's desk. She also put back into place a few papers, a quill holder, several quills, a cloisonne box that seemed to have held a small mirror that had fallen out of the box, and a picture of Ron holding Josephine.

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Severus was ready and waiting for her when she got home. Through the mirror though the other side was covered, he heard the Floo roar to life. It wasn't but for a few more seconds until the cloth was removed and Hermione greeted him with a radiant smile.

"How did it go?" he asked expectantly.

"I passed! With First Class level marks!" she crowed triumphantly.

With the good news, Severus popped the cork on the champagne and toasted to Hermione's success on passing her code of ethics exams. Marf had a chilled bottle ready for Hermione as well and served up a glass to his mistress.

"To Hermione, who will easily make Potions Mistress Extremely Talented, Third Class one day soon," Severus toasted, tipping his glass towards the mirror.

"Hear! Hear!"
They drank simultaneously.

"Pity I have to put in at least five years of work before I can graduate up to Second Class. Then I have yet five more years until I reach First Class, and that's with learning additional languages with each Class upgrade and more Potions developed, and publishing." Hermione noted.

Severus took another sip of champagne before putting it down and adding, "Yes, but given your academic and ambitious nature, that will be easy enough for you to accomplish."

"If it's just a matter of learning the languages, publishing, and developing Potions, I don't understand why there is a five-year wait to advance," she questioned.

"Because otherwise you'll have Potions masters and mistresses seeking to push themselves to reach the highest grade and burning themselves out in the process or not pacing themselves, and sometimes time itself can be an excellent teacher."

Hermione gave him a very sultry look as she leaned towards the mirror in her parlor-cum-boudoir. "Time has made you very, very knowledgeable, my dear Potions master." She tipped up the champagne flute and drained the last of it before setting it down on the settee. She had a look in her eye that said she wanted to celebrate with something a bit more intimate than a drink.

Just as she started unbuttoning her blouse, she heard a thunk in her fireplace, followed shortly by a rapping at her door.

Rolling her eyes, she held her finger up to indicate she would only be a moment.

Upon opening the door, she found Ginny on her front doorstep.

"So, did you pass?"

Hermione laughed and waved Ginny in. "Yes, Ginny, I passed, just as I was telling Severus I did."

"Hello, Severus," Ginny called through the glass. Turning back to Hermione, she said, "Well, I tried to Floo on over, but you locked your Floo."
"Yes, so I heard," Hermione said a bit dryly. "Maybe I should just unlock my Floo during the rest of your visit this week, but you should also owl ahead of time so I'm not in the middle of anything when you visit," she tried to hint delicately.

Ginny looked down at the champagne glass on the table in front of the settee. She then noticed the top button of Hermione's blouse wasn't properly buttoned, and Severus was buttoning up his half-unbuttoned shirt. Flushing, she stammered, "Oh, I am so sorry, I disturbed you. It's just that Draco and I were just eager to hear if you passed."

"It's okay," Hermione said, but heard Severus give a huff of protest. She then put forward, "How about you come over tomorrow night with Draco? We can have dinner here while Severus joins us while he has breakfast."

"Oh, that does sound lovely." Ginny turned to smile at Severus, but then noticed a slightly impatient look in his face. "Draco has a few questions for Severus, which he can ask then. So I'd better just toddle off now and leave you two at it, so to speak."

Severus gave her a look that her innuendo was not particularly subtle, but waved farewell to her regardless. "Until tomorrow."

Ginny didn't even bother leaving via the front door. Instead, she Apparated right from the spot back home, understanding that her friends no longer wished to be interrupted.

"Now, where were we," Severus purred as he began unbuttoning his shirt once again.

"I believe I was on the settee, but I suppose I can move on over to the bed for greater comfort and possibilities," Hermione said suggestively. She slowly sauntered over to the bed, using her wand to turn the mirror on the easel to face in the right direction.

Keeping her back to the mirror, Hermione slowly unbuttoned her blouse. She glanced over her shoulder with a smoky stare as she exposed one shoulder, then the other, as she let the fabric slide off her arms and expose her back for Severus' view.

Severus growled with appreciation, enjoying the slow building of anticipation. His own shirt was divested. He let his hands glide over the hard, flat planes of his stomach and chest; he knew Hermione liked watching him touch himself in the way she wished she could, imagining it was her
own hands on his skin.

At an agonizingly slow pace, Hermione unzipped the back of her skirt, the zipper making a noise loud enough for Severus to hear through the mirror. She slowly pushed the waist of her skirt past her hips and let it fall to the floor.

"Ah, mercy me," Severus sighed. He was in awe of the sight of her wearing stockings with seams up the back of her legs; the stockings were held up by lacy black suspenders, and she had a matching lacy black bra and knickers. She had dressed in anticipation of the occasion, much to his delight.

Returning the favor, Severus undid the fly of his trousers and indelicately reached in to adjust himself.

Hermione licked her lips, remembering the feel and taste of Severus in her mouth, wishing it was already June when she would make her next trip out, since her March trip had been canceled due to construction not having begun yet. It had been a little over two months since they had been in each other's arms, during her Valentine's Day trip; they were both aching for each other, right down to their very core.

Turning around to face Severus, she reached up and pulled the pins from her hair before she shook out her mane. As it cascaded around her shoulders and caressed the tops of her breasts, Severus gave an audible sigh.

"The next time we meet, I want to tease you mercilessly," Hermione exhaled, her voice rich with yearning.

"You're teasing me quite well enough as it is." Severus began to slip his trousers down, leaving his underpants on to prolong the long-distance seduction. For added effect, he stroked his stiffening length through his underpants, making the shape of his member quite visible to discern.

"But I love to hear you beg, it makes me want to yield to your every desire," she cooed sweetly as she reached up and unclasped her brassiere. She slowly dropped the straps of one shoulder, followed by the next, before slowly pulling the lace and satin away from her breasts.

Severus ran his fingers through his hair, pulling it away from his face in order to keep his hands busy and stop himself from reaching directly for his own cock, wishing he was there with her. Had
he been in the very room with her, he would have pushed her up against a bed post and begged to enter her right then and there.

To add to the torture, Hermione turned away from him to present him with a glorious view of her arse as she slowly bent over to slowly pull her knickers down. As they slid down, her could see her swollen lips dusted with her dark brown curls come into view from her position, as if taunting him that he could not sink himself into her snug warmth.

Still bent over, she peered behind her past her legs, her hair trailing down to her feet while she was still wearing her heels.

"Stay in that position and touch yourself," he asked in a husky voice.

Complying with his request, she reached around and began slowly caressing herself. As she toyed and teased herself, Severus finally shucked his underpants and began leisurely stroking himself in front of the mirror for Hermione's equal viewing pleasure.

Being bent over was fine and dandy for short periods of time, but not for long. She readjusted herself on the edge of the bed, spreading her legs wide for Severus to get a good look as she caressed her breasts with one hand and began fingering herself with another.

"Oh God, how I want you to fuck me," Hermione plaintively wished aloud.

"Then maybe something can be done about that," he proposed.

Reaching over to her bedside table, she pulled out one dildo, to which Severus shook his head.

"I don't think that will quite satiate your appetite tonight," he said, returning his eyes towards the side indicating she should try another.

When she pulled one out a little larger, he shook his head.

Pulling out the largest she was most comfortable with, he nodded his head that her choice was finally acceptable. It was just a bit larger than Severus, but he wanted to see her filled and view that
exquisite look on her face when she felt something that large fill her.

Holding the dildo up, she ran her tongue along its length, giving Severus a view of what she would do to him if it were him and not some stand-in of the real thing. She engulfed the thing into her mouth, forming a wanton act of fellatio upon the inanimate object. She groaned with pleasure, as she ran her tongue around the head of it as her hand blindly reached for the bottle of lubrication.

Looking at Severus wantonly, she recited in Japanese one erotic haiku from the book she gave Severus for Valentine's Day – the book that also featured shunga prints.

"Majestic pine tree
Stout and towering it stands
Felled only in bliss"

With the lubrication bottle cap flipped off, she poured the clear viscous fluid along the dildo's length. She then rubbed her hand along the proxy cock, trying to warm it up and spread the fluid all around to ease penetration.

Spreading her legs as wide as possible, she slowly pushed the head into her as she sighed, "Yes, Severus. Take me. Fill me, I need you."

Severus' breaths were labored as he watched her remove the dildo and push it in a bit further, followed by pulling it out a little bit and pushing it in even father until she eventually inserted the entire length into herself.

Severus groaned aloud as Hermione shut her eyes and arched her back, using her wand to set the dildo to slide in and out of her at a languid pace. He caressed his sac with one hand while his other was still firmly sliding up and down his rigid shaft.

"Yes, Severus, oh how I've missed you," she groaned as she fistied handfuls of bedclothes, trying to remain upright in order to watch Severus stroke himself, imagine him between her legs. She could just discern the glistening of precum leaking from the tip and wished she could lick it off and taste his sweetness.

Severus watched the length of surrogate-lover slide in and out of her entrance. He glanced at her flushed face, hearing her voice calling to him.
He recited another haiku from the book.

"Beautifully painted
The fan is seen when opened
She unfolds for me"

With a twitch of her wand, the dildo began speeding up. Unable to continue sitting up on the edge of the bed, Hermione turned sideways on the bed, turning her head to continue watching Severus as he stroked himself faster.

Her hand slipped between her legs and began to rub her clit furiously.

Severus watched how her back arched up off the bed with each stroke of the dildo and how her nipples puckered even tighter, her sighs and cries increasing in intensity and pitch.

"You are my goddess," Severus exalted, "my gloriously divine Hermione. So beautiful."

Hermione's eyes slipped shut as she felt the heat in her abdomen throbbing with each penetrating thrust of the dildo. Severus' words of adoration in addition to her own finger work pushed her over the edge and she came, calling his name.

Seeing Hermione in the midst of an orgasm, Severus came himself, his semen spurting all over his hands and stomach, as he groaned with release.

It was a pale imitation of the real act, but it was better than masturbating alone, both agreed.

Hermione removed the dildo from herself and got up to use the loo while Severus sat there catching his breath. Once she came back, they said their farewells. Now it was time for Severus to shower and open up shop while Hermione cracked the books, now focusing solely on her Japanese language lessons. Each put the cloth over their own mirror until the next time when Severus would have returned home from a day at his shop and Hermione was waking, shortly before Gary came over for another Japanese language lesson.

With one of her new ceramic peeling knives she bought herself recently, Hermione began deveining the prawns. She thought fondly back on when Severus opened his birthday present and unwrapped the set of Japanese ceramic knives. Upon her telling him about the particular attributes
of the knives, he of course ran to the ice box and started chopping and slicing various items on the kitchen table. He was quite thrilled by the knives' performance and even went out and bought a set for their kitchen too, since the set she bought him was for the laboratory.

When she finished the prawns, she heard the Floo roar.

"I'm in here!" she called out, as she grabbed a dish towel to wipe her hands before greeting her friends.

Just as she was about to exit the kitchen and greet them, Ginny and Draco entered instead.

"I brought a Spanish Rueda and an Italian Fiano, since you said the dish was going to be garlicky prawns," Draco said, holding up a bottle in each hand.

"Wonderful!" Hermione said enthusiastically as she took the wine from Draco. She greeted her friends before putting the wine in the icebox to stay chilled. "Severus just got back from his morning swim and should be out of the shower soon."

"We noticed the curtain was still up on his side when we arrived," Ginny remarked before adding, "You know, you didn't have to give up Marf so you'd be cooking all by yourself tonight without help. I know what long workdays you have."

"Nonsense," Hermione said dismissively with a flip of her hand. "Your party is Saturday, and you need all the help you can to get everything ready in time. I think I can live a few days without Marf, as useful and helpful as he is."

"Lavender did loan us her elves from her home for a few days too, except the one that cooks and the one that takes care of Josephine," Ginny informed her.

"Yes, Lavender did mention that this morning when we were talking. But please, have a seat while I start preparing the garlic." Hermione held her hand out to indicate for them to sit at the kitchen table while she continued her preparations.

"Oomph," Draco said with relief as he sat down in a kitchen chair, "I feel like I don't know what to do with myself. This is the first night Ginny and I have had away from the triplets since they were born, so this is like a date night for us. Granted, we have an elf at home we hired to help us, and we
have the elves at Malfoy Manor right now looking after them, but we both feel strange being away from them for once."

"Well then, relax and enjoy yourself. They're in good hands. Tonight we can have adult conversation, wine, good food, and good company," Hermione practically trilled, feeling like she was getting another slice of domestic bliss. If it wasn't for the fact that Severus was half a world away, it seemed like she could expect him to walk into the kitchen at any moment and begin helping by chopping the cilantro.

"You know, because the triplets were born on St. Patrick's Day, Fred and George were very disappointed we didn't name Sebastian Patrick instead, or one of the girls Patricia," Ginny said, wrinkling her nose with dislike at the idea.

"Given that Phoenix looks like she'll have your red hair, that would just--" Hermione trailed off, as she heard the Floo roar to life once more. "Hang on a sec," she said curiously, knowing she wasn't expecting anyone else. She drew her wand and went to investigate as Draco rose to follow.

Entering her main room, Hermione saw Lavender standing by the fireplace, a large sack laying by her feet.

"Lavender? Is there something the matter?" Hermione asked curiously as she put her wand away, noticing that Lavender's hair was down and looking a bit unkempt, which was highly unusual, in addition to the darker clothing she had on.

Instead of replying, Lavender pulled out her wand and stunned Hermione without saying a word. As Draco cleared the door, he was caught off guard, momentarily perplexed by the sight of his employer brandishing her wand standing above Hermione's limp body. Draco was fast, but the witch already had her wand out and was ready for him.

"Is Lavender joining us for dinner?" Ginny called out from the kitchen, having heard Hermione say the witch's name.

She fell out of her chair and onto the kitchen floor with a thud, not even getting a chance to see who her attacker was.

Severus rushed along, knowing he was running a bit late, but that Hermione would wait to start cooking the prawns until he was dressed.
Walking briskly out to the kitchen, he used his wand to remove the cover over the mirror he had already set up in front of his kitchen table.

As he rounded the table expecting to see the warm faces of his lover and friends, he was shocked by the image in the mirror.

Hermione, Draco, Ginny, and Lavender were all unconscious, sitting upright in chairs and bound with a Binding Spell.

Grabbing the frame of the mirror in panic, he called out each of their names hoping to rouse them. His face was nearly pressed to the glass as he tried to look around and discern what was happening.

The only response was a hand reaching out from the side, tacking a piece of parchment on the glass facing towards him in order for him to read it.

Come back to England now.

Notify anyone, especially Aurors, and Hermione will be killed immediately. I have ways to know if you contact anyone.

Refuse to come and they all die.

You will pay for what you did.

You have one hour.

"HERMIONE!" Severus screamed, wanting to pound his fists on the mirror, but afraid if he did he
would shatter the mirror.

To add insult to injury, the unknown assailant draped Hermione's pendant – the one that Potter had given her to call him, should she be in trouble – over the top of the mirror so that it dangled as if taunting him. Somehow, whoever had stunned her unconscious had known about the Auror's necklace and removed it from her, no doubt before she could call for help from Potter.

There was only one course of action.

Severus ran to his bedroom and used his wand to change his clothes into his black woolen trousers, black frock coat, and starched linen shirt, trying to shave off every minute he could so he could get back to England as soon as possible. He grabbed his cloak and checked to make sure he had his wand, then Summoned a few things from his lab just in case before Apparating directly to the Portkey office.

Bursting through the door, he saw Halulu there at her desk bent over, playing with her twin girls who were resting in a playpen by her desk.

"I need a Portkey to England!" he said urgently, trying not to yell, his eyes dark and stormy with trouble.

"Yes, what's wrong?" Halulu asked, getting up from her desk, sensing something was amiss.

"Dammit, woman," he snarled as he slammed his open palm down on the countertop, "I don't have time for twenty questions. Get me a Portkey to London NOW!"

Sensing the urgency of the matter, Halulu created a Portkey immediately and set it upon the table in the middle of the Portkey departure area.

Before Severus reached out and touched it, he felt around in his pockets and pulled out a ring filled with keys. He tossed them to Halulu. "Here."

"What are these for?" she asked, dumbly.
"Keys to my house and shop. Tell Mouna I couldn't escape fate. It's time to pay the piper," he said with defeated resignation just before he touched the shoe transformed into a Portkey and disappeared.

Knowing nothing good was meant by Severus' foreboding statement, Halulu ran over to the nearest fireplace and threw in a handful of Floo powder.

Poking her head out of the fireplace at the Finaus', Halulu called out, "Mouna? MOUNGA!"

"Hang on, hang on! Hold your hippogriffs," Rainbow said casually as she emerged from the kitchen with a cup of coffee in her hands.

"We got trouble. Where's Mouna?" Halulu nearly shrieked, bordering on hysterical.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to my ever lovely and talented betas, JuneW and Hope.

Good news, the last chapter is finally betaed, so I'll be posting remaining chapters as fast as I can get them through the Ashwinder mod queue.
Severus landed in London and immediately exited the Portkey office. He ignored the obvious stares and hushed whispers that rose like the susserations of an autumn wind in a wheat field upon their seeing the exonerated Death Eater, who had been pilloried by the Daily Prophet. He was a silhouette of billowing black robes as he crossed the atrium floor of the Ministry as if running for his life, which he essentially was, cursing he could not Apparate directly to Hermione's flat from within the Ministry. So instead, he headed towards the row of fireplaces and called out his destination before throwing down a handful of Floo Powder, his wand at the ready.

Emerging from the fireplace of his old flat, Severus stopped in his tracks.
There was Lavender, still unconscious and bound upright in a kitchen chair, yet another version of Lavender was standing over Hermione holding a small vial of something over her open mouth, while her wand kept a small mirrored compact aloft close to her head with a Levitating Charm. Hermione was still unconscious, her mouth hung open slack and wide. Severus also saw Draco and Ginny still bound upright in chairs as well.

"Recognize what I hold, Death Eater?" the conscious version of Lavender asked.

Severus immediately understood that it was the standing and talking version of Lavender who was the impostor, and the real Lavender was unconscious in the chair. The cadence and accent was wrong, and Lavender would never address him as such, nor look as unkempt as the one threatening those who were most dear to him.

Looking at the clear glass vial held in the impostor's hand and the way the early evening sun glinted off of it, he recognized it. The sparkling reds and oranges that danced within were unmistakable.

"Death of a Thousand Suns," he ground out in a murderous tone.

"Good, then you understand that if my hand just happens to slip, should you try to disarm me or worse, the vial slips into her mouth and she dies a painful death, that not even your bezoars, which you no doubt have shoved in your pocket, could cure. And without the right antidote administered within seconds, she will die an extremely painful death within minutes. Do I make myself clear?"

"As crystal," he growled, staring at the witch with deathly contempt.

"Good. Then I'll lock the Floo and ward the doors and windows shut so we'll be undisturbed," she demanded coolly.

"How do you know I have not informed anyone of your threat and that they'll be here at any moment?" he asked calmly, hoping to gain further information and stall for as long as possible.

"Your interview with The Quibbler gave me inspiration, thanks to your little mirror spell. Once I heard that this Death Eater and his whore wife were coming back, I placed mirrors within various offices and places of business of people who even remotely appeared slightly sympathetic to you that you might have alerted. I have several of these all charmed so I could listen in." She nodded her head slightly to the mirrored compact still floating by her head. "Even in Lavender's office,
where I overheard how the elf here would be away and these two would be coming over to Hermione's flat tonight," she said, gesturing towards Draco and Ginny. "That's when I knew to strike." Flicking her wand, the imitation of Lavender had the small floating compact mirror fold close and slide down into a deep pocket. "You were good to make sure you didn't notify anyone, else I would have heard. There was no chatter except a few saying they spotted you heading straight from the Portkey Office to a Floo."

"Clever." Severus quirked his brow.

"Yes, now hand over your wand." She redirected her wand to point directly at Severus' chest, all the while keep the one hand holding the poison poised above Hermione.

Seeing as how the vial was tipped slightly towards Hermione's mouth and could easily be poured down her throat, Severus felt he had no option but to comply. Reluctantly, he tossed over his wand, which landed with a soft thump on the rug by the threatening witch's feet.

She retrieved his wand with her own wand, pocketing it so it could not be easily Summoned.

"Now, let's wake everyone and begin the evening." Aiming her wand at Draco, she cast a Stinging Hex which awakened him with a scream.

"Who are you?" Draco tried to ask, gritting through the pain of being woken with a painful hex.

"Haven't figured it out? Let's see if your traitorous cunt wife can guess."

The copy of Lavender turned her wand to Ginny, yelling, "Furnunculus!"

Ginny woke with a blood-curdling scream, having been burned by the spell hitting her shoulder and causing boils to appear.

"What do you want? STOP IT!" Draco demanded as he struggled against his bindings.

With a sneer, their captor said with impatience, "We can't begin until everyone is awake."
Lavender began to groan groggily, finally beginning to wake being stirred by Ginny’s screams, looking around wide-eyed at the current predicament. She didn’t say a word, but only looked to Severus with a plea in her eyes to help them.

Severus moved a step forward, but the witch holding them all prisoner, or at least it might have been a witch, looked at him and gave him a threatening glare. With a tilt of her hand, she reminded him that she would easily tip the poison into Hermione’s throat if provoked. Severus stepped back and held his hands up.

"Polyjuice Potion?" he asked, his lip curling into a sneer.

"If you could use it to escape, as the Daily Prophet correctly surmised in their expose, then I figured so could I."

"Padma," Lavender exclaimed with shock knowing exactly who would intend all of them mortal harm.

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Mounga finally landed at the London Portkey office. Once he had his feet firmly on the ground, he ran over to the nearest Portkey agents and demanded, "Where are the Auror offices! This is an emergency!"

The poor wizard, somewhat stunned by this large wizard with an American accent looking serious and quite threatening, merely pointed a shaking finger towards the exit and squeaked out, "Second floor."

"Thanks, dude," he exhaled and took off running as fast as he could.

As he reached the second floor, Mounga stood there uncertain where to go. He did not want to barge into anyone’s office. Instead he inhaled a great breath and cupped his hands around his mouth. In his great booming voice he used when addressing thousands atop the volcano once a year, he called out, "HARRY POTTER! HARRY! I HAVE TO SPEAK TO YOU IMMEDIATELY!"

Every Auror who had stayed late that night immediately popped their head out of their office door to see who was bellowing loudly enough to rattle the interior windows of the Ministry department.
Mounga spotted a head of messy black hair, the scar and glasses on a slightly below average height wizard – just as Ginny once described – pop out of the door next to him. Grabbing him by the shirt collar, Mounga hauled him out of his office into the hallway.

Harry, thinking he was being attacked, drew his wand and pointed it at the large, strangely dressed wizard who was nearly as large as Hagrid once was.

"We can't talk here," Mounga whispered quietly as possible. "Your office is probably bugged, and Severus, Hermione, Draco, Ginny, and Lavender are all in danger."

Padma was too preoccupied with the vial of poison held above Hermione's lips to notice the mirror behind her was now shrouded black on the other side. The shock that Padma Patil, Parvati's sister, was the one threatening them distracted Severus from noticing such details as well.

"At last, we need to wake this Death Eater fucking whore who has denied me justice by allowing you to go free. It was probably you who told Macnair when and where he could abduct my sister," Padma fumed with seething rage.

"No, I would never tell them. I would have done anything to have prevented–" Severus began to plea his innocence, but was cut off.

"LIES! You're a fucking liar, just like when Goyle said he didn't kidnap my sister!" Padma removed the poison from near Hermione's lips and stood back, pointing her wand at the unconscious witch, screaming, "CRUCIO!"

Hermione woke to a searing pain crushing her skull and screamed at the top of her lungs. Amid the pain, through the haze of the spell that shrouded her in a sickly yellow, she could see Severus and wasn't sure if it was the curse causing her to lose her mind so quickly or that he really was there. Padma did not relent, and Hermione eventually passed out from the pain.

Severus, could almost feel the pain of the Crucius Curse himself. His body lurched forward, and when Hermione passed out, he slumped forward on the floor and was pulled into unconsciousness once more.
Severus found Hermione on the ground twitching as lightning crackled across the ink black night. Not even stars were visible. He rushed over and pulled her into his arms while kneeling on the cold, dank ground. He saw her eyes flutter, looking about but unable to focus on him.

"Hermione," he said, trying to bring her around and assure her he was there for her, even if they were on some unknown plane of existence yet again.

"Severus?" she asked with uncertainty, not sure if she had seen him before she blacked out or not.
"Yes, I'm here. I'm in the flat with you trying to save you and the others," he said, trying to remain calm as he brushed her hair away from her face.

Hermione's eyes finally focused and they were filled with remorse. "I'm sorry."

They both knew what she was apologizing for. The evening after the tea ceremony at the Malfoys, Hermione wanted to renew their bonding. She had bought a pomegranate at the farmers' market that morning. That evening, after dinner, she had crushed the seeds and extracted the juice.

In silence, they had shared the cup of pomegranate juice, understanding their intent and the symbolism behind the gesture with Hermione being separated from Severus once again. It was their promise to remain connected together through their souls until Hermione could finally rejoin Severus permanently.

It was this binding that had dragged Severus into their other sphere when he was in the midst of trying to save their lives when Hermione was hit by the Crucius Curse.

Severus shook his head, for she had nothing to be sorry about. He had equally wanted to renew his bond to Hermione for their long parting. "Don't be sorry," he whispered. "I'm not."

As Severus went to wipe a tear from Hermione's cheek, he suddenly vanished, leaving Hermione alone in the dark as skeletal fingers of lightning still crackled across the endless night.

"Wake up!" Padma shouted as her boot made contact with Severus' jaw.

Severus' head snapped back. He opened his eyes as the throbbing pulse of pain spread along his jaw. When he tried to move, he discovered that he had been bound by a Binding Spell as well, but was now laying on his side. This was too similar to the time Lucius hexed him, which jogged his memory.

"There is no way I could have let the Death Eaters know where to find Lavender and Parvati. Before they were taken, I was already laid up in the Infirmary suffering from some nearly lethal hexes by Lucius Malfoy. Looking back, it was no doubt an attempt to stop me from warning the Headmaster, in case I may have overheard their conversation of what they planned to do," Severus said as fast as he could before Padma could scream for him to shut up or hex anyone else again. To his relief, Padma was no longer holding a vial of poison above Hermione's mouth, but his lover
was still unconscious from the curse.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," Lavender insisted. "When they brought me back to the infirmary, I found him laid up, just like I told you," Lavender's voice was cracking and wavering from the overwhelming fear building in her gut.

"Give me Veritaserum. I will tell you the truth," Severus offered, willing to profess his innocence.

"No! It's too late for that. You're going to pay. It's all your fault." Padma's hand was starting to shake, and the tip of her wand bobbed up and down slightly as she continued pointing it at Severus.

Severus could see now that no amount of reason could be had with this witch, as she was hell-bent on dishing out her revenge focused at him, even if it was misplaced.

"Fine, take your revenge out on me, but let the others go," Severus countered. "They had nothing to do with your sister's unfortunate assault."

"NO!" Hermione screamed, finally waking to hear Severus' offer. "No, Severus, don't!" She knew if Severus stayed, Padma would kill him.

"Unfortunate assault? You call being beaten, raped, Crucio'ed to the point of madness and impregnated by that Death Eater scum an 'unfortunate assault'?" Padma said, her voice rising to a shrill scream as her umbrage rose.

"What?!!?" yelled nearly everyone in union, unaware of Parvati's resulting pregnancy.

Swiveling to point her wand at Lavender, she snarled, "How would you know about it. You were too busy staying in school to finish your seventh year and take your NEWTs to care that she was pregnant."

Lavender did a quick calculation in her head. She remembered the attack took place in late September when the Headmaster was considering whether to allow weekends to Hogsmeade to continue or not, while allowing only seventh years who could Apparate to leave the confines of the castle. Given the time of her rape, Parvati could have given birth before Lavender finished school and saw Parvati for the first time at St. Mungo's in mid-June.
"Nobody told me!" Lavender screamed back. "Nobody told me anything!"

"Because my parents disowned her after they found out she was raped and impregnated!" Padma bellowed back. "I was the only one who could speak for her when no one else could! And then after giving birth, I was saddled with that hell-spawn brat when I got back from Hogwarts!"

"But the elixir Madam Pomfrey gave her to stop conception?" Severus spoke up, knowing the school policy procedure for such tragic occurrences.

"Seems they are only good if they are taken before fertilization occurs in some instances," Padma spat at him. "And St. Mungo's was too busy with the war to follow up to make sure she wasn't impregnated. They couldn't stop the pregnancy by the time they bothered to notice the vegetable in the permanent ward was not fat, but carrying that bastard!"

Parvati was gone a few days, long enough for fertilization to occur if she ovulated about the time of her kidnapping. After a certain point in the pregnancy, the magic of the child would prevent any attempt to end it. Thus, aborting was not an option without killing the witch in the process, as the magical link between mother and child was too strong to break.

Lavender, Ginny, and Hermione could not bear the thought of Parvati not only suffering what she did, but carrying a child to term in her mental condition as well. They all openly wept in sympathy for their old friend and classmate.

Draco hung his head in shame, unable to comprehend such a horror being foisted upon the poor witch.

Severus felt like he had been kicked in the gut with this new revelation. He knew that some Death Eaters engaged in such sick sport, but to impregnate their victims was just beyond the pale. It seemed almost contradictory considering how they went on about blood purity, but had taken no measure to prevent them from spreading their seed to those considered impure or blood-traitors.

"The others had nothing to do with this most heinous and tragic event. Let them go," Severus insisted once more.

"No? Draco is a fucking Death Eater, just like you! Probably helped them find her!" she screamed back at him.
"He was just a boy who took the Dark Mark against his will," Severus retorted, pleading Draco's case since he was still too dumbstruck to speak in his own defense. "His father held his wand against his temple and said he if refused or embarrassed him any further in front of the Dark Lord, Lucius would end the Malfoy line right there and then. Draco joined to save his own skin, and then joined the Order immediately to help Dumbledore and Potter win the war. There isn't a day that goes by he doesn't regret being forced to take that Mark!"

Padma did not want to accept any of their reasons. Storming over to Draco, she held her wand up and pressed it to his temple. As the point dug into his flesh, Draco flinched, his eyes shut tight. With a sudden glacial calm, Padma suggested, "Maybe I should just Imperio Draco to rape Lavender. And after that, Hermione too. And then I can Crucio them afterwards until they lose their minds as well. Maybe they'll get pregnant just like my sister and go through what she did."

"No, please, there is no reason for you to do this," Draco begged.

"I have plenty of reason," Padma snarled. "Every day I see that bastard my sister birthed and every day I see Macnair's eyes staring back at me, mocking me. This is the only way!"

"But why hurt Ginny? What did she do to you?" Hermione asked, hoping she could at least get her best friend freed through the use of logic, though it seemed Padma was impervious to it.

"Because she ran away with a Death Eater who should have stayed here and died, just like I poisoned Goyle!" Padma screeched.

"You?" Draco asked with disbelief, flummoxed yet once more. "You poisoned him?"

"Yes, and it was glorious to watch him die so painfully," she hissed with vitriolic delight. "The way he begged for mercy to kill him, and the way he thrashed and suffered."

"I thought Alan Parker..." Severus let slip aloud.

"I saw Alan Parker poisoning a Death Eater one night in a back alley some years ago. And it was beautiful," she confessed with relish. "So I figured, I'd copy him. And if he got caught, he would be blamed for all those deaths, though most of them were his work. But I helped with several over the years on my own."
"Parker is in Azkaban," Hermione volunteered foolishly.

Padma spun around on the spot. "How did you know?" she asked, her eyes dancing with a madness Hermione had seen only once before. Tilting her head to the side, Padma quietly said as her face began to contort with anger, "You sent him there, didn't you?"

Before Hermione could refute by saying that Harry had caught him and sent him away, in her fury, Padma cast yet another Cruciatus Curse at Hermione.

Hermione thrashed and bucked against her bindings as the pain raced through every nerve, until she slumped against her bindings.

Severus was unwillingly drawn into the ethereal abyss once more.

Clutching to Severus, Hermione ruefully whimpered, "I don't know how much more I can take."

The lightning raced across the sky, a mirror of the electric signals of pain racing through Hermione's nerves.

Severus held Hermione tightly to his chest. He knew if he did not do something, Hermione would not keep her mind intact much longer. It seemed Padma wanted revenge, and he would give her the satisfaction of it if it meant that the others could live.

There was no more escaping his past crimes that he had long lived in remorse over. Now was the time to clear his debts.

Severus knew if he died, because of his soul being bound to Hermione's, he might drag her along to the depths of hell with him. He was doing this so that she could live. As much as he regretted it, he knew it had to be done.

"You must live, Hermione. I cannot let you follow me where I must go. I release you from your binding to me," he murmured softly into her hair as he held back his tears.
Hermione began screaming for him not to go, crying hysterically as she called out his name over and over as he evaporated from her arms like mist.

Severus opened his eyes to find Padma staring at him curiously.

"I have a proposition," he began, his voice calm and businesslike. Severus figured this was Fate's way of saying he could not escape the sin of killing his wife and unborn child, and this was his only possible way to atone for it. "Kill me. Torture me as much as you want, but let all the others go without further injury or harm. I give myself to you freely if it means you'll let the others go."

"Is this some trick?" Padma asked. Her eyes were dancing with the prospect of the wizard she'd hated for so long giving himself over to her sadistic delights she had mentally entertained all those years, hoping if she ever had the chance.

"No, no trick. But you must let everyone else go," Severus stipulated. "Lavender, Ginny, Hermione, and yes, even Draco. Or do you want to be called a monster on par with a Death Eater for taking two mothers and a father away from their infant children. Kill them or drive them into perpetual madness, and you're no better than the Death Eater who tortured your sister. You'll only just breed more witches and wizards who want to exact even crueler revenge on you on behalf of their parents. The cycle of hate will never end, and on and on it will go. Kill me and end it now. I offer myself up to you to put an end to this madness that lingers after the war."

As much as Draco wanted to live for his children, he did not want to let Severus die either. Looking over at his mentor, he saw the resignation in his old friend's face. Severus was offering himself up so his godchildren would grow up knowing their mother and father. And Draco knew that to speak up might risk having Padma kill them all, which meant Libra, Phoenix, and Sebastian would have no parents or godparents to raise them, in addition to Josephine never knowing her mother. Draco began to weep wishing he could save his family and Severus, but knowing that Severus had made the decision for him.

"Fine," Padma agreed. "But I want them to watch as you die, so they can remember with horror every day of your death and be haunted with it every day, as I am haunted with the sight of that monster my sister birthed."
Padma didn't even bother to wake Hermione up, not noticing she was still unconscious.

Severus closed his eyes, tilting his head back, exposing his neck in submission to and acceptance of her wrath.

Behind his eyelids, he saw a bright flash of light.

With a loud crack and a blinding flash, the door to the flat splintered wide open, momentarily distracting Padma from finishing her spell. Before she could re-aim her wand from Severus to the intruder, she caught a Stunning Spell directly to the center of her chest.

Severus opened his eyes, to find Potter, Kingsley, and – to his even bigger surprise – Mounga rushing through the door while Padma, still Polyjuiced as Lavender, slumped to the floor.

There were a few more Aurors who rushed in afterwards, but Severus was too flooded with relief to notice who they were.

"That's Padma Patil Polyjuiced as me," the real Lavender Weasley spoke up as her bindings were removed with the ending of the spell.

"We know, Mounga here filled us in on what he overheard," Harry volunteered.

Mounga was bent over Severus, freeing him from his bindings and helping him to his feet.

The bewildered Potions master asked, "How did you know since..." His question was stopped short when Mounga removed a miniaturized mirror from his pocket and produced it for Severus' inspection. He recognized it as the charmed mirror from Severus' house. In the miniaturized mirror, he could see the flurry of activity about the room with the other Aurors freeing Lavender, Draco, Ginny, and Hermione from their bindings from the alternate perspective. The note was still tacked to Hermione's mirror.

"I blocked it so she could not hear or see us from this end and made it look like the mirror on your end was shrouded, so we could continue to watch and listen in," Mounga said with a smile of relief. "I got your keys from Halulu and your message, and figured out what was going on before taking a Portkey here. And because I knew the Auror offices were bugged, I yelled for Harry to come out of his office so I could fill him in. Sorry we took so long, but it took a while to get
When Severus found his legs and was finally standing, he momentarily hugged Mouniga in gratitude of this friend's quick thinking, but immediately stopped and went over to Hermione, who was still unconscious.

He scooped her up in his arms as Kingsley was tending to her, and the others were being freed and assessed for injuries. "Hermione, wake up. It's all right," Severus said earnestly as he stroked her face, trying to revive her. "We made it, I'm alive. Hermione?"

Fear began to grip him, and his hands began to shake as he caressed her cheek.

Kingsley took Hermione from Severus' arms and laid Hermione on the floor flat on her back. Harry and Kingsley both began to perform spells to revive Hermione and determine if she was injured beyond suffering from the Cruciatius Curse.

Draco held Ginny in his arms as both stood by, watching the Aurors try to awaken Hermione. Ginny and Lavender both began sobbing once more in fear for their friend's life.

"No," Severus breathed with disbelief at the conclusion that raced through his mind.

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The room was deathly silent except for the odd noise made by the children. It seemed even the infants were keenly aware of the somberness that pervaded the hospital room.

Hermione was laying on her back, still and eyes shut as if she had drunk the Draught of Living Death. The white sheets were crisp and stark in contrast to her dark undulating waves and curls of hair that had been brushed out by the attending Healers.

Draco and Ginny sat in one corner with their three infants, unwilling to be parted from their children after recent events.

Lavender and Ron were also in attendance with Josephine in the portable bassinet being gently rocked by a charm. Lavender was looking unkempt and tired, too upset and scared for Hermione's well-being to bother with her appearance. Ron looked even more worried than his wife, dark circles and bags under his eyes. He had come home the night before to find his wife gone with no note as to why she wasn't there, knowing she should have been home by then.
Albert was there as well, looking drawn and quite old, concerned over the fate of his apprentice who had become like a daughter to him and a dear friend.

The Drs. Grangers sat on chairs along one side of the bed, holding Hermione's left hand, having been brought there by Lavender to be by the bedside of their daughter. Lavender had received quite the tongue-lashing from Christine that Hermione's parents were not immediately kept in the loop when their daughter was laid up in St. Mungo's the last time, and they were brought in right after Hermione was admitted this time. Hermione's Aunt Christine and Uncle Tim were also there, with Auberon being held in his father's arms.

The staff at St. Mungo's had demanded most of the people in the room standing vigil wait outside of Hermione's room or go home to await updates, but none who were there would budge nor be quelled into leaving.

Severus and Albert pooled their enormous talents together to try and think of some brew that would revive Hermione, but nothing they suggested to the staff of Healers worked any more than the Healers' standard procedures.

The Healers once again were at a loss as to why Hermione would not wake. They said it seemed very similar to the incident from last summer, stating that it seemed she had lost the will to live.

The last time Severus saw Hermione, he had let Hermione go, indicating he was willing to die to let her live. She had not awakened to discover that he did not die, and therefore must still be on that alternate sphere, thinking he was dead and gone.

Severus tried to rejoin her in that other plane they had shared before, but because he had willingly cut those ties that bound him to her to save her, he could not find the thread of deep consciousness with which to reconnect with her.

There was only one other option Severus could think of that might bring Hermione back to him.

All heads turned when the door to the hospital room creaked open.

Severus looked up from his spot by Hermione's bedside, unable to let go of her right hand those many hours to see his salvation walk in.
Harry was escorting Zhubanysh into the room. She was holding their son, James, in her arms.

For the first time, Severus willingly left Hermione's bedside and went over to greet Zhubanysh.

Before he could plead for her to help him, she said, "You must be Severus."

"Yes," he choked out, his voice hoarse from the fatigue of being awake all night, unable to sleep as he kept vigil by Hermionie’s bedside. "Please help. You're the only thing left I can think of. You healed your husband with your songs. You stopped Hermione's nightmares. Please save her, please sing to her."

Zhubanysh handed James over to Harry and took Severus' large and calloused hands in her small ones. "My songs will not heal her."

Severus sunk to his knees in front of her, still holding her hands, and piteously begged, "Please save her. Anything. You're the only one." He broke down in sobs, his shoulders slumped and heaving, no longer carrying about his dignity. His pride was shattered and he let himself be seen willingly crying by the others, unable to hold in his sorrow any longer.

Seeing Severus broken like this, Ginny began to cry silently once more and buried her face in Draco's shoulder. Draco could not hold back his silent tears either.

"My singing will not heal her, but your singing will," Zhubanysh said as she reached down and tilted his tear-streaked face up to her and smiled beatifically at him. Sorrow tinged her smile, for she was quite sad for what happened to her adopted sister, but she still had hope.

"But, I don't know your language, I don't know the melodies," Severus said, not wanting to do it wrong and fail to bring her back.

She pulled at Severus' hands indicating he should stand, which he did. She guided him back over to Hermione's bedside. "My songs do not possess magic that you do not already have within yourself," she informed him. "In our tribe, we learn to sing songs as a way of soothing and healing those dear to us. It is your love sung through song that will heal her, not the song itself."
Zhubanysh had Severus sit by Hermione's side once more. "Take both her hands," she gently instructed him.

Hermione's parents carefully handed Hermione's left hand to Severus' outstretched one, placing her care in his hands while hoping he could bring their daughter back.

Placing her hands on his heart, Zhubanysh said, "Close your eyes. Now all the love you have for Hermione, imagine that it is a mountain. And I can tell it is a very large mountain. So tall it touches the top of the sky and rises high above the clouds. Can you see it?"

Severus closed his eyes and tried to imagine all he felt for Hermione represented in a mountain. It was so tall he could barely imagine seeing it all in his own mind. He nodded.

"Good. Now from the top of this mountain flows a spring. That is the purest form of your love for her. The more you love her, the more it flows, like a great stream falling down the mountainside. Now as you imagine your love flowing down the mountain, it also flows from your heart down your arms," she guided him, moving her hands from Severus' chest, radiating sideways and began trailing them down his arms to his hands that still held Hermione's. "It flows to a valley, a valley where Hermione's soul resides."

Severus could feel a tingling warmth radiating from his chest and down his arms as Zhubanysh coached him.

"Now," she said softly so as not to break his concentration, "find a song that speaks of your love for Hermione and begin to sing it to her while you imagine your love flowing down your arms like a mountain spring and into her hands, feeding that valley where Hermione's soul is. Let those waters from your love and song make that valley lush and green."

Severus thought of one song that meant something to both of them. Taking a deep breath, he began to sing.

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Hermione lay there crying in utter isolation, knowing that Severus had broken their bonds to free her and offer himself up in her stead yet again. She did not want to go on if she could not have Severus there to share it with her. In her grief, she decided to seek out Severus and join him. She and Severus had debated theories that the plane they had met on was one between life and death, a sort of limbo.
After the lightning ceased, Hermione found the strength to get up off the ground and begin the long chthonic journey. If she did not tarry, she might be able to find the bridge to the afterlife and meet up with Severus once more, and they could cross into the afterlife together hand in hand, no longer separated.

Onward Hermione trudged through the darkness for what seemed like hours, possibly days. As she continued walking, a faint light on the horizon to guide her, the path turned into one that followed up a ridge line. The ground on either side of her gradually subsided until she was walking along the spine of a hilly range.

Off to her left, she saw a valley shrouded in mist. It looked exactly as she had imagined Hades to look in her many readings of Greek mythology. There was a dark mauve-colored fog that thickly obscured everything from her view high atop of the ridge.

"Severus, I'm coming," she said to herself.

As she turned to walk down the hill, quickening her pace, she saw a figure emerge from the fog. At first she thought it was going to be Severus meeting her, but in the dim light she finally realized it was another woman.

Halfway down the hill, the woman with long light chestnut hair greeted her. "It's not time for you yet."

"But I'm here to join Severus," Hermione insisted, not letting this person get between her and Severus.

"I know, but you're headed in the wrong direction."

Before Hermione could refute, insisting that she was certain Severus would be coming along this way, she heard the wind pick up, and on the wind was the lingering of a familiar melody.

The woman with intelligent and curious brown eyes pointed a finger back up the hill from where Hermione came from. "That is where you will find him. Go, he's waiting for you."

As Hermione turned away, the stranger added, "Take care of him."
Hermione began running up the hill, making her legs go as fast as they could, wondering if there was yet another valley of Hades she had not seen – a valley that Severus was crossing into without her.

"My love waits there in San Francisco
Above the blue and windy sea..."

Severus stopped singing, his eyes still shut tight as he imagined that mountain stream as a raging torrent. "It's not working," he whimpered with defeat.

Zhubanysh, who had stood by him with her hand on his shoulder, shook her head. "You're wrong. Look."

Hermione's chest was beginning to rise and fall more noticeably, compared to the dead stillness she exhibited earlier.

Zhubanysh moved closer to Hermione. Grabbing Severus' hand, she guided one of his hands to cup Hermione's cheek and the other to rest on her chest above her heart. "Keep singing," she urged him.

Severus tried to think of another song that had meant something between them until he finally remembered yet another. He began singing, "At last, my love has come along..."

When Hermione was near the top of the ridge where she once stood, the wind ceased and so did the ethereal music that lured her back up the hillside.

Stopping, in need of the whisper in the wind to guide her, she turned her head, trying to listen for any sound to give her a direction to follow. "No, no. Don't stop. Not now. Come on, where are you? Guide me, dammit!"

To her relief, the wind picked up once more, and she could even see a light on the other side of the ridge begin to glow. Not only did she hear the music once more, but a looming glow on the horizon that must have been the sun approaching in which to point her the right way.

Finally as she approached the top of the ridge, her breath stopped in her chest. Before her loomed a
huge mountain that had not been there before. She had never in all her years seen anything as majestic or as beautiful as the tableau before her, looking like some idealized version of a mountain jutting up from the plain that spread out before her as it rose up sharply towards the brightening sky. At the base of the mountain was a valley that was slowly turning from brown to green as it was fed from a roaring torrent of water that cascaded down the side of the mountain, pooling at the bottom. The lake that was growing in size at the base of the mountain in the valley was still shrouded in darkness, as the sun was still behind the mountain and below the horizon. The lake looked refreshing and tranquil. Hermione wanted to bathe in those waters. She wished Severus was there with her to swim with her in that lake that was placid and inviting.

Bounding down the hillside, Hermione wondered if this was the paradise that was meant for her and Severus to spend the rest of their days together.

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Halfway through the song, Severus could not remember the lyrics. He heaved a sob, as Hermione was still not coming around, just breathing, which is what she was doing before. Severus took a sign of Hermione's chest moving up and down as a sign she was barely able to hold on and would not much last much longer despite Zhubanysh's insistence he was doing fine.

Severus was losing hope.

Placing a hand on his cheek, Zhubanysh said, "Find a song, a song that speaks of your deep love for Hermione and how you feel about her right now. A song that speaks about how boundless your love is for her."

Severus could only think of one song, and he knew it by heart.

Closing his eyes, he poured his heart forth as he began to sing in a loud and clear voice,

"A wizard called Eòin Greumson
Of bonnie Blackbriar Dornoch
Was bid to fight the goblin horde
Rebellion rose an' duty call'd

He left his love, fair Maighread
His promise: a gowden ring
That they should wed 'pon his return
No later than the spring"
All around the hospital room, tears began to fall, most of the visitors all too familiar with the lyrics of the song. Hermione's parents, aunt, and uncle began to quietly sob, moved by the lamentable nature Scottish ballad being sung with profound sorrow.

As Hermione happily skipped towards the lake filled with sparkling clear water, she stopped, finally hearing the voice on the wind. This time she could not only discern the melody, but could hear Severus' voice on the wind. She knew this song, she had heard it before.

Looking up the mountain that loomed before her, she finally understood she was not supposed to swim in the lake, but to climb the mountain before her. There she would find Severus.

"I'm coming, Severus. I'm coming!" she said as she began running faster.

Severus sang on, putting every ounce of his emotions into the song as he continued to imagine his love flowing down the mountainside. His one hand caressed her forehead and cheek, the other was firmly placed over her heart, his arms feeling like they were almost glowing with warmth.

He was not distracted by the soft sounds of others in the room crying, moved by the song. He solely focused on Hermione and his feelings for her.

"A year had passed and not return'd
Poor Maighread was waefu'
Her lover fear'd lost for dead
Maighread's breast brokenheart'd

A poison quick upon her lips
The witch did drink 'ere deeply
To see her Eòin on the other side
Join'd e'er in eternity

As Eòin came home, he found his bride
Light fading from her eyes
She thought she had join'd him beyond the veil
And pass'd to the other side"

Hermione's mother sat there staring at the man she had never met who had captured her daughter's
heart; she listened as he sang a song that seemed to mimic Hermione's own choice to give up living, most probably convinced her lover was dead. A snotty tissue was clutched in one hand while the other curled limply against her own chest as she leaned into her husband's arms for support, unwilling to believe her daughter might never come back.

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Her lungs burning as she gasped for breath, Hermione raced up the mountain side. Hermione's legs were sore and felt like lead. Stopping by the water that splashed and tumbled down the mountain, she reached over and cupped a handful of water to refresh herself.

She suddenly stopped, wondering if this was like the story of Persephone and Hades. If she drank the water, would she be trapped there, unable to rejoin Severus? Seeing the water glint and radiate with a glowing light of its own, she could not resist. Sipping the water, she had never tasted anything so heady or ambrosial in her life. It was like her first kiss with Severus distilled into liquid form, it even tasted faintly like his kisses. It made her head spin and her body float.

Breathing heavily from the rush of sensation, she suddenly felt herself re-energized. Hermione leaned over to drink straight from the source, gulping it down by great mouthfuls, unable to quench this thirst that suddenly flared inside of her.

Finally lifting her head from the stream, the hair around her face now dripping with this dulcet mountain nectar, she felt herself renewed with boundless energy.

Like a sprinter, she ran up the hill as fast as her legs could move.

She could see the sun rising to meet her. She knew she had to reach the source of that spring at the summit.

"Wait for me, Severus," she breathed as her feet scrambled against the rocky path that would lead her towards the top, his voice leading her onward.

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"No ghost remain'd, her soul pass'd on
Though Eòin was not to be found
She wandered lost without her love
Maighread found no relief in death's bound

Young Eòin gaed to join his bride
His heart could beat no more
In gravely beds, they lie aside
Join'd e'er beyond Grim's door."

Severus finished his song, and to his disappointment, Hermione did not awaken as he had hoped. He hung his head down and began to openly wail. He felt like his own heart could no longer beat.

He made a vow that if she died, he would join her and seek her beyond the veil of death. He found no purpose in living if Hermione was not there with him.

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Just as Hermione reached the mountain top the wind and Severus' voice stopped.

"No, no, no!" Hermione had not run up what seemed like the tallest mountain in the world just to get there to discover Severus was not there and his voice had stopped. She was not going to lose Severus yet again.

"Severus?" Hermione called out, cupping her hands around her mouth, looking about frantically. "Severus! SEVERUS?"

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Severus' head snapped up and all crying in the room ceased when Hermione spoke.

"Severus?" she croaked feebly in her sleep.

Hope renewed, Severus gathered Hermione in his arms, his face fraught with apprehension and growing excitement. "I'm here, Hermione. Wake up, please, I'm right here. You're in my arms."

He lovingly stroked the hair away from her face as he called her name again.

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To her relief the wind picked up once again and she heard Severus speak her name, which filled her with joy. As she looked to the brightening sky, the sun finally broke above the horizon. It was blazingly brilliant in its luminosity. Its light made the waters pouring fourth from the spring source glimmer and shine as if the water was made of the sun itself.

Hermione looked directly at the sun, unable to turn her gaze away from its indescribable glory.
As her eyes fluttered open, the sun was replaced with the sight of Severus' face close to hers. And in her half-conscious dreamlike state, she could have sworn that there was a brilliant corona of light surrounding Severus' head like a halo of an angel.

He stared at her with wonderment, his face struck with awe as tears streamed down his ruddy cheeks.

"Severus?" she asked, wondering if this was real or if she was still on some alternate plane where she had finally found him.

"Hermione," he breathed and clutched him to her. He opened his eyes to see Zhubanysh smiling down at them, to which he breathed to her simply, "Thank you."

Zhubanysh merely nodded her head and went back to stand by her husband's side, taking James in her arms once more.

The room erupted in a wash of cheers, sobs, and expressions of relief that Hermione would be all right.

Severus rocked Hermione in his arms, unwilling to let her go, while Hermione, with as much strength as she could muster, hugged Severus back, her arms hanging limply over his shoulders.

Someone fetched a Healer, notifying them of Hermione's return to consciousness. It was only when Severus was threatened with being banned from St. Mungo's that he finally left go of Hermione, though he still sat by her bedside to hold her hand while the Healers went to work trying to figure what was the source of yet another prolonged and unexplained sleep.

"How long was I out?" Hermione asked.

"A whole day," Severus said, looking quite exhausted. He had been unable to sleep the entire time, and singing to her nearly took the last of the reserves he had left in him.
Once the Healers were done going over Hermione with every spell and asking her questions, they finally left. But first, they ordered everyone else to leave soon so Hermione could rest, having been close to what the Healers deemed the brink of death.

Hermione's parents promised to come visit the next day, if she had not been discharged yet. Aunt Christine and Uncle Tim also expressed their relief that Hermione would be all right before giving her a peck on the cheek and a pat on the hand as they said their farewells.

As Hermione said farewell to Lavender and Ron, Severus went over to speak to the Potters. "I cannot express my deep gratitude in you helping me bring Hermione back," Severus said with humble appreciation.

Zhubanysh handed their son over to Harry before reaching out to take Severus' hands in hers. "It is you who did all the hard work, I merely showed you the way. It was your love that brought her back. I should be thanking you for bringing my sister back." Without reservation or knowing the standoffish nature of Severus, she stepped forward and hugged Severus, wrapping her arms tightly about his ribs, and placed a chaste kiss upon his cheek.

Severus did not flinch, but welcomed the warm affection by this extraordinary witch.

"Thank you, Potter," Severus said without any grudge for once, looking over at Harry.

"Thank Mouna. He's the one who clued me in that something was wrong. I had no idea Padma dropped that mirror in my office to eavesdrop when she came to visit me Monday morning. I'm just glad I was still in the office late when he arrived to find me," Harry admitted.

There was too much of a history between them for either to embrace the other, so the two wizards merely parted with a handshake.

As Hermione and Lavender were speaking, Hermione began breaking down into hysterical sobs. Hearing her in distress, Severus rushed back to her beside.

"Severus, I can't bear it. I want to give up my apprenticeship. I can't stay here in England and finish if these attacks keep happening, and I don't want to be separated from you again," she began to wail, set off by Lavender's comment that she could take as long as necessary to recuperate before coming back to work.
"No, you've put in too much work and come too far to give up. I'm not going to let you walk away from your dream of becoming a Potions mistress," he insisted, trying to be sensible, but also equally unwilling to be parted from Hermione yet again.

"Severus? Lavender? If I may have a word with you both?" Albert said, as he stood holding the door open so they could talk in the hallway.

Severus reluctantly left Hermione's side, but only did so because Draco, Ginny, and even Ron were in there to protect her. His paranoia was at an all-time high that someone was out to get her.

Hermione watched from her bed as Severus gave her one last look and a reassuring nod of his head before he stepped out into the hallway to confer with Hermione's boss and her master.

She couldn't understand what was being said, but she saw the edge of Severus' head through the door's small rectangular window periodically shake in negation or nod in the affirmation.

When the three of them came back into the room, Hermione saw a smile tugging at the corner of Severus' lips, a sign there was hope.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks to my fantastic and hard working betas, JuneW and Hope.

I commissioned Drkav (http://drkav.deviantart.com/) to do a piece of fanart to go with the scene in which Hermione and Severus are on an alternate plane. You can view it on my Tumblr page here:
http://68.media.tumblr.com/8ddb7a9e17c8f5664d3f0767f299a665/tumblr_okq27mburG1ugsuuho1

Did you cry? I did when writing this chapter, in full Joan Wilder "Romancing the Stone" fashion.

And if you want to read something I laid down in this story, back in chapter 42, before I took my multi-year hiatus, go read that chapter once more. Or for convenience, here is the section I am referring to when Severus was still in denial of his love for Hermione:
Once the lift started moving, Draco dropped his hood and confronted Severus. "All right. Nobody else can overhear us now. What do you mean she knows it's you, yet you have not revealed yourself? What sort of nonsense is this? More delays?" Draco asked tersely.

Severus kept his hood up, preferring to keep up his implacable facade of cool disdain. "Hermione needs time to adjust to the knowledge that it is me. She has already agreed to come to dinner as usual Thursday night. Once I feel confident that she will stay and help us, then I shall remove my mask. Until then, she would prefer to keep up the pretense of this little charade."

The lift lurched to a halt at their floor.

Just as Severus was going to reach out and push aside the gate, Draco placed his arm in front of Severus, his hand placed on the wall next to the older wizard, blocking him from exiting the lift. "You mean you'll keep your mask on until you are done with this little charade."

Severus did not bother to hide his harsh glare as he eyed the arm blocking him. He knew just how to break an arm in two with just the use of his hands and one knee. A clean snap, and Draco would not be able to wield his wand until he made the trip to St. Mungo's to have it healed.
"I would think that you, of all people, would understand the need for subtlety in this rather delicate situation," Severus hissed, not bothering to hide his growing anger at being questioned about his tactics.

"I understand, all right," Draco retorted with equal enmity. "Each day that we sit here in England is another day that one of us could be discovered. Then it's goodbye freedom and hello Azkaban. But I suppose if you want to wait until you can bed your annoying little Gryffindor, that's your call."

Severus grabbed Draco by the wrist and twisted him around quicker than the blond wizard could have anticipated. Draco was pinned up against the wall with his arm being painfully wrenched behind his back. Leaning close to Draco's ear so as to make his point clear, Severus snarled, "I would think that someone who is bedding an Auror's wife would be the last person to talk about taking risks and being sent off to Azkaban."

With his cheek pressed against the wall of the lift, Draco said with defiance, "I love Ginny. I'd die without her; I would die for her. What's your excuse?"

Severus was so taken aback by Draco's remark, he let go.

Draco twisted himself free as Severus' grip slackened. The younger wizard stepped out of the lift and faced Severus, who still stood in there. "If you love her, that would be one thing. But if you don't, end this game and get the damn ingredients."
Severus continued to stand in the lift. When the lift started to descend, he didn't bother to try and stop it, instead allowing the lift to descend and ascend once more before going to his office. He needed that time alone just to collect himself and put aside all thoughts of Hermione. If he bothered to analyze how much Draco's comment had unsettled him, he would have realized that he loved Hermione; then he would not have gotten any work done that day.
Chapter Summary

Hermione faces the Redoubtable Convocation of Potions Masters and Mistresses regarding the fate of her apprenticeship.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter One Hundred Thirteen
"The Redoubtable Convocation of Potions Masters and Mistresses"

Disclaimer: How many people write fanfic
How many make money from it – not I?
Where were you while Rowling published Potter?
Slowly posting on my wall
Disclaiming about owning it all
Where were you while Rowling created it?
Someday you will read me
Caught beneath the disclaimer
In an epic super-fanfic on the Internet
Someday you will read me
Caught beneath the disclaimer
In an epic super-fanfic on the Internet

A/N: Disclaimer a parody of "Champagne Supernova"; Songwriters: GALLAGHER, NOEL
Champagne Supernova lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC

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Lavender sat down, finding a seat next to Ginny and Draco. "I'm sorry that took so long. Seems that because Ron was once divorced, that was cause for not granting automatic guardianship. We had to plead our case as to why we should become Devlin's adoptive parents," she apologized. She had just left the Wizengamot's main chambers since Padma would be going off to Azkaban and Parvati's child would otherwise be sent off to an orphanage.

There was the clearing of a throat off in the darkness and the rhetorical question from an unknown person asking, "Since all interested parties are now present, may we begin?"
Hermione and Albert rose from their seats and approached the two circles of light spotlighted on the floor. The circles were lit from above, giving this forum an air of great solemnity. Then a staff was thumped on the floor off to their left, signaling the start of the convocation.

From the darkness strode in five robed figures, their faces concealed in the shadow of the large cowls that covered their heads. With great ceremony, they walked in a processional toward a long table that was curved with a slight arc, concaving towards the person or persons who brought the petition forward.

Once the robed figures were all seated, there was another thump of the staff. The center figure who sat amongst the five said in a voice Hermione recognized, "Let the Redoubtable Convocation of Potions Masters and Mistresses commence."

Hermione was tempted to snort at the ostentatious name of what everyone else generally called the "certification board" for the Potions discipline, which was an assemblage of five randomly-selected Potions masters and mistresses among the field, but it was an old name. Given the request to be presented, formality and procedure must be endured.

"Potions Master Albert Dobmeir," the wizard in the center began. "You bring an unusual petition before us."

Albert, dressed in his best formal dress robes, nodded. "Yes, I do, but one worthy of the petition brought before the convocation. And I would like to start by thanking the committee for agreeing to this last-minute request, but as our case shall show, this requires immediate attention."

"And what is the petition you bring before us?" the central robed figure, who was acting as chair of the proceeding, asked.

"It is my request, and that of my Potions apprentice, Madam Hermione Weasley, that she be allowed to change Potions masters in order to finish her apprenticeship," Albert said with great seriousness.

There was a murmur amongst the five robed figures before the room was quiet once more.

"This is a highly unusual request, given that a change in masters occurs in cases such as the death of the master or incapacity with which to finish instructing their apprentice," the chair noted.
"True, but there are unique circumstances which surround our petition for Madam Hermione Weasley to switch masters and require the Redoubtable Convocation to consider and hopefully grant, without penalty to Madam Hermione Weasley's good standing in the Potions field once she has been fully accredited and certified eventually by this committee," Albert pleaded before the council.

Hermione would have normally been addressed as Madam Weasley, but given Lavender was there, their full names were needed to specify which Madam Weasley was being referred to.

"Let Madam Hermione Weasley speak her reasons as to why we should consider such a proposal, and then we shall see if your petition has merit."

Hermione stood proudly with her chin tilted up. She had only been discharged from St. Mungo's that morning, and not twenty-four hours prior had been near the brink of death, but she felt strong enough to face this council in order to hasten her departure from England.

"In the span of less than two years I have been attacked by those who had intent to kill me. The first was Alan Parker, nephew to Calpurnia Fudge, who sought to block any attempt by myself to gain an apprenticeship after the war, which many on the council here are no doubt aware," Hermione added with a bit of disdain. To her satisfaction, there was a bit of grumbling from a few of the council members who were aware of such interference from the former Minister's wife. "Mr. Parker is also the godson of Dolores Umbridge, the very same former Administrator at Hogwarts during my school years who was carried off by centaurs and who blamed me solely for the incident." Hermione could not stop a small smirk of satisfaction from tugging at the corner of her lip before schooling her face once more.

"During my attack by Mr. Parker, he expressed his bigoted views regarding my lineage as a taint upon wizarding society, his sympathy towards the societal goals of Voldemort—" she said, pausing while Severus and many on the council flinched upon the mentioning of that particular wizard's name, "—regarding those of non-pure-blood status, and disgust regarding my divorce from Ronald Weasley, in addition to seeking vengeance on behalf of his godmother, Umbridge."

The chair nodded when Hermione paused to let the effect of her statements sink in for dramatic effect. "Go on," he encouraged her.

"Then Wednesday night, Padma Patil, who was once a member of Dumbledore's Army and with whom I worked alongside during the war, attacked not only me, but Potions Master Severus Snape, my employer, Madam Lavender Weasley, Draco Malfoy, and his wife, Ginny Malfoy. She had the intent of harming all of us, but especially me since I had exonerated Master Snape's and Mr.
Malfoy's names in front of the Wizengamot. In my clearing their names, she felt I had denied her justice. In her mind, she blamed both Master Snape and Mr. Malfoy for the unfortunate abduction, rape, and torture of her sister, Parvati Patil back in 1997.” Hermione did not mention the subsequent resulting pregnancy that ensued, as it was still too painful for her to acknowledge without breaking into tears in front of the committee.

Everyone on the council was aware of Miss Patil's pregnancy; the news of their attack and many of the details had been covered in the *Daily Prophet* in Friday's edition. Fortunately, Luna reported a more truthful and less sordid version in *The Quibbler*, which called into question some of the literary license yet again taken by the writing staff at the *Daily Prophet*.

"So it seems that I have had two people, one sympathetic towards the death and havoc wrought by Voldemort and his Death Eaters seeking to expunge Muggle-borns, and one whose sister and who herself suffered at the hands of Death Eaters subsequently on the other side of the war, both seeking to harm me. It seems the scars of this war linger so deep that I cannot remain in England without living in constant fear of my life that the next witch or wizard coming around the corner might intend me mortal harm. This latest attack has caused me to wish to end my apprenticeship in my desire to leave this country and seek refuge elsewhere. However, if you will allow my petition to switch masters, I can continue on with my apprenticeship with peace of mind and body, without living in fear."

There was yet another round of murmurs between the robed council members before the chair spoke. "And where would you go? If you have been attacked here, what is to prevent someone from going abroad to seek you out and intend you harm in your new place of residence?"

There was a clearing of a throat before the spotlight suddenly shone down on Mounga, who strode up to stand next to Hermione. "I can help provide her sanctuary where she will be safe, in Malu Palekaiko," he said with gravity.

"And you are?" the chair asked, a slightly amused lilt in his voice.

"Judge Mounga Finau. I am Master of Law and Letters, town judge for Malu Palekaiko, an island of the Hawaiian chain, and president of the town council of Malu Palekaiko. Malu Palekaiko is an island sanctuary for all witches and wizards, and even some Muggles married to a witch or wizard, who have come seeking safe harbor from those who have sought to cause them harm." Mounga was wearing his finest judicial robes and leis he only wore for formal occasions, after taking a quick Portkey back home and coming back to help in Hermione's case.

"And just how can your sanctuary protect her?" the chair asked. "They could just Portkey in and attack Madam Weasley."
"Trust me when I say that the sanctuary of the island will protect her," Harry said, coming to stand up in front of the council. A light eventually shone over Harry's head. Understanding the formality of the proceedings, he introduced himself, "Harry Potter, Auror, First Class."

"We're quite aware of who you are, Mr. Potter, but we need you to further expound upon your assurances to us that Madam Weasley would be safe in Malu Palekaiko," the chair prompted him.

"When my ex-wife, Ginny, divorced me, I followed her to Malu Palekaiko." Harry paused while the council chattered excitedly amongst themselves momentarily. "And while I meant her no harm, I did intend to bring her back to England with me. Upon touching her arm, I was instantly transported back to the Portkey office on Malu Palekaiko." Harry heard Draco stifle a snicker upon recalling that day, but refrained from glancing over his shoulder and glaring at his former school rival. "I was also informed of other instances of persons coming to the island with more nefarious intent and trying to harm others given sanctuary; they were suddenly transported to various places, including dangerous cliff edges above razor-sharp reefs, lagoons full of sharks, and the edge of an active volcano caldera. The more pernicious the intent, the more dangerous the place the assailant was magically transported against their will. Trust me when I say she will be perfectly safe, should she move there."

There was a hum of low murmurs and heads nodding in unison before they quieted down. The chair then asked, "If this committee does consider the proposal that Madam Hermione Weasley transfers the remaining time of her apprenticeship to another Master or Mistress, who is the person she will finish her apprenticeship under?"

Severus took Mounga's spot in front of the council, speaking up, "That would be me. Severus Snape, Potions Master."

The snickers of some of the council members was unmistakable, which only made Severus stand up straighter and glare more imperiously at the robed figures who would decide Hermione's fate. Fortunately, he was able to have his clothes washed and pressed that morning since he only came to England with one set of clothes. He was also able to visit the barber to neaten his appearance, in addition to getting a trim of his beard in order to look respectable as he presented his case to supervise the rest of Hermione's apprenticeship.

"Yes, yes," the chair said with a innuendo-laced chortle. "Given the history of you two that has been made public in recent months, and a rather torrid history at that, what assurances do we have that you will make sure Madam Weasley will finish her apprenticeship?" There had been many instances where a master had married a female apprentice, and yet in time she had never become fully accredited, such as it was with Ganfrey and Fastrada Johnson.
"For the fact that as much as I desire her to remain in Malu Palekaiko to be by my side, during her two previous visits, I have been only able to let her return to England knowing how important this apprenticeship is to her," he said, projecting a very serious air about him, but his desire for Hermione was unmistakable. "It would be selfish of me to try prevent her from completing her own desire of becoming a Potions mistress, a goal she had long before our current relationship began, an apprenticeship delayed due to reasons previously stated before this council. Should her request to transfer masters be granted, I assure you, she will become a Potions mistress within a timely manner." There was an absolute finality in his last promise to the council, the presence of the former professor who once was Head of Slytherin House gleaming through in his voice and demeanor.

The droning sound that rippled between council members made it seem as if they were not entirely convinced of this petition.

Lavender cleared her throat as she approached the council, taking Harry's spot in the light. She presented herself, looking impeccable in her finest lavender dress robes, her hair beautifully coiffed, and her make-up understated but perfect. "If I may address the committee?" she requested.

"You may. And you are?"

"Madam Lavender Weasley, founder and president of The Lovely Lavender Company and employer to both Albert Dobmeir, my Potions master, and Madam Hermione Weasley, his apprentice and my Vice President of Operations."

"And what is your interest regarding Madame Hermione Weasley's request to not only change masters, but to move to the other side of the world with..." The chair paused and Hermione could almost hear him finish his sentence referring to Severus as "her lover" in a slightly derogatory manner, but was surprised when he finished by asking, "... the intent of finishing her apprenticeship there?"

"As some in this committee may have read, I have appointed Draco Malfoy, also a resident of Malu Palekaiko, as my Vice President of Advertising and Marketing for the Asia Pacific region," Lavender began, her manners and tone very formal at first. "It is my intent, once Madam Hermione Weasley is finished with her apprenticeship, that she should move to Malu Palekaiko and open an Asia Pacific manufacturing, distribution, and sales center for my company that is expanding into eastern Asia, Australia, and the Americas. Hermione has proven herself capable of running operations of such a size, having run my company while I was away on maternity leave last year, and becoming fully versed in every aspect of the company. She has, in a Potions-focused business, developed relationships with suppliers, negotiated deals with distributors, and overseen manufacturing and quality control, in addition to attending to company finances, earning her title of Vice President through skill, brilliance, determination, and a commendable work ethic. Not to mention using her experience in developing new products for me towards her apprenticeship,
working alongside her master, Albert Dobmeir, in a Potions research and development capacity.

"In addition, I might add," Lavender said, her voice becoming more authoritative and a bit short that it seemed this committee was too dim to realize that Hermione was not a slouch and should instantly be granted her request without these endless pointless questions, "she has completed her year of Herbology experience in the field, tended to Albert's garden weekly in addition to working on her Potions theory, learned her code of ethics and passed the exam with flying colors, successfully developed a new Potion on her own to deal with Portkey Time Zone lag, mastered three languages, is working on her fourth, and yet we watch you sit there and drag these proceedings on as if changing masters so she can remain safe is some great scandal amongst you lot!" To finish her tirade, Lavender gave a great huff and then insolently sniffed at the chair leading the proceedings.

"Your commendation of Madam Hermione Weasley is admirable and noted for the record, Madam Lavender Weasley, but changing masters under such circumstances is something of great importance and rarely undertaken," the chair gently reproved her, his voice patient, but held a hint of warning. "While you feel this is a cut-and-dry matter, this is an issue that will affect her good standing in the Potions community and amongst her peers, and must be thoroughly explored before a judgment can be rendered."

Lavender turned to see Draco standing behind her and removed herself from the spotlight in order to let him take a crack at the committee and put forth his own rhetorical spin.

"And you are?" the chair asked, knowing who he was, but needed it stated for the record.

"Draco Malfoy, Vice President of Advertising and Marketing for The Lovely Lavender Company for the Asia Pacific region. If I may address the committee?" he asked with a detached air about him that reminded Severus of his father, Lucius.

"Yes, Mr. Malfoy?"

"In addition to the arguments regarding Madam Hermione's Weasley's personal safety, and her character which speaks of her determination to finish her apprenticeship, though under the tutelage of another master, there is another reason for her to transfer her apprenticeship to Potions Master Snape while on Malu Palekaiko sooner as opposed to later," Draco began.

"And that is?" the chair prompted him in hopes he would further elucidate the conclave on the matter.
"Economic and academic. Last year, Madam Lavender Weasley purchased two large plots of land in Malu Palekaiko in order to build her new Asia Pacific facilities, but also to help build a school, since there is no formal academic school of magic in the Hawaiian Islands. Potions Master Snape has been tutoring many of the children residing in Malu Palekaiko, and until recently, I was a tutor in Charms and Transfiguration. And Master Snape and I can both attest to the fact that the lack of a formal educational institution on the island is a detriment to the children's academic careers, given some of the abysmal gaps of knowledge by some," Draco added quite mutinously.

"That's all well and fine that you care for the academic standards of the local population, but how does this pertain to Madam Hermione Weasley," the chair urged him to get to his point.

"A formal academic institution for the benefit of the local island population has only come about with the promise of The Lovely Lavender Company opening several hundred jobs for the local population to fill. With better paying jobs than working rice and taro fields or orchid farms, they can afford to send their children to the new local school for which Madam Lavender Weasley had graciously donated the land for the benefit of the public, with additional monies provided by her, my wife and I, and Master Snape towards the building of facilities for education.

"Currently most children are home-schooled, with few traveling abroad or to the mainland of the United States to attend school. With jobs available for the local population, witches who currently spend half their day at home homeschooling children can now work full-time while their children are educated to a standard level that can provide opportunities beyond growing up to be farmers themselves with little economic opportunities to advance themselves if they do not score high enough on their standardized exams with which to earn an apprenticeship."

"Sounds very noble, Mr. Malfoy, that you have become quite the advocate of the working class to better themselves, something your father would have found distasteful, I'm sure. But please get to the point. As rambling as these proceedings may seem to you, they are not an invitation for you to ramble on without purpose," the chair reminded him.

"My point is, the sooner Madam Hermione Weasley takes up residence in Malu Palekaiko, the sooner operations can begin, the sooner parents can work and the sooner they can earn money with which to pay for a formal education for their children. Next week, after much delay by local building code regulators," Draco grumbled under through gritted teeth, "construction of the manufacturing facility begins. Should we have to wait until Madam Hermione Weasley finishes her entire apprenticeship here in England, the building will sit unused for months, possibly a year, and children will continue to be home-schooled in an uneven and sloppy fashion to their academic detriment. Considering she has finished most of her course work, except for Japanese, for which she gets language lessons long-distance through a mirror from a native-speaking Japanese tutor who resides in Malu Palekaiko, and Chinese, which Master Snape is more fluent in than Master Dobmeir, according to both of them, it would better serve Madam Hermione Weasley to finish out the rest of her apprenticeship abroad to the benefit of everyone, including her safety and health."
"A very persuasive argument indeed, Mr. Malfoy." The chair leaned over to confer with his fellow committee members before sitting upright once more. "Before we grant a decision, there are a few other questions we would like to have answered to our satisfaction."

'Oh, shut it, Niles, and just render a decision already. I know you made up your minds. What are you up to, you tosser?’ Hermione pondered, keeping her silent thoughts to herself.

Taking a different tangent, the chair casually mentioned in an airy tone as he addressed Severus, "It has come to the attention of many on the committee, that in addition to the name of Severus Snape, you worked under the alias of Sebastian Delgado, so that you could continue secretly working as a Potions master while unjustly incarcerated under the Death Eater’s Decree, which Madam Hermione Weasley had finally exonerated you of being prosecuted under after your... departure from England under less than auspicious circumstances, to eventually reside in Malu Palekaiko."

"That is correct," Severus replied, wondering where this little exercise was going to go.

"And based on recent articles that have been published since the New Year, your current association with Madam Hermione Weasley began the summer of 2003."

"That is also correct," Severus affirmed, dreading where this was going to go, sensing it was not going to be particularly pleasant for him or Hermione.

"Madam Hermione Weasley has previously stated, and even you, while under disguise as Delgado at the Ministry Halloween Masked Ball, that she came up with the idea of the brewers kettles for solving a problem of simmering ingredients in order to make the brewing of the male sexual enhancement potion, Sequoia, produced by The Lovely Lavender Company, cost-effective?" the chair queried.

Trying not to sneer, based on the growing insinuating tones in the voice of the chair, Severus answered, "That is also correct."

"And did she in fact help with the development of the other potion, the libido-enhancing potion also produced by The Lovely Lavender Company, under the name Irresistible?"

Severus nodded reluctantly.
"So what you are admitting to is that before Madam Hermione Weasley began her apprenticeship with Master Dobmeir, she was consulting with you regarding Potions work?"

"Yes," Severus admitted through gritted teeth. He could sense this was when they were going to lower the boom, and he was proven correct.

"Tell us in... great detail all the Potions experimentation work you and Madam Hermione Weasley conducted in private before her formal apprenticeship with Master Dobmeir began."

She could almost hear the leer in his request. Hermione felt her ears and cheeks burning hot with embarrassment that Niles would do something as vulgar as this for his and the committee’s amusement, humiliating Severus and her during formal proceedings.

"I assure you, sir, whatever lewd and inappropriate conduct you are insinuating that may or may not have happened between Madam Hermione Weasley and me, anything regarding those two potions you have listed, any help she may have participated in regarding the testing of said products occurred after we had realized our affections for one another. I, at no point, took advantage of the situation or my position as a Potions master. As for your request for details, I refuse to divulge them for your prurient amusement," he said with a snarl, his umbrage clearly apparent.

"Prove to this committee that this is not some lust-driven ruse in which to whisk this young witch away to your... jungle love lair," he said wittingly, hearkening back to the *Daily Prophet* article. "What assurance do we have that this relationship you have is not merely a love potion gone awry?"

"What proof can I provide, besides testimony at Padma Parvati’s trial this morning that I was willing to let myself be killed in order to save Madam Hermione Weasley?" Severus asked rhetorically.

"Kiss her," the chair stated simply.

"What?" Hermione challenged, a glint in her eye that she was tired of this nonsense and sensed Niles and the others on the committee were up to something for their own twisted sport.

To make her and Severus kiss in front of them, knowing how Severus felt regarding public displays
of affections, and given his notorious history for breaking up more canoodling students at Hogwarts than Mrs. Norris, Filch, and Peeves combined, she felt this was merely their way of trying to embarrass him and her with this spectacle.

"No!" Hermione protested. "Given everything Severus and I have gone through, you want us to kiss in gratification of what? These proceedings have gone on long enough. If you're not convinced of everything presented to you by now, then nothing will." It was strange for Hermione to refuse, given she freely kissed Severus at Mario's on Christmas Eve with so many diners watching, but she sensed this was something to satisfy their prurient inquisitiveness, for their own titillation.

Hermione was stilled from her rant by Severus grasping her hand.

Turning her to face him, he cupped her face in his hands as he gazed down at her. With earnest sincerity, he said, "If I was asked to prove my love for you by being whipped naked down the middle of Diagon Alley while incarcerated in a Shrew's Fiddle, I would do so without hesitation if it would satisfy their puerile curiosity and in the end keep you safe from ever being hurt again."

Hermione could only look up at Severus in wonderment, her eyes filling with tears upon his declaration to the lengths he would go for her.

Severus leaned forward and kissed Hermione gently. She responded in kind by wending her arms around his neck and kissing him back.

Neither noticed nor cared about the room of spectators who watched them in this brief moment of sincere and intense moment of love shared between them.

After their lips parted, Hermione heard Niles laugh. Turning her face towards the chair, she glared at him.

"I told you I could get Severus to kiss her. Pay up, Braxton! Fifty Galleons," crowed Niles triumphantly as he threw back his hood, nudging the wizard to his right with an elbow.

"You bastards!" Hermione fulminated, aggrieved that this all was for show as she had correctly assumed. Incensed, her mind raced through the worst insults she could gather without dragging insults up from the gutter using language only Ron would use. "Both of you! You sophomoric, fiendishly callous malperts!"
"C'mon, of course we're going to let you run off with lover boy, here. We were ready to just give you an automatic ruling without even bothering to hold this meeting, but Royston here, it was his idea to put the screws to you both," Niles admitted, pointing to the last conclave member to the right who was waving cheerily.

Royston threw his own hood back and said, "That was precious. And worth the thirteen years in the making, considering the ration of shit Severus gave me when I was standing before the committee seeking to become fully certified and the hoops he made me jump through."

"Impudent little shit," Severus growled. To his displeasure, he heard Mounga laugh in the background.

"That's exactly what you called me when I sought to challenge some of the things you made me say and do in front of the conclave before you would relent to my certification as Master. Payback is a bitch, Severus, and I loved dishing this back to you in spades," Royston admitted with glee. "And I had to pay you back for the few hexes you laid on me, Hermione." Seeing how Royston was getting onerous glares from Hermione and Severus, he added, "You have to admit, it was kind of funny. I bet Niles I could get Severus to dish on some of the down and dirties we guessed you two got up to with those potions, but it seems Severus is just as noble as ever. Nice save from spilling details, Severus."

Albert gently grasped Hermione's wand hand, knowing she was going to hex Royston to hell and back if given half a chance. "Remember, revenge is a dish best served cold and often," her master muttered quietly under his breath so that only she and Severus heard.

The rest of the committee threw their hoods back, revealing the two others in this drawn-out farce to be John Leyster, and a master about Albert's age by the name of Garrick McAngus she had seen at a few of the booze-ups. He was an affable fellow with a penchant for dirty limericks when properly sauced.

John and Garrick both had the decency to look chagrined that proceedings got out of hand as they cast disappointed looks towards Niles, Braxton, and Royston. John cast Hermione a contrite look, while Garrick hung his head, embarrassed his fellow Potions masters used the solemn and serious event to pull a prank and fulfill a few bets.

To formally end proceedings, Niles pronounced in a rushed manner indicating his boredom, "Let the record stand that Madam Hermione Weasley, Potions apprentice, la-dee, la-doo, la-da, may formally transfer the rest of her apprenticeship under the tutelage of Severus Snape, Potions Master, until she finishes and returns to England to face the committee once more in order to become a fully accredited Potions mistress. And Bob's your uncle."
Despite all the formality through most of it, it was a rather indecorous end to the hearing.

Hermione threw herself into Severus' arms and they hugged each other fiercely, finally able to be together without impediment.

Albert congratulated the couple before the rest of the attendees to the hearing could rush up and congratulate them as well.

As things settled down, Niles announced to the whole group, "Well, since the Malfoy party is tomorrow night, how about a proper booze-up at my house tonight in celebration of the good news?"

Severus was about to refuse, but before he could give his scathing response to the wizard who led the painful proceedings, Hermione spoke up, "I guess we can put your prank aside and not let it ruin what should be a happy occasion. Severus and I would love to come over."

Normally Severus would have protested, but knowing Hermione, he was familiar with that particular lilt in her voice and knew to go along with her plans. Offering his hand out to Niles, he coolly said, "I guess there was no permanent harm done, as juvenile as your bets were."

"See?" Niles said, looking over his shoulder at his fellow Potions masters, "I told you Severus couldn't always keep that stick up his arse. Having a girlfriend and getting periodically laid seems to agree with him."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to my wonderful betas, JuneW and thegreyladies.

A Shrew's Fiddle is like a portable pillory. Your head and wrists are locked up in a wooden device in which you can be marched through town. Sometimes it has been called a Shrew's Fife, if the wooden carving resembled a flute with locking the wrists around the outside of the wood shaft instead of locking in the middle, or neck violin. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shrew%27s_fiddle
Shew's Fife examples can be seen here: http://www.medievalwarfare.info/torture.htm
"Some Enchanted Evening: Take Two"

Chapter Summary

Come join Hermione and Severus as they glide through the throngs of guests at the Malfoy Spring Party.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter One Hundred Fourteen
"Some Enchanted Evening: Take Two"

Disclaimer:
I disclaim this, I wrote for you once upon a fic
Rowling owns this, the copywrite proves it's her own original work
Yet I know it's true that characters are so much fun to write
But if I know you, I know what you'll do
You'll read Harry Potter, the way you did once upon a book

A/N: Disclaimer a parody of "Once Upon a Dream," Lyrics from "Sleeping Beauty."
Written by Sammy Fain and Jack Lawrence.
To help set the tone of this chapter, please read while listening to waltzes.

Severus yanked on the front of his new dress robes, courtesy of Lavender, who had called in a favor. Madam Mandel sent some house-elves over Saturday morning and made the robes in time for the Malfoys' party that evening. The robes were very nice, the wool-and-silk blend fabric a bit lighter in weight than his usual woolen clothing, and the cut was a smidgen more fashion-forward than he would have picked for himself, but they were very flattering.

"Severus? Could you help me with the necklace clasp?" Hermione asked as she finished putting on her lipstick.

"Certainly." Severus strode over to the bathroom where he found her smoothing a curl that had come askew from her carefully styled coiffure that showed off her natural curls to their most complimentary, courtesy of the hairdresser Lavender sent over to the flat to help Hermione.
Holding the multiple strands of pearls he gave her for Valentine's Day, Severus secured the clasp before letting his fingers delicately caress the top of her mostly-bare shoulders, which were only covered by a few thin strips of fabric.

Severus pulled one tendril loose and set it to rest along the side of her neck. Hermione smiled back at him in the mirror's reflection, remembering how his eye was always drawn to her neck if there was a wisp calling his attention.

Hermione and Severus had stayed in the flat all day, finally having a chance to talk and catch up, finding comfort in each other's presence. They had not made love yet. There had been little time, though they had been inseparable since Severus' return to England.

Severus never left Hermione's bedside while at St. Mungo's. After she finally awakened, Severus had still slept in the chair beside her bed all night, even with the Auror guarding her hospital room all night long. Friday, after she was discharged in the morning, was spent with various hearings and proceedings, including the trial and conviction of Padma Patil where she was sent to Azkaban permanently. This was immediately followed by the custody hearing for Parvati's son Devlin, which was awarded to Lavender and Ron; Severus and Hermione had briefly attended the hearing before Hermione's own hearing in front of the conclave.

Saturday they spent recovering from far too much drinking at Niles'. During the day, Hermione described to Severus her journey while unconscious. Upon hearing her description of the woman who met her and turned her around, Severus suspected his wife Gabrielle had saved Hermione from joining the land of the dead.

With rapt attention, he listened to Hermione's description of the mountain she climbed. She told him of the exquisite manna-like waters from which she drank, and how it seemed to revitalize her and fill her with joy. Her experiences made perfect sense when Severus told her of how Zhubanysh had helped him guide Hermione back from death.

As much as hearing each other's tales brought them yet closer, they did not consummate their rejoining. For both of them, it seemed that they needed this moment of quiet tenderness and restful spiritual healing.

It was Severus' gentle touch of Hermione's shoulders after securing the clasp of her pearl necklace that the flare of desire once again sparked between them.

Admiring her in that dress that was unmistakably Slytherin green, he suggested, "Are you sure you're up to this evening? It has been a rather harrowing few days, followed by much to do to
prepare you coming back to Hawaii with me tomorrow. Nearly rambling into the valley of death is not what one could call a leisurely stroll. Perhaps it would be best if we stayed home and rested." His finger trailed up the side of her neck and caressed the shell of her ear.

Severus was rewarded with a sigh and the tilting of her neck in invitation. Obliging, he leant down and kissed the nape of her neck.

"Rest is hardly what we'd do if we stayed at home," she insinuated with a come-hither glance in the mirror.

Looking at each other in the reflection, both finally felt the call to join together.

Hermione's brow furrowed. It figured when they were both ready they had other obligations. Reading Severus' mind, she said, "Unfortunately, we're not in Hawaii; here, punctuality is a matter of courteousness, as well as required. I think if we show up nearly two hours late, it would be noticed and not a sign of proper etiquette."

"Damn propriety and etiquette, and the hell with punctuality," he said playfully as he wrapped his arms around her from behind, resting his chin upon her shoulder as they shared a smoldering gaze in the mirror.

"And miss the chance to be announced as a couple? Despite our names being linked in the papers for months, it will shock most of high society in attendance as well as many of my former in-laws who will be there. I wouldn't dream of missing it." Hermione smugly gloated. "Besides, I have to show off what a handsome wizard I landed myself."

Severus snorted, "Handsome? Hardly."

"A little sun, a bit of exercise, a well-trimmed beard, a vast reduction in the amount of stress in your life," she said, but the last item listed was met with a quirk of Severus' brow, given their rather stressful week, "and you clean up quite nicely. Doesn't matter; I think you are very attractive, and all those other witches in Malu Palekaiko seemed to think so, too."

Hermione spun around and adjusted Severus' red silken cravat; it matched the red ribbon holding his hair back into an elegant queue that reminded Hermione of some paintings from the 1700's. "Besides, everyone will be in shock because of you wearing Gryffindor red. It will be worth the wait to get me home tonight where you can ravish me properly without having to worry about my
hair and make-up being mussed." It pleased her to no end that Severus had voluntarily requested his cravat be made with red silk as a symbolic gesture to match Hermione's own color choice.

"Heaven forbid decorum, should the band strike up a tango. Lascivious just might accurately describe our dancing for once," he joshed, recalling the phrase used in the Daily Prophet article that described how they danced on New Year's Eve.

Malfoy Manor was decorated in the grandest of splendor. While the Malfoy family home in Malu Palekaiko was modest and understated, adopting some of the Zen-like qualities of the Japanese style, Malfoy Manor was extravagant befitting an old family renowned for wealth and prestige. Hermione could definitely pick out where the Malfoy sense of style influenced the design and building of the Grand Royal Supper Club, with the gilded column capitals, use of mirrors to reflect light from the candle sconces, and semiprecious stone used to accent and decorate the walls.

Standing at the top of the stairs, Hermione and Severus stood side by side. Hermione's right arm rested gently upon Severus' in a manner befitting a time long ago.

"MADAME HERMIONE WEASLEY AND SEVERUS SNAPE, POTIONS MASTER!" the herald called out in a loud booming voice.

While the band on the dais at the far end of the ballroom played on, most of the guests at the ball stopped talking immediately, their heads swiveling in unison to view the infamous couple descend the stairs.
The lovers were a picture of elegance and refinement as they descended the grand staircase together.

Once they reached the base of the stairs, conversation among the party-goers resumed with a flurry. As the couple made their way across the floor to greet their hosts, they kept their heads held high as Hermione's lips were graced with a sublime smile, and Severus' mien exuded the air of a wizard not to be trifled with. Eyes darted towards them, as hushed whispers and sotto-voce comments rippled through the crowd as they passed. Hermione was keenly reminded of the film scene from "My Fair Lady" where rumor of Miss Doolittle's royal Hungarian lineage meandered through the crowd as she tangoed by.

"Named as godparents and not even married," one scandalized witch hissed under her breath.

As Hermione and Severus reached their hosts, the couples bowed and curtseyed to each other as custom dictated for such affairs. Once that was done, they greeted each other as old friends.

Draco was looking rather elegant in his own formal dress robes of a dark gray. Ginny wore a matte silk dress with silver beaded fringe along the bottom edge, a style that was reminiscent of the 1930's; the silk was a slightly lighter silvery-gray to match her husband's eyes. Of course Ginny was dripping in diamonds set in platinum, wearing a Malfoy family heirloom necklace designed
during the Edwardian era.

Hermione bent over slightly and stroked the cheek of little Libra in the wide bassinet that held the Malfoy triplets. It was easy to tell the twin girls apart from one another as Libra had the faintest dusting of platinum blond hair while her otherwise identical twin, Phoenix, had a fine down of pale strawberry blonde hair coming in. Sebastian was blond like his father.

Ginny and Draco has been introducing their children to British wizarding society as the guests filed in during the evening; no one except for the closest of trusted friends and family they were still on good terms with were allowed to touch the Malfoy progeny. What with recent events, there were always at least two house-elves standing guard by the children at all times to help protect them. The elves were in addition to the swarm of Aurors that mingled undercover at the party, making sure no one else sought to bring old grudges to bear at such a grand event.

"May I?" asked Hermione, looking at little Libra who would not let go of her finger.

With a nod of their parents' heads, Hermione reached down and picked up Libra, along with a burp cloth she placed over her shoulder.

As Hermione looked adoringly at her goddaughter held in her arms, Severus felt his heart swell. It didn't take much for him to imagine their own children in her arms some day. His reverie was cut short when Phoenix began to fuss, not caring to be separated from her sister, especially when Libra was getting some additional affection when Phoenix was not. Severus reached down and picked up his goddaughter, expertly placing a cloth on his shoulder; he'd become quite familiar with the concept and viscosity of spit-up over the past month.

There was the briefest exchange of glances between Hermione and Severus before a shy smile crept upon Hermione's lips.

"One day," was all that Severus said as he patted Phoenix's back gently and ran a hand up and down her back to comfort her. Then they both put their goddaughters back into the bassinet next to their sleeping brother, who snoozed happily away amidst the bustle of the party.

"Hopefully not too long?" Draco added to their exchange.

"Let me finish my apprenticeship first. No sense putting the carriage before the thestral," Hermione said. She was not bothered by Draco's question about children since it was meant not to nag, but
made in hope of their experiencing their own joy of children together some day.

"Yes, first things first," Severus said as he tucked Hermione's hand in his arm. There was also a wedding and much-deserved honeymoon to take care of before such things were considered.

They bid adieu to their friends before beginning to mingle amongst the crowd.

Over near the band they found Mounga. He had been invited last-minute to the party since he had made the trip all the way there and back once more, with his wife along the second time.

"I can now see where Draco and Ginny had all that money to donate for the school," Mounga mused aloud as his eyes drank in the grandeur of the newly-restored residence. Draco and Ginny had offered lodging at the manor to the Finau family and an additional guest during their brief stay.

"Yes, but if it wasn't for Hermione's tireless work to clear our names, it would still be a derelict dwelling with the vines slowly reclaiming it," Severus asserted with pride, glancing down at his love who looked up at him fondly. "Since rumors of what happened in Malfoy Manor still abounded after the war, few wanted to purchase it, so it sat unsold, an asset on the Ministry books until restored to its rightful owner."

"Who is taking care of Iakona and Kaimi?" Hermione asked. She'd noticed Akela and Tristan, who had also been invited, provided they could make the brief visit without endangering their study schedule for their upcoming exams.

"Halulu and Greg are employing Kaimi's babysitting skills while she and her brother stay over at their place until we get back. And cat-sitting skills," the large wizard added with a knowing look, since Severus had left without making any arrangements for Katrina and Veronica, the calico kitten Hermione insisted they keep from Katrina's litter. Following Severus' gaze, Mounga glanced over and beamed with pride as his eldest daughter moved about and socialized with British wizarding society; she looked like a Polynesian princess in her fanciest Hawaiian-style dress robes, escorted by her beau. He enjoyed seeing his daughter's radiant face as if she was drifting through a fairy tale.

"She seems to be quite adept at charming British society, for an American," Severus said, having told Mounga of British wizarding society's general contempt for Americans, some considering them to be uneducated, couthless slobs. It was not meant as a slight towards his adopted niece, but as praise that she was able to deftly overcome some ingrained preconceived prejudices with her grace and wit, given her young age.
"I can hear it now," Mounga grumbled, "'Can I summer at the Malfoys' and take a Potions apprenticeship in England, Papa?'"

"Too few mistresses here in England, and don't let her study under a master unless he's Dobmeir's age or older – if that," he drawled. Severus' warning was heavily laced with implied innuendo. "And unless you don't mind the idea of Royston Bentwick as a possible son-in-law, which I would heavily object to, then I suggest she stay the course and study under Hermione back home."

"If you'll excuse us, there are some people we need to speak with," Hermione said with a growing smile.

Following her line of vision to another area in the crowd, Severus spotted who'd caught her eye and escorted her over.

"Mum, Dad," Hermione greeted her parents. "I'm so glad you made it."

"Dr. and Dr. Granger," Severus greeted her parents with a genteel nod of his head.

"Severus, please. We're not in the office, and considering all things, please address us by our first names," Wendy insisted as she went over and greeted him with the briefest of kisses, but not directly on his cheek.

"I know we have had little chance to talk, though I must admit we've had more time to meet with you than we did with Ron before the wedding," Wallace said, somewhat uncomfortable of bringing up the topic of Hermione's first husband as he shook Severus' hand. "And while Hermione is a grown woman who can make her own choices, I must ask: are there any long-term plans?" he asked as delicately as possible without outright asking if Severus was going to "make an honest witch of her."

Hermione refrained from rolling her eyes, but given that in less than twenty-four hours she was leaving England for good, now was as good a time as any for her parents to grill Severus regarding their relationship, even with Hermione having filled them in on some aspects.

Sensing Hermione's discomfort and seeking to assure her parents, Severus volunteered, "Had Hermione finished her apprenticeship, I assure you that you would be addressing me as your son-in-law by now. But Hermione has indicated her apprenticeship comes first, something I understand
"and am willing to wait for." He lifted Hermione's hand and kissed the top of it, which made Hermione duck her head and blush given Severus' charming romantic gesture in front of her parents.

"A wise decision," Wendy chimed in. "I had a few friends at university who dropped out once they married."

There was a nod of agreement between the four of them.

"You're wearing a lovely dress this evening, Wendy," Severus complimented her. "I can see where Hermione gets her good fashion sense, since she has not adopted the silly custom in the wizarding world of wearing a Quidditch hoop about her ankles, unlike others," he dryly remarked as their eyes cast about at the many witches wearing large flouncing hooped skirts.

"Oh, but it does make it seem like a costumed ball held by one of those period recreation groups I see listed in the Times or posted on the Internet," Wendy sighed a bit dreamily.

Hermione was about to tell her parents that they weren't costumes, but that fashion moved forward very, very slowly in the wizarding world. Even her own dress was reminiscent of something an elegant screen siren in the 1950's would wear to the Oscars, and still it was considered to be rather avant-garde by wizarding society.

"I wish you could both stay in England a bit longer so that we could have a chance to know each other better before you both leave, Severus," Wallace said with a bit of melancholy.

"As do I," Severus diplomatically lied, "but I already canceled four days of intensive tutoring for exams that will affect the potential careers of dozens of students on the island. Now I must now make up that time, but luckily I can do it with Hermione's help, as she has offered to tutor next week as well. And then there is the matter that I will not leave England without Hermione. The sooner she is in Malu Palekaiko and granted sanctuary, the sooner we can all be assured of her safety."

It felt strange to Hermione that her parents and Severus were speaking more about her future plans than herself, but she had rarely been comfortable about speaking to her parents about many aspects of the wizarding world, despite their open-mindedness.

"Then I hope we'll have a chance to spend some time visiting before the wedding," Wendy said, but
quickly amended with, "that is, if there are accommodations close by in town."

"Nonsense," Hermione finally spoke up, "there is plenty of room at the house." That comment garnered a fleeting glance between her and Severus, which her parents caught.

"Well, we would not wish to intrude on a young couple in their house, so that is a detail we can sort out later," Wallace tactfully intervened, noting the potential conflict looming.

Before anything else could be said, Christine and Tim approached the small group.

"I'm so glad Draco and Ginny were kind enough to have a couple nurseries set up here at their manor, so we could check on Auberon during the evening instead of having to arrange a sitter," Christine said with a sigh, just coming back from nursing her son.

Tim reached over and plucked two glasses of champagne from a nearby floating tray and handed one to his wife. "Such a grand affair," he noted with admiration. "And the house-elves were very nice to us Muggles too, as they were charmed with the idea of watching a Muggle baby. I guess it's quite the novelty."

Yes, when the Drs. Grangers and the Taylors were introduced, the fact that Muggles were invited to a wizarding event – in Malfoy Manor, no less – it had caused as much as stir as when Hermione and Severus were announced.

"Given that Ginny invited all her family, and her six brothers have... nearly twenty children between them all, not including the triplets," Hermione guessed. She was unable to tally all their names quickly in her head at the moment. She knew that that number would be going up soon since Charlie and Angelina were expecting again; she'd seen the pregnant witch as they crossed the floor earlier. At the request of Arthur, Charlie seemed to put his particular grudges with his sister and her husband aside for the sake of family harmony, and had agreed to come along with Percy and his wife.

Everyone in the group rolled their eyes. They kept comments about the amazing breeding Weasley women to themselves, especially given the fact that Ginny had given birth to triplets. Also, there were a great number of Weasleys milling about who could overhear them at any moment.

When Hermione spotted Fred and George, she promised she would speak to her parents again before the end of the night, but she had an urgent matter to discuss with some old friends before she
could leave tomorrow.

"Well, well, well. The terror of the dungeons and the bossy know-it-all came after all," George ribbed them lightly, which earned a sneer from their former professor. "No, really, we're glad you came to save the day there, Snape. Hermione comes up with some brilliant ideas. We would have hated to have lost someone as inventive as her. She's too bright a witch to lose," he praised her in earnest, which earned a nod of agreement from Severus.

"Speaking of brilliance, is that your handiwork we spotted earlier on Niles Goggins and Jack Braxton earlier this evening?" Fred asked with great curiosity.

"Me?" Hermione feigned with false innocence. "No, not entirely me. Severus helped, the brilliant darling he is in his own right," she chirped sweetly as she gave Severus a slightly mischievous smile.

"Care to tell us how you did it?" Fred asked, leaning forward.

"Only if you promise that no matter how many Galleons either one of them throw at you, you do not provide them with the antidote," Severus said with a smug grin.

"Done," the twins said simultaneously.

As Niles passed them, casting a penitent glance towards Hermione and Severus, George twITCHED his wand. This caused Nile's hat to fly off his head and expose the word "TWAT" on the back of his skull, where the hair had been removed in the shape of the four letters. No amount of hair growth potions or spells could make the hair grow back, much to Niles' distress. Braxton had also suffered the same fate that night, but with a worse four-letter word; it caused him to attend the party while wearing a turban that the twins had removed twice so far.

Niles used his wand to Summon his hat back. There were a few snickers from those nearby who had caught sight of Niles Goggins' new haircut. A mix of bemused and shocked glances were cast from some other nearby spectators before the wizard was able to cover his head up once more, using another sticking charm to keep his hat on.

"Is it permanent?" George asked.
"Hopefully within the year it will grow back, but given it is an experimental formula, we'll just have to see," Hermione remarked with a blasé attitude. "There is one item I would love to have your feedback on, regarding an idea I had," she proposed. Hermione spoke as she observed Royston Bentwick sauntering about with a drink in his hands, grabbing some of the hors d'oeuvres off of a floating tray before shoving them in his gob.

"What did you have in mind?" the twins asked, keenly curious as they followed her gaze.

"Let's just say when I come back in about a year's time to become certified as a Potions mistress, I want it to be something that will be remembered for a long, long time," Hermione said, imagining the tales that would be told for decades to come of the revenge of Hermione on Royston. The ill-humored potioneer deserved it for the humiliating grilling he'd put her and Severus through for his own petty grudge; so it should be something that would be remembered for more than just thirteen years.

"Ice-cold revenge, my favorite," George crooned with glee.

As Hermione and Fred talked, George turned to Severus. "Got any more of those lovely get-away ideas, like that tropical rendezvous? That has been quite the hit, and we're seeking new ideas to develop more of those."

Severus thoughtfully put his hand to his chin as if deeply pondering possibilities, before he replied, "Hmm, wasn't there something you mentioned about Hawaiian dungeons featuring racks made with bamboo and coconuts?"

George burst out laughing and slapped Severus on the back, exclaiming, "Hermione is right, you do have a sense of humor after all."

It was a good thing Severus did not have a drink in his hand, otherwise he would have spilled it all over Hermione. But then again, it would have been the perfect excuse to momentarily slip Hermione out of her dress while the house-elves cleaned it for her. Severus knew many secluded places in the manor they could have secreted themselves away in, but alas, it was proving far harder to slip away with his lover due to so many people she wanted to speak to before leaving tomorrow.

As Hermione and Severus strolled through the crowd that kept giving the couple curious stares, they spotted Harry and Zhubanysh, but Harry was busy pretending to blend in while working. He was in Auror mode. Hermione and Severus spoke with Mrs. Potter for a while as Harry's eyes kept scanning the crowd.
Mingling, they eventually came upon Lavender and Hermione's ex-husband. Hermione and Lavender began discussing the various things they needed to settle and resolve before her departure the next day.

"Weasley," Severus said with a particular drawl of dislike, deciding to make idle chatter to feign politeness while the two witches discussed business.

"Snape," Ron said in turn, no longer intimidated by his former professor. "Please let me, for the thousandth time, express my deepest gratitude for your saving my wife, my sister, and Hermione." Technically it was Mounga and Harry who had saved them all, but Severus' sacrifice, had the cavalry not arrived in time, would have ensured they still lived because of his bargain to offer himself for their safety.

Severus looked over the wizard he'd once loathed and still did not particularly care for, but he was gracious enough to accept his thanks. He extended his hands and they shook in a rather perfunctory fashion with no warmth between them.

"While I may not have been a good husband to Hermione," Ron began, and was met with a penetrating glare from Severus, at which Ron had the timidity to blush slightly with embarrassment, "I know that her next husband will take far greater care of her than I did."

Severus accepted Ron's half-apology with a nod of his head, indicating with a steely look at Hermione's ex that he would indeed take far better care of Hermione than Ron did, and more.

To fill the void of silence, Ron casually observed, "I don't see Viktor and Anne. I would have thought given their standing in society they would have been invited."

Ron was oblivious, but Severus and Hermione both caught the fleeting moment where Lavender collected herself. They improvised, "Well, Anne is probably home with morning sickness, just as Harry and Zhubanysh had to miss Anne and Viktor's wedding when she was pregnant." Rumors in the gossip rags had recently leaked her condition.

Of course Draco did not invite the Krums, especially given Anne and Severus' history. The potential for possible embarrassment was too great. Hermione had not informed Severus she was aware of their past business arrangement and saw no benefit in informing him of her knowledge, though she did mention the Krums had protected her from the mutinous mob when she returned in January.
As all the guests had arrived and ample time had been given for drinks, food, and conversation, the band struck up a musical introduction to indicate that the dancing portion of the evening was about to begin.

The dancing area in front of the band, laid with highly polished wooden parquet flooring, cleared of guests as Draco and Ginny stood in the middle of the floor, ready to begin the festivities with an opening waltz.

As Severus watched their hosts take to the floor, it amazed him how similar Draco looked to his father, with much the same build but none of the cold dispassion and arrogance. Instead this was a wizard who was radiating with warmth and hospitality, but with still the same grace and regal carriage. Severus felt quite proud of Draco, for whom he had acted as a mentor and eventually became friends with. Draco had turned from an arrogant, petulant, narrow-minded spoilt brat into a wizard who was admired by the Malu Palekaiko community. He was now what Muggles would call "a decent human being," or, as Jerry called him, "a mensch." And while Draco had credited his happiness in life to Severus saving him from a fate worse than death had he never fallen in love with Ginny, his wife and mother of their children, Severus had to admit that Draco was largely responsible for reuniting him and Hermione, and for that he was eternally grateful to his friend.

The band struck up a song and began to play "Donauwellen," the waltz that was played during the hosts' first dance as husband and wife during the impromptu wedding reception held by the town. The couple moved back and forth before beginning to turn.

Hermione, having seen the memories of Ginny and Draco's wedding in Severus' Pensieve, sighed aloud with great sentiment. She was moved by the symbolism of this song being chosen, and leaned her head against Severus' shoulder feeling rather nostalgic.

"Shall we join our hosts on the floor, Madam?" Severus asked simply, as the edge of the dance floor was too crowded with spectators for him to formally bow.

Hermione set her hand atop Severus' and let him lead her to the floor where he placed his hand gently at her waist and held her right hand as if it were a delicate china cup. They moved back and forth, to and fro for a few measures, before they began to spin about.

With their addition to the dance floor, others stepped out and began dancing in a swirling of colors from the multitude of brightly colored formal dress robes and gowns worn for the evening.
Three songs later, the band began playing a tango. Wearing large hoop skirts was not conducive to dancing the tango in, and even those who sported a bustle found the dance too demanding in the heavy and slightly constrictive dresses. This meant there were few couples who danced the tango on the floor, and Severus and Hermione certainly stood out among the few who danced to the music. The flash of Hermione's thigh and the top of her stockings as she wrapped a leg around Severus' certainly garnered more fuel for hearsay about their infamous affair. It seemed as they tangoed that they were almost taking perverse delight in stunning the crowd, shattering long-held perceptions of Severus as a gelid and asexual being. Their smoky stares and lingering glances as they danced with barely restrained passion were observed by all who stood agog as the couple's obvious desire for one another played out to the staccato beats and sweeping strains of the tango melody.

A few songs later a reel was called. Four long rows of dancers lined up. It was a song with a lot of Scottish flare and was a dance very similar to Strip the Willow, but instead of locking arms, people crossed wands above their heads. Hermione laughed gaily when it was her and Severus' turn to dance along the long line, briefly spinning with other partners down the row before returning to dance around each other with wands touching above their heads. Hermione's joy was so contagious even Severus could not refrain from the moment infecting him, and he smiled and laughed a bit.

They danced and danced until Hermione's feet were sore. Then they took a break and applied a potion to address her feet so they could dance some more. There were offers by those close to Hermione she trusted to dance with her, and even a few requests by witches to dance with Severus, but they both declined, with the exception of dancing a reel which required brief interaction with other partners. Severus was unwilling to let Hermione out of his sight or grasp until they were in Malu Palekaiko and she had been granted sanctuary. Even when she had to use the toilet, he stood guard by the door until she came out to join him by his side once more.

Taking a brief respite from dancing, they walked out onto the terrace to view the gardens in the moonlight à la belle étoile. It was much chillier in England than in Malu Palekaiko. When the breeze picked up, Hermione momentarily shivered. Severus immediately removed his long coat and draped it about her shoulders to keep her warm.

"Thank you," she breathed, reveling in the scent of Severus enveloping her, amplified by the faint hint of Haunt cologne he was wearing. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply while leaning into him. "I have missed your scent," she murmured aloud to herself, but also for Severus' benefit.

There was so many things he'd missed about her, he could not even begin to list them, but her scent was one of them as well.

They stared out at the gardens lit by the gibbous moon that was so large, it was hard to tell if it was
not already a full moon.

The rows of white roses, white tulips, and white peonies caught all the silvery light in their glory, making the gardens look otherworldly in their perfect splendor. The delicate scent of the peonies and roses gently perfumed the air.

As the strains of the music drifted out into the night, they stood in silence, feeling at peace in this perfect moment they shared.

Unable to stand it any longer, Severus swept Hermione up in his arms and kissed her soundly. He could no longer hold back the passion that had been slowly building inside of him all evening since he'd clasped the pearls about her neck, the necklace that now pressed against his chest as he held her tight.

Hermione felt as if she had drunk directly from the spring of Severus' love, her head dizzy and spinning. She could no longer feel her feet beneath her, feeling swept up in the spontaneous moment of their emblazoned kiss.

This was what love was. This was without a doubt what was meant to be. They both looked forward to the many years that lay ahead of them, facing life together side by side.

As their kiss finally drew to a close, Hermione sighed dreamily. Opening her eyes, she saw the moonlight glinting off of Severus' hair. The silvery light made his skin glow with a cool, pale blue light on one side of his face, while the warmth of candlelight from the party spilling out into the night cast the other side in warm colors. The lighting perfectly showed the two sides of Severus she knew so intimately and loved – the dry, cool intellectual who stimulated her mind, and the man with burning passion inside who consumed her whole with his touch. She reached up and kissed Severus, cupping his cheeks in his hands they way he had done to her many a time.

Severus reveled in the sensation of Hermione kissing him back with the same passion. His own sense of time and gravity momentarily faltered as his head spun. He was not drunk on champagne, but on the love he felt in Hermione's kiss, and that made him sigh deeply with satisfaction.

They smiled at each other, ready to finally call it a night and go back to her flat for one last night in London. Then they were going home, to their home that awaited them in a faraway land where, as she once sung to him in Russian, "love reigns, where peace reigns. Where there is no suffering, where war was behind them."
As Hermione offered Severus his coat back now that they were back inside, passing through the party, they nodded their heads toward Bill and Fleur, who nodded back. They had talked earlier in the evening, as Bill mentioned that he might swing by Malu Palekaiko since he had a business trip to the Gringotts branch in Tokyo he had to make soon.

Luna Longbottom came up to the couple and wished Hermione well on her trip abroad. While Severus knew Neville, who stood fidgeting next to his wife, was in no way a rival for Hermione's affections, especially with the Longbottoms being newlyweds, Severus could not bring himself to warm up to the younger wizard who'd shagged Hermione once while they were parted. There was a spark of jealous dislike in the Potions master's eye that made Neville quail slightly. Severus was very gracious to Luna, however, thanking her for reporting the truth after their interview, a rarity in journalism he noted. Luna and Hermione made promises to send the periodic albatross and to meet up when she came back to England the following year.

Walking toward where their hosts were chatting with guests, Severus and Hermione almost bumped directly into Arthur and Molly.

"Severus!" Arthur said jovially as he shook the fellow Order member's hand. "I'm so glad Hermione was able to clear your name."

"And thank you for being there to protect Hermione from the unruly mob when she returned after the New Year," Severus responded in kind.

"Yes, thank you, Arthur," Hermione added her thanks.

There was an awkward moment, as Molly sniffed disdainfully at Hermione, glancing at her sideways as if to not look directly at her. The matriarch's large hooped skirt rustled as she raised and lowered her shoulders in a non-verbal attempt to express the displeasure of being in the company of her ex-daughter-in-law. "Still not married and without children?" she asked stiffly.

"Molly," Arthur warned her.

Hermione was tempted to go into detail about how she and Severus would be living together out of wedlock and had not even bothered to get engaged – just to nettles and goad her – but instead was inspired to take a different course of action.

Turning to her lover, she smiled placidly as she began saying in fluid Spanish, "This woman has a
new daughter-in-law happy to breed with my ex-husband, yet still acts as if I have personally attacked her and deprived her of yet more grandchildren. Thank God I am no longer married into this family and thank goodness for Ginny and Draco's sanity they don't live in England where she can harangue them into madness."

Glancing at Molly briefly at her reaction, he replied to Hermione in the same Castillian accent he used when pretending to be Eduardo, "My sweet darling, do not fuss. Take joy in the fact that you will probably never have to lay eyes on this harpy made manifest. Instead feel pity for her poor husband who has unwittingly bound himself to her. He has many more decades to go in which to endure her, while this evening is probably your last."

To both Hermione and Severus' satisfaction, Molly began to twitch.

"Molly?" Arthur asked with great concern, noticing his wife looking rather peaked and pale, her eyes glazing over.

"Perhaps she exhausted herself with all the excitement," Severus said with false sincerity that seemed quite believable, suppressing a malicious grin.

Arthur thanked him for his concern and began guiding his wife towards a nearby couch, thinking she was having another relapse.

"You have such a vengeful streak that I must make you an honorary Slytherin," Severus said quietly under his breath as they made their way through the party once more towards their hosts.

"Considering that you are often the epitome of what a Slytherin is thought to be, I consider that a great compliment," she accepted his remark with pride. "Resourceful, cunning, ambitious – all admirable traits."

Hermione had told him earlier in the day that he made a great Gryffindor with all his own brave, noble, and selfless acts over the years, especially in light of offering himself to save her, but he had taken her compliment with much less aplomb.

"It is time we made our farewells," Severus announced to their hosts.

"The night is still young," Draco said, sorry to see his friends leave.
"True, but we have a morning Portkey." Severus clasped Draco's hand as they said goodbye.

"We should be returning no later than Wednesday," Ginny replied, informing her friends of their own plans to return home soon. "Given recent events, Draco and I will be closing the house up for longer than we anticipated, and so there are some matters we must address."

They all quietly reflected in somberness that the lingering scars of the war had removed the possibility of them coming back to England even twice a year. Only time would tell when wizarding society in Britain would move on and it would be safe for the Malfoy family. Draco would allow his family to return only without the threat of harm looming over their heads.

"Then we look forward to you coming over to our home Sunday for dinner, at the usual time," Severus concluded, suggesting the pleasant idea of normal domesticity to look forward to before they parted.

Walking towards the cloak room, they found Albert sitting in a chair by the balcony surveying the scene below him. He had a glass of brandy in his hand, looking serenely happy and far drunker than earlier in the evening when they spoke.

Spying the exiting couple, he held out his hand to talk one last time that night before they parted. "Children, children, children," he called to them with the lazy flopping of his hand and a rosy glow about his cheeks and nose.

Severus did not care to be addressed in such a manner, but the wizard was old enough to be his grandfather, and he knew it was meant with endearment.

"I don't know if I will have the legs to see you off tomorrow," Albert said with a distinct slur, "but in case I don't, let me say a few things." Pointing a wavering finger at Severus as if trying to find the right wizard between the two in his field of vision, he said, "Next time you pick a nom de plume, alter your handwriting more so it's not so recognizable, and avoid using those particular phrases that only you would use." His fingers moved about freely as if he was playing some invisible musical instrument.

Weaving in his chair as he turned to look at Hermione, Albert addressed her in as stern a tone as he could muster, given how deep into his cups he was, "And you, young lady! Never had I had an apprentice as wonderful as you." He nearly sniffed and shed a tear at the great swelling of affection he felt toward his now former apprentice. "Merrrrrrrlin, am I so glad Severus could help me get out
of that contract with Trevor Sprog." Hermione did not correct Albert's error regarding Trevor's last name. Upon mentioning of the topic, Albert swiveled his head and said, "And oh yes, thanks for that little favor, old boy." Returning to his wobbly train of thought that was in danger of derailment, he fuzzily focused on Hermione once more. "No working yourself to the point of collapsing anymore. Should you need to be hospitalized from over-exhaustion, I hope it's because you've been fucking each other's brains out to the point of blissful lassitude." He paused to hiccup momentarily before adding, "Again," referring to the way Hermione looked after coming back from her recent two-day Valentine's Day trip.

The addition of that last comment sent Hermione into a fit of blushing so severe it crept all the way down to her chest.

"We shall take your wise advice to heart, rest assured," said Severus with as much dignity as he could muster given the adjuration they both received. He was thankful the music from the band was too loud for others to have casually overheard the exchange.

"Yes, goodnight," Hermione muttered feebly. The lovers absquatulated with haste.

Upon arriving, Marf was there to greet them and take their cloaks. The poor house-elf had been wracked with guilt that he'd not been at the flat when Padma had attacked his mistress, employer, former master, and their friends. It took quite a lot of convincing from Hermione that none of it was Marf's fault and that she was the one who had suggested Marf go over to Malfoy Manor to help earlier that week. She reminded Marf that Padma timed her attack so that there would be no one around to help. Since then, Marf had been nearly underfoot the entire time, unwilling to let his mistress out of his sight, much like Severus had been.

"Thank you, Marf. You can retire for the night since I am here to make sure your mistress is safe until our departure tomorrow. If you could wake us around seven, that would be appreciated," Severus asked politely, being used now to addressing free elves in Malu Palekaiko with more courtesy.

Marf bowed deeply before disappearing with a shimmer.

Along one wall of the flat were many boxes of Hermione's books and housewares she was bringing with her. The rest was to be boxed in the morning, to be packed in her charmed trunk.

Marf had made sure there was a warm fire merrily burning, awaiting Hermione's return from the
ball with Severus.

Now alone, Hermione turned to see Severus' silhouette back-lit by the dancing flames in the fireplace. Her heart and her loins sang with want for this wizard before her. Before Severus could suggest a snifter of brandy to relax, before he would slowly and gently seduce Hermione by the fire, she advanced on him and kissed him.

When Hermione awoke from her coma, she had been so happy to see Severus. With the halo of light around his head dazzling her, she had been too relieved to be upset with Severus. But once her strength began to return quickly, she was secretly angry with her lover. She had wanted to wail and pound on his chest with her fists that if he had a death wish, then he should not mercilessly tease her with the promise of a long life together. With the knowledge that Draco had imparted to her in confidence of Severus' brief dance with lunacy to kill himself in some mad plot to save her, and now this latest offering of himself to let Padma kill him to spare her and the others, Hermione was furious that he would welcome death so easily. After she had a chance over the next few days to silently mull over what had happened, she found she could not remain angry at Severus, for he did what he viewed as the only course of action to save them all from harm, and possibly death, with his sacrifice. And in his madness last summer, she could not fault him, for he wasn't in his right mind. Given her own willingness to traipse so readily to death's door without certainty of Severus' demise, she knew she could not fault Severus for all that he had done. She silently forgave him, though there was nothing to forgive.

It was when she finished her mental absolution of Severus that her carnal desires returned as they were getting ready for the ball.

The entirety of the evening seemed like one tortuously prolonged bout of foreplay between them. The trailing of his fingers as he clasped the pearls about her neck as the night began, the soft caress of his finger in a circular motion at the crook of her elbow when no one noticed, the possessive placement of his hands upon her as they tangoed, the subtle pressure of his hand upon her lower back as he guided her as they weaved through the crowds at the ball – all of these touches had slowly built the fire that now blazed hotly inside of her and now demanded to be quenched.

Her hands gripping his lapels tightly, she advanced on him until, her lips firmly on his, her tongue invaded his mouth as if she would sack and plunder him that night.

Severus shuffled backwards until the back of his calves hit the settee, and he plopped down rather inelegantly, bracing himself just in time.
Gazing up at her, he saw her need for him plainly written on her face. Pure love, searing lust, and unfettered desire were all discernible in the way she pinned him in place with her stare. Severus was unable to move.

Hermione stood above him, feeling the thrill of her seductive powers coursing through her as seen in the awestruck look Severus was giving her. She reached up and undid the zipper of her dress. With deliberate slowness, Hermione pushed the straps of her dress off her shoulders, one after the other.

Severus sat there feeling like a fool, unable to do nothing more than gaze at the vision before him, but this was the Hermione he'd hoped to bring forth with his training from the beginning of their affair: a confident temptress capable of paralyzing him with her sensuality. His mouth hung open and his breaths became shallow and quick. His erection was straining against his trousers, awakened by Hermione's sudden and commanding kiss. He wanted to reach up and caress her waist through the silk of her dress, but he could not find the ability to move. Dumbly he watched as she teasingly undid her zipper and sensuously pulled the straps aside to let the sheath of silk slip from her body, revealing her to be wearing only dark green lacy knickers, stockings, and her heels. Her wand was still secured in a loop on the side of her stockings until she suggestively removed it from its holster and casually tossed it on the settee next to Severus.

Hermione kept her pearls on, the multiple strands rolling across her skin with the longest strands swaying back and forth across her breasts. Severus watched each subtle movement. He was hypnotized as the ropes of pearls caressed her skin as if to tease her nipples, lightly brushing against them, as she began removing her knickers.

Thumbs hooked along the sides, she pushed the scraps of lace and silk past her hips until they fell and landed atop of her dress that was puddled on the floor.

With one fluid movement, she stepped away from her clothes and straddled Severus, who was still fully clothed.

The light of the fire flickered across her face, allowing Severus to see how large and dilated her pupils were, as if her own eyes had changed to match his own. He felt as if her eyes could swallow him whole, and he was transfixed by them. His hands tentatively reached up and stroked her ribs, skating along her skin until he gently cupped her breasts. The pearls clacked as Severus' hand moved, his thumb reaching to brush across her peaks that were already firm, casting shadows across her areolas.

Kneeling with her face above his, Hermione wended her fingers into his hair, her lips now parted as she breathed heavily, the anticipation becoming close to unbearable for her. Hermione could feel the throbbing between her legs grow ever more insistent like a steady bass drum that pounded
away in time with her heart. With the removal of her knickers, she could tell she was already ready for him, as the cool air met her sodden curls. She could rarely recall the ache between her legs pulsing as badly as that moment. Severus' hands on her breasts were making her ability to draw out the moment excruciating, yet all the more delicious.

Removing one hand from his hair, Hermione placed it between her legs and dragged a single finger between her labia, coating it with her slickness. She then gently smeared her wetness on Severus' lower lip, her finger making a small circular motion while she recited in Japanese,

"The ripe peach is split
Juice dribbling down your chin
Devour with relish"

Severus knew every haiku in the erotic Japanese book she gave him. This was one of her own. Its symbolism so sexually charged, so lusciously suggestive and blatantly lustful, he could not help but be aroused she had written something like this for him, an amatory invitation for him to consume her whole. His licked her finger, drawing it slightly into his mouth, his tongue teasing the tip as he had various parts of her body before, giving a silent promise of things to come. He savored the sweet musky taste of her and felt his own heart thumping loudly against his chest in his own building anticipation.

As she lowered his mouth on his, the spark was lit.

Suddenly Severus' hands clutched at her possessively as one arm wound around her waist and the other to her hair, to pull her as close to him as possible.

Hermione's hands quickly snaked down his body and began blindly yanking and undoing knots and clasps, not caring if she popped buttons or ripped fabric.

Sensing the urgency of the moment, Severus hastily yanked at his trousers, shoving them down. He was reluctant to let go of Hermione, but also too eager to wait until he could enter her.

His coat and shirt undone, trousers and underpants only shoved halfway down his thighs, Hermione grabbed Severus' hot and rigid member. She felt it briefly twitch from her touch, before she positioned him and without any preparation impaled herself on him in one swift moment.

Both simultaneously threw their heads back at the overwhelming sensation. Hermione cried out,
welcoming the feeling of him in her once more, as sudden as it was. Had her body not been so
ready, it would have been painful, and his entrance into her nearly was, but only because she was
aching so badly it was a release to finally have him inside of her once again.

Severus let out a loud moan of delight. While usually much quieter than Hermione when they
made love, the quick thrust of Hermione's encasing him in her snug warmth was too much for even
him. He shut his eyes tight and wrapped his arms around her tighter, locking his arms around her
waist as he proceeded to help Hermione as she began to rise and fall, impaling herself on his length
with a fury that demanded gratification.

One of Hermione's hands was braced on the back of the settee, clutching at the Chippendale
wooden carving that ran along the top of the back, while her other arm crushed Severus' head to her
bosom.

Severus grunted and groaned each time he was fully sunk into Hermione. He used his arms to push
her down before helping to left her up in conjunction to her legwork.

His unreserved shouts of ecstasy were coupled with Hermione screaming in perfect time with him.
Each time she was fully seated upon Severus' cock, feeling it fill and stretch her so satisfactorily it
made her want to cry, she exhaled with shouts of joy. And when she rose up, feeling Severus'
member stroke her just so as he withdrew, she inhaled with a gasp.

The tension of their bodies pressed together, the pearls tugged and twisted around Hermione's neck.

Hermione was so highly aroused before they even began that it did not take much for her to feel
the climax rapidly building inside of her. She did not even need stimulation of her clit, as she
normally did, in order to reach orgasm. Between the long evening together, her already heightened
desire, and their many months apart, Hermione quickly felt herself so close.

As her head began to loll back and the pitch of her screams hit as high a note as she could wail, her
arm around Severus' head began to slacken.

Severus took this moment to hold on to her as tight as possible and push her down onto him as he
thrust up from underneath, slamming into her deeper.

As one of the strands of pearls broke, Hermione shattered. She instantly felt whole with Severus
once again.
Lurching forward, her eyes shut tight, Hermione's mouth hung open as she let a low and guttural bellow issue forth as Severus pushed himself into Hermione with desperation from underneath as he felt her body quake and shudder. Neither of them noticed the sounds of the pearls that had slipped off the silk cordage roll off the settee and fall like rain on the wooden floor with small plunking and plinking noises, bouncing and rolling away.

Seeing her so lost in rapture, he joined her and called her name out as he gave one last great thrust. He spilled himself into her. His hips gently continued rocking back and forth on the settee, milking the last of his orgasm as Hermione slumped bonelessly against him.

It was a short union, but it was perfect in its simplicity. So much intense emotion and consuming passion in such a fleeting moment as the hottest fire consumed most briefly, but brightly.

While holding her tenderly, he felt her chest rise and fall rapidly, and heard a great shuddering gasp. She was crying, but these were the tears he was happy to see come from her, the only tears he looked forward to. Hermione lifted her tear-streaked face from his shoulder and smiled at him with uncontainable elation.

No matter how many times she had cried from joy because of him, it humbled him. Wiping away a few tracks of tears from her cheek with a thumb, he said with great reverence, "You are my everything."

This only made Hermione cry more and laugh as she stroked the sweaty tendrils of hair away from his face before she lovingly kissed his brow.

"As are you, mi corazón," she sighed dreamily as her hands stroked his face before resting back against his chest.

Severus wrapped his arms around her once more protectively and stroked her back with a loving touch.

After removing themselves from the settee and fixing the broken strand of pearls with a swish of Severus' wand, Hermione spelled their clothes to hang in the closet to be packed away in the morning. Then they quickly settled into bed.

As they both drifted off with dreams of a future together, the two ghosts were off in the kitchen
having a celebratory glass of champagne. Well, it was not real champagne, but merely a spectral manifestation in the shape of a champagne flute they each held in their hands.

'To Hermione and Severus! May they finally get on with their lives together in peace,' the vision of Albus said as he clinked glasses with Hagrid.

As Hagrid began to sip his own glass, he slowly morphed into a vision of Minerva. 'And about time, too!'

Albus' form began changing into Remus, faltering a bit before reasserting its form to resemble Albus once more, but with short hair as the werewolf once sported. His form was vacillating between the two since both Hermione and Severus were in the next room influencing his final shape as their minds began slipping towards dream states.

'It is a pity we could not have been of help during that whole incident,' Albus lamented with regret.

'Yes, but neither of us could latch on to any person in Padma's mind who could have swayed her from her course of action. Her mind was an absolute mess. What a jumble of madness, poor dear.'

Albus shook his head with regret. 'It would have been easier if the new tenants on the third floor were home at the time. We could have alerted them, and they might have been able to get help faster.'

'Ah, but Padma had planned for such an instance and had all those mirrors she planted all over the Ministry, so she might have mistaken it that Severus tipped them off and then Hermione might have been killed,' Minerva reminded him as she stroked the great black beard that spouted from her face as she morphed back into Hagrid.

'Well, it will be interesting to see if our next tenants will be as entertaining as these two have been.' Remus said with a twinkle in his eye, as he looked over his half-moon spectacles. 'The ones downstairs are as boring as plain porridge.' he complained sullenly.

'Hey, you forget that Draco and Ginny were quite an interesting pair as well. From what I can read of Severus' mind, Draco never told him about his own so-called mental manifestations of his dear Aunt Andromeda. Draco was so torn up when his Aunt Bellatrix killed her during the war. He felt guilty he could not publicly mourn Andromeda and had to pretend to revel in her death. Fortunately, that was an easy memory to pick from his brain. But you, you got to play Albus for
both Severus and Draco.'

Albus/Remus nodded, noting it was easy to pretend to be one person for two people, both of them having very similar impressions of the Headmaster. 'Do you think they'll ever figure out that we're linked to those charmed bed curtains?'

'You'd think after they tried remodeling the third floor flat and the bed curtains kept popping back up they would have figured out something was amiss,' Minerva/Hagrid snorted.

'Well, Lavender did say she would wait to remodel this flat after Hermione left, so they might start getting a clue finally. That and that we're tied to each other and can't be separated, dear sister.'

Minerva/Hagrid rolled her beetle black eyes, noting with some gratitude, 'At least we didn't wind up in a Muggle's house where they would try to exorcise us, dear brother. That would be a bother to be stuck in limbo, that is if they even knew what they were doing in the first place.'

Jackson and Jillian, the ghosts of the once great Leto twins, seers and diviners extraordinaire, both raised their amorphous glasses and toasted once more.

Little did they realize when they created cloth to read auras and minds – when they imbued moonstone and their own blood into a richly woven silk and woolen tapestry – that it would bind their souls to the threads for eternity. But they figured that life in such an eternal state provided great amusement over the couple centuries, versus being stuck in an afterlife with other dead people. The living were far more entertaining with their daily triumphs and tribulations, with all the highs and lows. It seemed that Severus and Hermione were not the only ones who had inadvertently discovered some form of powerful and unknown magic resulting in unforeseen consequences.

The ghosts of the Leto twins just hoped the next flat occupants weren't going to be as hard to read as Hermione was. It had taken almost three months before being able to figure out who they should impersonate after filtering through the memories in her head as she slept.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And now you know that they weren't manifestation of their minds, but indeed ghosts who could change shape and impersonate others. Still, the Leto twins are very special ghosts.
Thank you to my wonderful betas, JuneW and thegrey ladies. My betas really do a phenomenal job of improving the writing and flow of my story, so please do give much thanks to my betas too, when reviewing.

And you can view the fan art of Hermione and Severus descending the stairs, by dokinana (http://dokinana.deviantart.com/), commissioned by me, here: http://atdlheabetz.tumblr.com/post/157281150665/hermione-severus-at-the-malfoy-party-by
"It's a New Dawn, It's a New Day, It's a New Life"

Chapter Summary

Hermione finally leaves England and seeks sanctuary in Malu Palekaiko.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter One Hundred Fifteen
"It's a New Dawn, It's a New Day, It's a New Life"

Disclaimer: In Japanese haiku:
Rowling owns Potter
No copyright infringement
None of this is mine

Hermione could hardly eat her toast. She was equally nervous and excited she would be leaving with Severus that morning.

Severus read through the Sunday edition of the Daily Prophet periodically huffing with exasperation. The paper was filled with not only the usual whitewashed pablum about the Ministry goings-on, but was also chock full of coverage about the party at Malfoy Manor the night before.

The headline "MUGGLES MINGLE AT MALFOY MANOR MIXER" led right into a story that questioned whether the non-magical guests at the fête were aware of the notorious rumors of possible Muggle torture that may have occurred at the house during the first and second wizarding wars.

Once again, it was a piece of pulp meant to enrage the public and titillate their short attention spans until the next falsely-manufactured scandal came along, even if a few Muggles were actually tortured there during both wars.

The fashion pages featured, among many photos, a candid shot of Hermione and Severus.
descending the staircase at the beginning of the evening, with compliments to Madam Mandel regarding Severus' dashing set of robes. There was also a photo exposé comparing Muggle and wizarding formal wear. Photos of Hermione's parents and aunt and uncle in their finest outfits, the men in black-tie tuxedos and the women in long formal Muggle evening gowns, were compared by fashion mavens to the more traditional evening wear that involved hoop-skirts and bustles. In the end, Ginny Malfoy's silver bias-cut dress was heralded the fashion winner of the evening, with a hint that maybe it was time for the wizarding world to begin moving away from Victorian underpinnings toward something more contemporary and chic, like hobble skirts and flapper dresses. Draco's double-breasted cashmere and silk robes in dark gray, with lapels set in a slightly lighter gray silk velvet, won him the designation of best-dressed wizard at the event.

Severus put the paper down when Hermione made a slightly distressed noise to herself. "Everything all right?"

"Yes, I received an owl from James Hoover, my therapist. He says that he is willing to continue seeing me long distance through the mirrors, especially in light of what recently happened, but that it may be a couple weeks before he can find an evening slot where he can make it to Lavender's offices." She sighed and put the last of her posts away before trying to finish the last of her toast, knowing if she didn't eat something Severus would be cross at her again for not eating.

Hermione hoped Lavender would take her advice and bring Devlin in for sessions with James, given the child had grown up in an unloving household where his aunt convinced him he was not worthy of love and that he was the son of a monster. Harry had also grown up in a very difficult house devoid of any love for him and was treated as a "freak"; she knew how that had caused him long-term mental and emotional scars. Hermione just hoped that Lavender and Ron could help reverse some of the damage done so Devlin could grow up to be a happy and well-adjusted wizard some day.

While they finished breakfast, Marf was busy packing up the bathroom and Hermione's clothes.

As they came out to inspect Marf's progress, Hermione found the top drawer of her dresser left opened. While all her lingerie had been packed, she could still see one item left behind that wasn't packed yet from that particular drawer.

Reaching in, she pulled out the box, waving her wand to end the spell that hid it from all except her and evidently Marf, since he'd packed it in her trunk during her December trip to Malu Palekaiko.

"What's that?" Severus asked, suddenly noticing the plain lidded box that suddenly appeared in her hands he didn't notice before.
Hermione bid him to come over to the settee to join her. With great interest he watched as she pulled off the box lid and peered inside.

"This is what I call my 'escape box,'" she informed him. "Before my parents left for the States to hide during the war, they wanted to make sure that in case the war didn't go as we hoped that I had a means to slip away and maybe rejoin them abroad if necessary."

Severus sat in silence, not missing the significance that Dumbledore had the same thought cross his mind during his last days alive, when he'd urged him to escape to Malu Palekaiko if the Dark Lord won.

"They made me promise not to tell Harry or even Ron. And to this day the boys have no idea about this. You're the first and only person I've told," she said in a voice barely above a whisper, noting the irony of it all. "Driver's license, credit card, passport, cash card, even some Muggle money should I have to suddenly leave and disappear. It was because of this, as well as Dumbledore's fear the Death Eaters might regroup abroad again, that I came up with a nearly foolproof way to prevent any Death Eaters from leaving after the war." Looking up at Severus, she added with a half smile, "Strange that though I came up with those measures I was the one who helped you and Draco escape, foiling my own carefully designed plan."

He felt deeply honored that she would share this great secret with him.

Hermione lifted out each piece to place in Severus' hand for his inspection. They both smiled when she removed the length of black silk from that night Hermione was blindfolded, while she only knew him as Calleo, and he'd begged her for more than she could give at the time.

"And now, despite having an escape box in case of the worst, I still need to leave England to stay safe even after we won the war," she noted with melancholy.

Severus looked at the photo of an eighteen-year-old Hermione on her passport and driver's license, noticing it was going to expire in a couple of years. All of the documents listed her last name as Granger.

As if reading his mind she remarked in an amused lilt, "Maybe before these expire I'll get them renewed, and maybe with a new last name."

Hermione's hint at marrying him one day and changing her last name on Muggle documents from
Granger to Snape made him grin. She had not even changed her name on these items after marrying Weasley, but she was willing to do so for him.

Severus put the items back and put the lid back on. "Maybe you could even get a Hawaii state driver's license, and you could take me for another drive in a convertible. I hear the road to Hana on Maui is especially terrifying to most Muggles, because of its narrow twisting road."

Hermione laughed, thrilled that Severus seemed to be open to the idea of another drive. They might even go Muggle again and stay in Muggle accommodations in Maui for the night for the fun of it, making the bed springs creak as loudly as possible, and not even bother to charm them to be quiet next time.

It was almost time to go. Hermione put her escape box in with other sentimental items Marf packed, alongside the green frog-shaped pearl Severus gave her that she kept on her dresser top, and her San Francisco snow globe from her parents.

After one last check, everything had been packed and levitated into Hermione's trunk, including her dresser she'd had since before she married Ron. The only thing left behind was the furniture that was there when she moved in, including the settee, the low table that matched it, and four-poster canopied bed with the bed curtains that changed colors according to Hermione's moods – curtains that she rarely charmed black. Hermione also left the charmed two-way mirror behind, as Lavender would have one of the elves move it to her offices while its match was packed away after Mouna brought it from Hawaii. It was settled in her trunk with a protective cloth over it to prevent breakage during the trip, should the contents shift while Portkeying.

Marf sobbed bitterly that he was losing such a kind and wonderful mistress. When he asked if he could come with them and take care of them in Malu Palekaiko, Severus explained to the diminutive creature that in Malu Palekaiko there were only free elves, so Marf would have to be paid a comparable wage to that of a witch or wizard the house-elf suddenly decided that staying in England was a fine option and wished them the best instead. Hermione was sad that Marf and many other house-elves, though mostly free, still sought to bind themselves in some form of servitude to an employer. She was just glad Lavender was a fair and equitable employer who at least paid the elves in her employ something beyond a pittance and insisted on one day off a month mandatory.

As Hermione and Severus arrived at the Ministry via Floo, they were greeted by Harry. It seems after the night of partying, he was the only one awake and not hung-over enough to see them off, which was fine since Hermione had said most of her goodbyes last night.

Severus carried Hermione's trunk for her, levitating it with his wand behind them as they walked towards the Portkey office while Hermione carried Calleo in her cage. Mouna and his family had
taken a slightly earlier Portkey and would greet them there in Hawaii when they arrived.

Just before approaching the desk for those with reservations, Hermione turned to Harry and gave him a hearty hug goodbye, which he returned with equal feeling.

"It's been a long, strange turn of events to reach this point," Hermione remarked.

Harry hummed in agreement, nodding his head. When he had asked Hermione to spy on Ginny to see if she was having an affair, neither of them could have guessed the way that events would have turned out with Harry married to someone else. Neither did they expect Harry to save Snape and Malfoy, two wizards he once loathed with a passion, from a former fellow Dumbledore’s Army member. They certainly did not expect all parties present to be happy that Hermione was going to go off and live with Snape.

"I suppose I should return this to you," Hermione said as she made to remove the Auror's pendant that still hung around her neck.

Harry shook his head. "No, keep it. When you come back to England for your certification as a Potions mistress, put it back on. Just let me know so I can wear its match before you come," he said as he lifted the other pendant briefly out from under his shirt to show he still wore his half. Looking to Snape, he added, "Two wizards looking after Hermione while she's here is better than one." It was an assurance that Harry did not doubt Snape's ability to protect Hermione when they would come back in about a year, but that a little extra help can sometimes be a good thing, just in case.

Severus agreed and shook Potter's hand. "Thank you."

Hermione waved farewell and even shed a few tears as they made their way to the desk to take a nine o'clock Portkey directly to Malu Palekaiko.

Severus held Hermione's arm to help her as they landed.

Exiting the Portkey landing area, Severus heard Halulu sigh with great relief, "Oh, thank Pele you both made it back safely!" Mounga had briefly brought Halulu up to speed on what transpired, but kept the details vague.
Mounga was waiting on the other side of the counter for the pair.

As Mounga placed a hand on Hermione's shoulder, she glanced over to Severus. "Must I do this now?" she asked, wanting nothing more than to go home and put the trauma of it all behind her.

Severus knew how she felt, but said with resignation, "Once your interview is over, you will be granted sanctuary and will be protected by the island's magic. Then we can both rest easy."

Glancing over at the clock that was just a few minutes past eight in the evening, Mounga said, "Hopefully, you'll be done by midnight, or maybe sooner, we hope."

"I'll wait for you here until you're done," Severus assured her.

Hermione gave him one last hug and fleeting kiss before removing her cloak and being willingly led off to a hallway featuring a row of doors. Severus could hardly believe that it was a mere sixteen months or so since he walked into one of those rooms. It wasn't that long ago, yet seemed like it was another lifetime.

Settling himself into a chair in which to wait alone with his thoughts, Severus wished he had at least pulled out a book to read from Hermione's library before they finished packing her trunk.

"I'm about to close up for the night. Mounga will lock up when you guys leave. Care for a cup of coffee before I turn off the pot?" Halulu asked as she cleaned up for the night.

Severus shook his head. He wasn't sleepy. He should have been, but staying up all night by Hermione's bedside that first night had reset his body clock to London time, without the help of Hermione's Portkey lag potion. He would make use of a vial tonight to set his body back to local time.

In the white room that gleamed with impersonal coldness, Hermione took the seat offered. She noticed the toilet in the corner concealed behind a low screen, no doubt to relieve herself should this take a while. She could only imagine the types of people who came seeking sanctuary – including some who might have once been dangerous indeed, that they would have to provide a toilet so the interrogator could still keep an eye on them until the interview was finished.
"Please place your wand and everything in your pockets on the table," Mounga asked politely.

Hermione did as she was asked.

Mounga removed a vial from his shirt pocket. "This is Veritaserum. Given you are a Potions apprentice, I shall assume you know what it is and does."

She nodded mutely.

Mounga continued explaining, "Now, by law, you asked for sanctuary, and I must give it to you. But part of the process of asking for sanctuary requires the administration of Veritaserum during the processing of your request for sanctuary."

"You don't have to give it to me," she freely offered. "I'll gladly tell you everything you want to know. You were there during the hearing in front of the committee."

Shaking his head, he admitted with regret, "It doesn't exactly work that way. See, we get all types. On one end of the spectrum, we see those who are truly being harassed, hunted, persecuted, oppressed, and tortured, who are the reason why a place such as this exists. All the way at the other end of the spectrum are mass murderers, sadistic psychopaths, and the worst scum who deserve to be wiped from the face of the earth, but they make it here by the skin of their teeth and luck, escaping what I would consider justice. However, because of the magic imbued into our sanctuary, all who come to seek it take Veritaserum, even if they profess innocence and even if we know they are innocent of any wrongdoing.

"If we make an exception for one from taking Veritaserum, even if we know they are worthy of the protection they are guaranteed here, then what would it take before others start demanding that it is not fair, others who might have a more questionable background. And while yes, technically, I can't force you to take it, this is the custom. But the custom is also perceived as the law though in actuality it is not law; the law should be blind, treating all equally without bias or preference. If it is any consolation, anything you say in here I am bound to never say. Should you choose to share certain aspects of your background, then it becomes public knowledge and then I may only speak of what you have revealed. I processed Severus, and though you may know him quite intimately, I cannot share things he said to me in confidence during his own interview. As such, anything you share here with me in this room I cannot tell even Severus, unless you were to break the law and things you divulged to me were relevant to said trial case, for instance: if you were a killer granted sanctuary and then attacked someone here."
Hermione had heard from Severus about his interview and Mouna's assured secrecy, but it did not ease her apprehension about taking Veritaserum.

"Does this Veritaserum make me tell you everything?" Hermione queried, knowing there were some variations to the formula and wondering if she would inadvertently tell Mouna about her and Severus' private and intimate moments.

"Only if you deem them relevant to the questions posed regarding your request for sanctuary," he assured her. "This is a slightly varied potion from the traditional Veritaserum you might be familiar with. It's a secret formula only known and brewed by those on the town council who interview those seeking sanctuary. Not even Severus knows this formula, unless he becomes a town council member some day and interviews those seeking sanctuary."

"The ones you said who come here, the more dangerous ones. Will I have to worry about someone like that here?" she asked, the threat of being attacked still looming large in her mind.

"No. Those types who come here know if they so much as set a toe out of line and harm another or blatantly break the law, they will lose sanctuary status and get kicked out. Those who we deem more potentially hostile we place in more secluded and remote parts of the island, and I visit regularly to check up on them and monitor for any possible issues. And while they are free to move about the island and mingle with the rest of the inhabitants, many usually keep to themselves, avoiding temptation. I can assure you that most seek to start over, and they have made earnest endeavors to leave their old lives and habits behind to live out the rest of their days in peace and quiet. For those, it may seem like a prison to you, but a prison of their own choosing versus what options were available had they remained to meet justice in their homeland."

Hermione drank in all that he said, remembering Severus had told her that Mouna's father treated all who came there as if they were the worst of the worst. She was glad that Mouna was running things around here now as Severus was never made to feel like a prisoner, despite his being unable to leave the protective sanctuary of the island while he was still being persecuted and hunted back in England.

"I'm ready," she said with a sense of finality, ready to take the step forward to be granted sanctuary.

With a flick of his wand, Mouna conjured a glass with water. He poured the famous elixir into the water for her to see.

Taking the glass in hand, she took a large gulp of it, feeling the tendrils of the magic loosen her tongue.
"Now, why don't you start at the beginning of everything that led up to the events that occurred that require you now to seek sanctuary," Mounga prompted her.

Of course Hermione had to start at the beginning. And to start at the beginning of it all meant she had to begin her tale with her first year at Hogwarts. With little surprise to Mounga, it began with Ronald Weasley insulting Hermione by calling her a "nightmare," which resulted in her fleeing to the girls' toilet the night Professor Quirrell had let a troll into the dungeons.

As Mounga remembered from Severus' confessions during his interview, he had told Mounga about Weasley's long-standing propensity to insult Hermione. 'Severus was right; Weasley is a big fat jerk,' Mounga mused to himself.

After the troll incident, Hermione said, she became friends with Harry and Ron, which resulted in her squarely in the category of students Severus disliked due to her association with the boy wizard who looked like a carbon copy of Severus' old nemesis. Of course, Mounga would never make mention of the fact that Hermione also reminded Severus of his dead wife, Gabrielle, as Mounga was not allowed to divulge such information. It was Severus' place to share that tidbit, if ever.

Her tale went on in which she and her friends thought Severus was after the Sorcerer's Stone and the various incidents that further put her into the doghouse with Severus, including the robe-burning incident during the Quidditch game. There was stealing from his stores to brew the Polyjuice Potion in her second year, the Shrieking Shack incident in her third year, and other happenstances, when she periodically had to stop talking to allow Mounga to guffaw with surprise or laugh heartily, having heard the tale from a different viewpoint before.

Never had Mounga had the privilege of processing two people so closely connected in their bid for sanctuary. He was acutely made aware that though both were speaking the truth during their interviews, the truth was somewhat subjective from their own points of view. And while their stories did not contradict one another, he did notice the differences, which made his appreciation for listening to two sides of a story in the courtroom more amusing with this elucidating experience.

It was as Hermione told about her fifth year at Hogwarts that more threads of the story began to unfurl, with the addition of Dolores Umbridge to Hermione's confession. From there Severus and Hermione's paths began to diverge during the war, except for where they briefly worked towards the same goal of defeating Voldemort. Progressing along her narrative, the war eventually ended. This resulted in Hermione telling Mounga about her marriage, including Severus yelling at her the night before her wedding, her low-level job at the Ministry, and her inability to secure an apprenticeship.
From here the story became more convoluted with the additional discovery of Ginny's infidelity with Draco, and Hermione's meetings with Severus, when she knew him only as Calleo and how she reluctantly fell in love with him. Hermione skipped over her time together with Severus, keeping only to the relevant details of stealing the Polyjuice ingredients and his invitation to join him to flee, including her meeting with the old fortuneteller.

She shamefully confessed her brief flirtation with Alan Parker at the Three Broomsticks, unaware he had set his sights on her in order to seek his revenge on behalf of his godmother, and their subsequent encounter the night of her anniversary. She even admitted, much later in the confession as it was chronologically relevant, as to why she'd slept with Neville, which then led to the disastrous floral mix-up being misconstrued for something other than what it was.

Upon reaching the part where Severus fled for sanctuary himself, it entered territory Mounga was not familiar with and he listened with rapt attention. When Hermione told Mounga about her and Severus' potions experimentation, which came to bear when she was attacked and Severus' bout with the ice pox; she explained how she and Severus met in an alternate plane. For some reason, this was a source of great relief to Mounga, since he had been perplexed as to the reason why Severus was passed out for those two days during the Pele Festival.

Mounga assured Hermione that he would not share that information about their inadvertent binding, not even with Rainbow, who was still confounded to that day as to the cause of her patient's prolonged and unexplained sleep.

On Hermione's tale went, periodically stopping to drink more Veritaserum as needed. As she told of her tale of nearly wandering into the Valley of Death, she could not help by cry, moved by the fact that Mounga was crying, having himself been involved with the surrounding events. Her interview ended when she gave a brief recap of her petition before the council to change Potions masters, since Mounga had been there himself to witness the hearing.

Sitting back in his chair, Mounga exhaled a huge breath. "Dude. I'm totally floored. What a tale. And I thought Draco and Ginny's story could hardly be topped, but man..." He shook his head, his mouth drawn down in deep contemplation of all that he had heard.

"What else do we have to do before I'm granted sanctuary?" Hermione asked, feeling emotionally spent.


Hermione frowned, as it seemed a bit anticlimactic. It wasn't that she expected a shower of silver
and gold sparks to sudden baptize her or anything in some magical absolution and blessing, but it seemed that all she had to do was spill her guts and that was it.

"I was wondering, do we have to tell everyone on the island I was granted sanctuary?" Hermione asked, unsure what the answer would be.

"You want to keep it a secret?" Mounga asked, wondering why she looked a bit ashamed.

"Well, it's just that..." How could Hermione phrase this without making it come out wrong. "Must I carry around a welcome packet as a badge that I'm one of the good guys, like a seal of approval? I mean, people were already expecting me to move here anyway to open up operations. Can we just say that due to circumstances we moved up my move date and got a work-around with the council – which is the truth." Hermione hated to admit it, but she didn't want there to be a question as to her reasons for seeking sanctuary. For if people thought it was for criminal activity, she felt it might reduce everyone's esteem of her, and if it was for protection from persecution or harm, then there would be the curious questions and stares of who she was trying to run from. She just wanted to be accepted as someone who moved there of their own volition, not under duress.

"Yeah," Mounga said. "That is if Halulu and my wife haven't told half the town already," he said with a guilty chagrin, wishing he had said something earlier to the two witches to assure some confidentiality.

"Well, if the kneazle is out of the bag, I'll just deal with it then, but I would prefer to just go on without it being publicized so freely." Hermione sighed, hoping she would not have people approach her to drag up the past.

"Well, here, people tend to let others alone regarding their lives before coming here, unless the person wants to share. Just be aware my wife loves to pry, but I've seen you handle her, so no worries," he said with a half-laugh.

Severus kept himself busy by mentally going through all the students he could shuffle off to Hermione to make up the four days he had been gone during scheduled tutoring sessions. Then there were the commissions that he'd had to scrap. Fortunately for a few of the ones that required long-term brewing, he had spare batches already brewed and bottled just in case. Just as he was he was starting to go through his inventories at the shop, he heard the door down the hallway creak open.
Hermione practically ran and threw herself into Severus' arms just as he got to his feet. He spun her about and planted a kiss firmly upon her lips. But it was brief, suddenly remembering that Mounga was there and chuckling aloud to himself watching the two reunited.

"It's done," Mounga announced. "She's safe here now."

Severus could not keep an ecstatic smile from spreading across his face. Were he any other person, his eyes might have twinkled even.

Hermione reveled in seeing him so happy, on par with the day she suddenly showed up on his doorstep on Christmas Eve. However, this time it was no brief visit; she was going to stay there with him for the rest of their lives.

Walking up the main street of town, arm in arm, Hermione holding Calleo's cage while Severus took care of her trunk, they heard the music spilling out of Bongo's.

It was almost midnight, and the place was packed.

Severus was glad he went to the bar on Friday nights as those nights tended to draw a slightly older and less rambunctious crowd than the one that populated that bar on Saturday nights – the ones who were presently imbibing unwisely beyond their limit. Many of the young unmarried witches and wizards in the bar were those close to Hermione's age or younger. Many of them were apprentices who sought to blow off steam from a long week working for their masters and mistresses while hoping to find someone attractive of the opposite sex equally interested enough to attempt a brief tryst that night.

Jerry's voice could be heard as he played on the piano, the volume up much louder than during Severus' Friday night visits, when he was surrounded by others who were a bit older seeking a drink after a long week at work before going home to family.

As they passed by the bar, they could clearly hear Jerry singing an older Muggle standard from the 60's that had been rerecorded and recently playing on the local Wizarding Wireless Network.

"... Oh freedom is mine
And I know how I feel
It's a new dawn
It's a new day"
It's a new life

It's a new dawn
It's a new day
It's a new life

It's a new dawn
It's a new day
It's a new life
It's a new life
For me

And I'm feeling good...

Hermione was sure this was yet another case of "radio syndrome," but with Jerry instead of a box belting out a tune that reflected the mood. It was a new day where Hermione and Severus were both free to begin their new life together. They were indeed both feeling good. She leaned her head sideways on Severus' shoulder as they continued their walk home.

"Do we really have to make the trek all the way to the top of the volcano tomorrow? Can it wait until next weekend when we've had a chance to rest?" she whined, seeing the tall mountain looming above the small town.

Recalling the urgency that was imparted to him when he first arrived, he recalled similar words. "You must make a trip to the edge of the caldera and make an offering to Pele in thanks for providing you with sanctuary within the first week, preferably the sooner the better. To not do so would be a great offense and bring bad luck."

"Bad luck?" Hermione scoffed questioningly.

Severus decided that when he, Hermione, and Mouna made the trip up tomorrow, he would share his experiences of seeing Pele in person himself. He would impress upon her the seriousness of the fact it was Pele's magic that was going to keep Hermione safe from future harm, and their need to respect that powerful magic with appropriate reverence.

Up on the porch, Severus set her trunk down with his wand as he fished in his pocket for his keys that Mouna gave back to him at St. Mungo's, while Hermione set Calleo's cage down. After
unlocking the door, he pushed it open. Before Hermione could pick up the cage again and walk through, Severus scooped her up into his arms. She squeaked with surprise from the sudden act. Her heart raced at the symbolism of Severus' gesture to carry her across the threshold.

They may not have gone through the ceremony or had the piece of paper to make it official, but to Severus it made little difference. To him, he was finally bringing Hermione into their home at last, and they would no longer be parted.

Hermione suddenly felt a bit shy, like a new bride, and was overcome at this heartwarming gesture of great sentimental significance.

He was reluctant to put her down, and to his relief, Hermione pulled out her wand and cast a Summoning Charm to bring her trunk and Calleo's cage inside, followed by a flick of her wand to close the door.

Hermione stroked his cheek in awe at the sight of Severus unable to stop smiling.

"How about we get out of these warm woolen clothes into something a bit more appropriate for this climate," Severus suggested with an arch of his brow that implied so much more.

"And change into what?" Hermione played along with their banter.

"Cool cotton sheets and nothing else," he proposed with a lustful glance that made Hermione gasp with mock drama and throw her head back in surrender to Severus' libidinous intentions.

"Carry me off to your jungle love lair to ravish me, my dark angel lover," she sighed coquettishly, trying not to laugh, but failed as Severus began to chuckle himself.

Severus did not have to be told twice, but he was hoping to make her beg sweetly this time.

Calleo was glad, that after much vociferous squawking and unseemly baying that went on in the room upstairs that seemed to last for hours, her owner finally came back and let her out of her cage. The female human set her up with a few owl treats before going back and continuing on with the incessant whooping and caterwauling that went on far too long until nearly dawn.
Chapter End Notes

A/N: Stay tuned, two more chapters and then the epilogue.

And let’s give a round of applause to my lovely betas for this chapter, JuneW and Hope.

Yes, I have driven the road to Hana on Maui. It is rather narrow and twisting, but no less stressful and frightening if you grew up driving narrow twisting canyons like I did around Los Angeles: Tujunga, Mulholland, Coldwater, Topanga, Laurel, and some parts of the Pacific Coast Highway. However, if you live in a state that is mostly flat with lots of straight roads, I can see how it can be rather fearsome and daunting, based on some of the souvenir T-shirts they sell locally saying "I Survived the Road To Hana" or "Road to Hana Survivor" and showing a harried driver narrowly missing driving off a hairpin turn and driving off a cliff.

"Feeling Good": song written by Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse. This particular version lyric arrangement performed by Michael Buble. And yes, Buble's version was released in April 2005, same time as the end of this chapter.

And for a bonus, what sort of author would I be to keep talking about Severus' mango chutney and not provide you the recipe. So here it is:

**Severus' Mango Chutney**
Makes 6+* pints

Ingredients broken down into WET and DRY:

**DRY:**

5 cups White Sugar  
1 3/4 cups Dark Brown Sugar 
12 oz Candied Crystallized Ginger: snipped* into approx. 1/2” pieces  
1 TBL Mustard Seeds: yellow or brown  
1 1/2 tsp Salt  
2 cups Raisins: white or golden 
1 cup Black Seedless Raisins: e.g. Muscats
1 cup Dates: snipped* into 1/2” pieces

**WET:**

6 cups Apple Cider Vinegar  
8 Large Mangoes: firm but barely ripe, not mushy  
6 Large Garlic Cloves: finely minced  
1 Small Onion: minced, red, white or yellow  
1/4 cup Lemon Juice

Instructions:

1. Peel the mangoes and dice the fruit into 3/4” sized pieces.  
2. Prepare 6-7 pint canning jars, lids and rings in a hot-water bath per manufacturer's instructions. Keep them simmering in hot water on a back burner ready for canning.  
3. Put everything together in a large non-reactive (e.g. Stainless Steel) pot and bring to a simmer while stirring.  
4. Cook, while stirring, until the mangoes are softened, about 8 to 10 minutes.  
5. Remove all solids to a bowl and reserve. A Wok "spider" is an excellent tool for this. Don't worry about the small pieces that slip through the mesh of the "spider".  
6. While stirring, boil the liquid down to slightly less than half of the original height. To measure the height, stick a clean kitchen knife straight down into the liquid until it touches the bottom of the pot. Carefully remove the knife straight up and measure the height of the liquid clinging to the knife. You must do this when the pot is NOT boiling and the surface is not bubbling. Clean the knife off and repeat as necessary to insure that slightly more than half the original liquid has been evaporated.  
7. Return all the solids to the pot, bring back to a boil, while stirring, and can into pint-glass containers using good hygienic canning practices.

**Notes:**

A. Makes a little over 6 pints. Refrigerate after opening.  
B. Make one-quarter of a recipe and you'll have a good size batch that you won't have to can.  
C. Very long shelf life in the Fridge. I've kept some for 6 months and it was still good. High sugar and vinegar content probably makes the keeping ability at least as good as ketchup.  
D. And in reference to the Ginger and Dates being "snipped," I am referring to the use of kitchen shears, but a good sharp knife will do as well.
Vivieron Felices Y Comieron Codero Y Salmón" (And They Lived Happily Ever After, and Ate Lamb and Salmon)

Chapter Summary

Come join Hermione and Severus at their wedding. Please specify if you will have the lamb or salmon at the reception.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter One Hundred Sixteen

"Vivieron Felices Y Comieron Codero Y Salmón" (And They Lived Happily Ever After, and Ate Lamb and Salmon)

Disclaimer:
We gather here today to read this fanfic of two characters who are finally going to be joined in the bonds of holy matrimony, which is an honorable plot. Into this, I must disclose that Harry Potter belongs to J.K. Rowling and no monetary compensation is received by me, nor is any copyright infringement intended. If anyone reading this fanfic can show just and legal cause why I shouldn't post this, let them review now or forever shut their gob.

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September 3, 2006

As Severus stepped out of the shower, he noticed Hermione was standing in front of the bathroom sink while studying the vial in her hand, lost in contemplation. He went over to her, covered the vial and her hand with his own hand, and softly reminded her, "You don't have to make a decision today. We can discuss this after we come back."

Hermione looked at the edge of the vial that wasn't covered by their hands, studying the henna design refracted on her palm through the pale elixir and glass tube. She was about to reply, but was cut short when the doorbell chimed.

"That must be Mario. Can you let him in, dear?" Hermione asked, as she went back to brushing out her freshly washed hair, a towel wrapped around her torso.
"And after I let him in, maybe I could put up a Silencing Charm," he said in a sultry voice as he began to undo her towel and cast her a seductive glance in the mirror, but was met with a slight slap on his hand and a faux stern glare from her.

Turning around and brandishing her hairbrush in a threatening manner, she admonished him in her best imitation of a New York Brooklyn accent, "Y'know, you got them bad eyes, like a gypsy!" It was a favorite line of hers to quote from that romantic film they watched together last year during the summer Friday night movie festival.

"The better to seduce you with, my dear," he purred before briefly attacking her neck with his mouth. He was pleased when she squeaked with delight instead of thwacking him with her brush, but he stopped when the door chimed once more.

"All right, all right!" Severus barked as he rushed to throw on some shorts and a shirt.

Hermione could hear Mario talking away excitedly with his Italian accent and the tromping feet of several other people filing in to take over their kitchen that day.

Just as Hermione tied off her dark blue silk dressing gown there was a gentle rapping upon the bedroom door.

"Hermione? Are you ready?" a voice called out hesitantly.

"Yes, perfect timing," she invited the hairdresser in.

Fortunately for Hermione and Severus, they had taken Draco's original suggestion to keep things very simple.

While Hermione was getting her hair and make-up done, Severus let the florist in to drop off the flowers before going to get dressed himself in one of the guest bedrooms. He wanted the joyous surprise of seeing his bride all dressed up only when he would meet her at the bottom of the stairs and escort her.

Akela and Kaimi were so excited about the wedding, they were more than happy to fulfill the
function of hostesses and part-time wedding coordinators before the day. They greet guests, the few who were coming; and they place presents in a pile. The guests had been told that since the couple was combining two households there was nothing they required, but that didn't stop people from bringing something for the bridal couple to unwrap. At the right time, the Finau girls would then direct guests to the backyard where the ceremony was to take place.

When Hermione was granted sanctuary over a year ago, Severus began the long process of getting the backyard ready for their eventual wedding. There was now a large multi-tiered deck on the back hill with an impressive pergola covered with vines of *Jasminum tortuosum* that he'd trained to climb over the structure. While the bush *Jasminum sambac* produced extremely fragrant flowers used in pikake leis, this particular vining jasmine produced a much lighter citrus-like scent that pleased Hermione. It was not cloying, like *Jasmine polyanthum*, the heavily perfumed variety grown in the Grand Royal Supper Club's garden.

In addition to the pergola, there was a large area he and Hermione had designed and built as a "toddler pen." They expected many toddlers to be coming – Draco and Ginny's triplets, for starters – so this area would keep them entertained and essentially penned off, since the children would no doubt find the solemnity of a wedding ceremony boring and tedious. The grassy area featured a slide, a rocking hippogriff and rocking owl, and other toddler-sized play equipment. They knew it would keep the children happy and busy, having the play area thoroughly tested over many weekends by their godchildren and children of friends who came over to visit periodically. There would also be a small contingent of elves to help wrangle the children and help with potty visits and diaper changes during the wedding and reception, so the parents could relax. The bridal couple had even set up one of the guest bedrooms to function as a nap area for when the little ones tuckered themselves out.

It didn't take Severus very long to get ready, so he mingled and greeted people as they arrived, keeping his jacket off until it was time.

The Finaus were the first to arrive, with Tristan who got a special furlough from his master in order to attend the wedding that weekend with his girlfriend, followed by Halulu and Greg with their twin toddler girls in tow. Hermione's parents, along with Aunt Christine, Uncle Tim and Auberon came over; the Grangers offered to help with anything, but there was little to do since it was all kept simple in order to save Hermione's sanity, and thereby Severus' as well. Bill Weasley, the twins and their entire families eventually arrived too; the Weasley wives were eternally grateful there was a play area they could let their brood run loose and work off that boundless energy that wore their parents down, and it was barely one o'clock. Albert arrived with gifts in hand – a gift for the bridal couple, and a couple bottles of very fine Spanish Madeira to share with the bridegroom, and any other guests who chose to have a bracer, before the ceremony.

While Severus was not nervous exactly, nor did he consider finally marrying Hermione unpleasant at all, he did have a glass to steady his steadily building nerves.
Gary and his wife Iolana finally made it, arriving at the same time as Fastrada Johnson, now a Potions mistress herself. Jerry and Pat, Severus' office manager, followed shortly after. Severus barely closed the front door before seeing more people down at the gate by the roadside approaching. As Severus directed Mario to where he could place the wedding cake to keep it safe from curious and grubby toddler fingers, Ranjit and Arnold showed up, the Japanese Potions master and Severus having long buried the hatchet thanks to some careful scheming by the Indian Potions master, Pat, and Hermione.

There were only three more families who needed to show up before the ceremony could begin. When Severus was tempted to have Akela go fetch the friends who were now officially late, Harry and his family arrived all looking a bit exhausted; they offered a quick apology for their tardiness due to a last-minute temper tantrum. No sooner had the phrase "temper tantrum" been uttered than Severus heard Josephine squeal in protest all the way down from the road where Ron Weasley and his family trudged up the hill.

"But Josephine, all your cousins will be there, and I know how much you like your cousins," Severus could hear Lavender trying to reason with her daughter who squirmed and fought in her father's arms, seeking to be let down and run in the opposite direction from the house.

"No, I wanna go swimming again!" she squalled.

"We can go swimming after the wedding. Besides, Auntie Hermione promised chocolate cake for all the good little girls and boys who behaved," Lavender added. Hermione didn't exactly promise such a thing, but the bride did insist on chocolate cake for their wedding, which Lavender used to bribe her daughter into behaving.

This seemed to quell the obstinate toddler's demand to do as she wanted into doing what she was told.

As they opened the garden gate, Severus saw Ron roll his eyes in exasperation, his fussing daughter in one arm and Devlin holding his adoptive father's hand quietly. Lavender brought up the rear, looking well put together as always, but slightly worn down by the toddler's recent outburst.

Severus could do nothing but give a smirk. He found some perverse justice that Ronald Weasley, who gave him trouble for seven years in his classroom, would have a solid ten years of dealing with his rather willful daughter, plus her summers home from Hogwarts.

As they reached the porch, Devlin struck out his hand with awkward politeness, "It's nice to finally meet you, Mr. Snape. Congratulations."
Severus shook the young wizard's hand, pleased his adoptive mother was imparting good manners in the boy, who seemed to be thriving in a house full of love. "Thank you, Mr. Patil. It is a pleasure to meet you as well." While he did recognize Macnair's eyes in the boy, Devlin did not seem to possess any of the cold cruelty of his biological father.

Devlin went into the house. He was followed quickly by Josephine who squirmed out of her father's grasp and bolted towards the backyard, where she heard her cousins and other children playing.

"Albert has Madeira," Severus announced quietly, knowing the offer would be much appreciated.

"Thanks, Snape, I definitely need some," Ron exhaled with relief that he would get a temporary break from the terrible twos.

"I'll need one as well," Lavender added as she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, bracing herself for the afternoon to come, praying Josephine would be cooperative for once.

"In the library," Severus directed them with a wave of his hand.

Draco and Ginny decided to Floo directly from home instead of making the walk up the hill, as they were already running late. There was a roll of the eyes indicating that temper tantrums were par for the course today to get children out of the house, but the triplets' moods brightened immediately now that they were over at Uncle Severus and Aunt Hermione's home and could play in the special garden they had built. They shrieked with ear-shattering delight when they saw all the other kids there playing already; they joined them immediately, running up the stairs and expertly opening the gate to get inside and join the fun.

Severus went into the library to enjoy a brief bit of peace and quiet; he had placed an age line and a Silencing Charm on the room so that parents could find a place of momentary refuge from the noise. Upon entering the library, he saw it was rather packed, all by parents seeking a moment free from the joyous screams and sounds of their toddler children. The exception was Albert, who was happily playing bartender, handing out glass after glass of cherished and nerve-soothing Madeira.

"Thank you for building that play area and having elves to help today," Draco said with deep gratitude.
There was a great murmur of agreement from the rest of the parents, all thankful that Hermione and Severus had the foresight to plan for things accordingly so their wedding guests could take a break.

"To the bride and groom! With much appreciation of your planning ahead of time from everyone here with children," Bill toasted.

"Hear! Hear!" the group chorused and drank in honor of the bridal couple. Aunt Christine and Zhubanysh raised their glasses of iced ginger and lemon tea while everyone else was imbibing with something stronger and alcoholic.

Now that everyone had arrived and caught their breath, Severus asked Akela and Kaimi to start directing everyone – well, the adults and older children – to their seats. The younger children were left to play in the special garden just for them.

Severus buttoned the bespoke cream and pale gold Sherwani jacket that had a subtle paisley pattern woven into the silk and linen fabric. He had cream-colored European-style tailored trousers to go with the jacket instead of the more traditional churdar trousers. All things considered, his outfit was very similar to his traditional long black frock coat he was renowned for by those who knew him during his Hogwarts years, except with a more distinct Indian flare. The outfit was Hermione's idea; she'd confessed her first daydream of marrying Severus was in India, upon seeing an Indian groom astride a yali while looking regal and handsome. She had easily envisioned Severus in a similar outfit.

Mounga laid a hand on his friend's shoulder. "You ready, dude?"

"For a while," Severus said a bit over dramatically, making light of the fact he had been very patient waiting for Hermione to finish her apprenticeship. Then he'd been patient waiting for all the guests to make arrangements for the trip all the way out from England, especially Hermione's side of the family who traveled via Muggle air travel.

Hermione had only just finished her apprenticeship three months prior, but they both had to make arrangements regarding their schedules to find a time where they could both take a few weeks off for a proper honeymoon. They timed the wedding to be during the week of Labor Day, since many students took that week off from school. This reduced Severus' need to be around for tutoring and would ensure they would be back in time for Oktoberfest, since Hermione had to perform with the beginner adult women's belly dancing group at the Sausage, Suds, Shimmy & Sounds Festival.

During Hermione's remaining apprenticeship time, she had trained Draco on all aspects of running
the company. By the time she did finish and became a fully accredited Potions mistress, fourteen months after arriving in Malu Palekaiko as a permanent resident, he was fully up to speed on all aspects of the company, including supervision of manufacturing. Hermione added the joke that she swore she was going to marry Severus before her twenty-seventh birthday, by hook or by crook. Given that her birthday was only sixteen days away, they were just making it under the wire.

Draco and Mounga waited with Severus in the foyer near the bottom stairs. Severus felt his heart beat loudly in his chest when he heard the clatter of heels on the wooden staircases as the matron of honor and bride descended.

Hermione thanked her hairdresser for doing a fantastic job on her hair and make-up. Severus had always said he loved it when Hermione piled the hair up atop her head to let it cascade down the back of her head like a goddess on a Grecian urn. She tipped her stylist extra, having prepaid her, for taming her wild hair while not over-styling it. Her stylist added the spray of flowers – miniature red dendrobium orchids with yellow throats – to the left side of the bride's coiffure at the last moment, to match the larger ones in her bouquet.

Ginny helped Hermione fasten the necklace Severus insisted on buying Hermione when they went to Varanasi to go shopping for wedding clothes. It was twenty-two karat gold featuring red rubies and golden-colored sapphires, to match her red-and-gold wedding sari, chosen based on Indian wedding tradition, not her House colors. While it was a bit heavier in design than the sapphire necklace Severus had given her for Christmas, it perfectly fit the design and ornateness of her richly embroidered sari, though not as heavy or ostentatious as the one she wore during The Lovely Lavender Company's launch in India nearly two years ago.

She was glad she paid extra to have the sari charmed to wrap itself around her, ensuring perfect pleats and flawless placement of creases.

"Severus is going to be utterly stunned," Ginny sighed dreamily as she helped, looking over Hermione one last time to make sure there was not any lint that might have been caught in some of the beads that lightly fringed the edge of her pallu. "Nervous?"

"Absolutely not. Not a hint of cold feet," Hermione assured her friend that for this marriage she was certainly ready and looking forward to it. She slipped on her sandals and was now finally ready.

"Good, that's how I felt too when Draco and I were finally getting married," Ginny said with empathy, both witches silently remembering their nerves and reluctance regarding their first weddings.
Ginny handed Hermione her bouquet of red anthuriums and yellow-throated red dendrobiums before grabbing her own smaller bouquet of pale pink orchids and petite red anthuriums.

Walking down the stairs, Hermione could feel her heart racing. She was excited to be getting married, and the best part was that she had not put herself into a state of exhaustion. Now she and Severus could both enjoy this day.

As Hermione stepped into view, Severus felt his breath catch in his chest. He stared at her in awe as a euphoric smile spread across his face. And when Hermione momentarily cast her eyes down demurely to Severus' obvious reaction, she glanced up at him a bit coyly through her lashes, and he could have sworn she was blushing just the slightest bit. She was a vision in red and gold, and the complex henna design on her hands, wrists, and feet added a delicateness to her loveliness. A few days prior, she had spent several hours to have her henna tattoos done traditionally, incorporating each of their names subtly into the design in Sanskrit, even though she could have just used one of the easy roll-on kits she’d developed a few years ago.

Finding his voice, he bowed before her deeply. With adoration, he professed, "Madam, just when I think you can look no lovelier, I am gladly proven wrong once more. You are radiance personified."

Hermione could actually feel her cheeks bloom with heat; she hoped that in addition to the rouge she was wearing, it would not appear as if too much make-up was applied. And she certainly prayed Lavender's latest version of tear-proof mascara would hold true, for she could feel the tears swelling behind her eyes, but rapidly blinked them away.

She wanted to say how handsome and regal Severus looked in his outfit, and that he even looked better than in her daydream nearly two years ago of him, but figured that was something she could share with him later. Now it was time to get married. Besides, she was too choked up to say much of anything with any eloquence, as the moment demanded.

Leis were exchanged in the foyer, with Severus presenting a carnation and orchid lei to Mounga, their officiant. Severus presented Draco with a white ginger and green orchid lei to go with the cream and pale green Hawaiian shirt he wore and cream linen trousers. Hermione gifted Ginny with a pink orchid and white plumeria lei to go with her coral pink and white formal muumuu.

Hermione held her arms up above her heart, presenting Severus with a traditional lei of maile, symbolizing strength and growing together, accented with small red roses in full bloom. Her hands
shook slightly as he took the lei presented to him, both recognizing the symbolism behind this gesture, since it was also a custom to exchange garlands in a Hindu wedding during the Jaimala portion of the ceremony as well. According to Hindu custom, her garland signified that she accepts the groom's proposal and accepts him as a husband. Severus gifted Hermione with lei made of five strands of pikake flowers, the number of strands symbolic as a testament of love according to Hawaiian lore. Ginny and Severus helped Hermione place the twisted multiple-strand lei over her head so as not to disturb her artfully-arranged cascade of curls.

Normally the exchange of leis would have happened before the guests who were seated out on the back deck, but Hermione and Severus wanted to do this very intimate and symbolically rich act in private.

Mounga led the way through the living room and kitchen, out the back door and up the steps to where the guests were waiting under the broad shade of the pergola. The strains of some light classical piece began to play as the couple began climbing the steps.

Jerry had offered to play "disc jockey" and cued Severus' music box to play something while they came up the pathway. Hermione didn't want anything formal or even slightly resembling a processional, so she asked that he keep it to something classical and light without an air of pomp and circumstance. She wanted to keep this informal, as did Severus.

Hermione did not want to do much of anything that reminded her of her first wedding, much the same way Ginny had felt, and so they merely walked to a spot cleared in front of the guests, who were seated theater-style – instead of marching up an aisle between guests seated on either side.

There were about thirty-two guests seated, including Devlin, plus Michael and Philippe, Bill and Fleur's two oldest, who wanted to watch the wedding. They preferred it to playing with the much smaller children who gaily squealed and frolicked about in their special garden.

Everyone stood as the bride approached. There was a murmur of appreciation of how lovely the bride looked and how she glowed. Her choice of a red sari would not have been acceptable back in England within the wizarding community unless she truly was of Indian descent and having an authentic Indian wedding, but given the rather international mix in Malu Palekaiko, this was met without a bat of the eye.

Hermione's father offered to give Hermione away again, but she politely declined. She didn't want to be given away, as she explained, but walk into this marriage already by the side of the man she had shared so much with and who already had claimed her heart. Severus kept glancing down at his beautiful bride who held on to his left arm. Hermione was more focused on trying to not step on the hem of her sari as they ascended the stairs towards the back deck, but she could feel his mesmerized eyes upon her.
Now that everyone had taken their places, the guests sat down while Jerry ended the music.

Lifting the conch shell to his lips, Mounga blew it three times, each long note resounding through the afternoon air. Even the children in the garden momentarily quieted to listen to the rich heralding sound.

Mounga did not have to cast a Sonorus Charm, as his voice projected quite easily with little effort for the small gathering. "When Severus first came to Malu Palekaiko, as I listened to his story as he sought sanctuary, I was moved by the words of love he spoke about Hermione and how he had – with great reluctance and heartbreak – left her behind, and how she willingly let him go and stayed behind to clear his name so he could be truly free, a very moving act of love itself. When Hermione came here herself seeking sanctuary, she told me her side of the story and of the things that happened between them. This showed me not only a deep and abiding love, but an extraordinary connection between two hearts that despite being separated by a great distance seemed to beat as one."

Hermione was initially reluctant about admitting she had sought sanctuary, but in time she saw there was no shame to it and people did not pry into her reasons for seeking it when she finally confessed having done so. However, Hermione and Severus had not shared the story about the inadvertent binding to each other through the use of pomegranate juice, though some knew of them meeting on an alternate plane. The only other person who knew was Mounga, and he was not going to share the particulars of that tale. So his words spoken meant something far more than the guests, or even Draco and Ginny, could assume.

"Marriage is a solemn contract, a joining of two to become as one, while remaining separate enough that each may thrive in the shelter and care of the other. Severus and Hermione, I have no doubt, will continue to thrive and grow together and stronger as the years pass within the shelter of each other's hearts and souls."
Turning to their witness, he prompted them. "The rings?"
The couple stuck with the traditional vows regarding the rings, as the symbolism of the words spoken and their meaning did hold true for them and their feelings.

Mounga then reached toward a small table next to him to pick up a glass that contained a dark red liquid. He held it up to show all the guests, who assumed it was wine.

"Drink, and with this act reaffirm the bindings of your hearts and souls to one another as you have stated your desire to do so," he announced to the couple, before offering the glass of pomegranate juice to the bride first.

Throughout the ceremony, Hermione had heard Mounga's words, but she was so awash in the heady sensation of elation, she could hardly remember what he said. Instead, she could do nothing but bask in the happiness that seemed to pulse from within Severus. But when Mounga lifted the glass of pomegranate juice, she became acutely aware of the words spoken and drank in their august intent knowing that to drink was to once more spiritually reconnect with Severus, their love as the catalyst.

Hermione took the glass in her hand and gazed up into Severus' eyes as she sipped from the glass, holding it with two hands like a ceremonial chalice of antiquity and she was invoking some great and ancient magic with this act.

She then offered it to her groom, the wizard she was willingly binding herself to once more. The marriage ceremony was merely to make official what was already cast in their hearts long ago.

Severus took the glass and drank the last few sips before handing it back to Mounga, his eyes never leaving Hermione's. When they had planned and discussed the ceremony, he was surprised that Hermione wanted to bind herself to him once more with pomegranate juice, but he welcomed the act as he had no regrets having done so before. This simple act of drinking meant more to him and her than any rings, exchange of leis, or spoken words. It was when he finished drinking the last swallows of the dark red nectar that in his mind that the ceremony was complete and he and Hermione were now truly joined in marriage, but there was one last thing to do for the benefit of the guests.

Upon watching the sharing of drink, Mounga recalled the words the ghostly memory of Albus once said to Severus. Mounga proclaimed with great reverence, "Love is the grandest of all the emotions man can experience. It brings us happiness, and makes our souls feel full of the matter that makes the universe spin and move. Love is the most powerful thing in the universe. There is no regret in the experience of love, only when we deny ourselves the ability to love." He paused to stress the importance of the words to be drunk in by all. "Let your hearts beat as one and your souls be joined forever more, bound by the love and affection you share with one another. Let it not wither, but flourish and flower as lush as a valley fed by the boundless springs of love."
Hermione finally broke eye contact with Severus so she could reach for her bouquet to fetch her handkerchief she had hidden under her bouquet, and dabbed at her eyes, feeling the tears swelling behind them. She was moved by the words that Mounga used to express their love; during her interview for sanctuary, she had described to him the springs she drank from cascading Severus' mountain of love.

Mounga's choice of words were not lost on Severus either. He would normally scoff at such sentimental drivel, but these words held great meaning to him and his bride.

There was only one part of the ceremony Hermione and Severus rehearsed beforehand. And since they did not feel the need to have the same words spoken twice since they shared the same sentiments, they decided to share, alternating in the speaking of their final vows.

Severus and Hermione stared with adoration at each other, both so fixed on each other, they hardly noticed anyone else around them. Severus noticed how the dark kohl around her eyes made the lighter flecks of amber more pronounced in her irises.

As they spoke their vows, Mounga translated for those who did not speak Hawaiian.

Severus began. "Na'u `oe."

"You're mine."

"O ku'u aloha no 'oe," Hermione said, finding her throat closing up with emotion as the ceremony was drawing to a close.

"You are indeed my love."

"Kaʻu Ia e lei aʻe nei la."

"I pledge my love to you alone."

"Mau loa, kuʻu lei."
"Forever, my beloved."

They smiled at each other, knowing it was finally done.

"You may now kiss each other," Mouna said, knowing how sexist Hermione thought the phrase "You may kiss the bride" was.

Without hesitation, Severus swept Hermione up in his arms and Hermione threw her arms around his neck, both eager to seal their vows with this simple act.

As their lips met, they could feel the magic of their renewed binding thrum through them, a visceral re-connection that told that their love had indeed bound themselves freely to each other, this time understanding and entering into this magical contract willfully.

Off in the forest just beyond the edge of the backyard, a beautiful young woman with a long fall of hair down to her knees stood there watching the ceremony from afar. She had heard the conch shell blown three times, calling for her divine presence yet again. As she watched Hermione and Severus kiss, she felt the thrum of their magic pulsing like a starburst, a shockwave radiating from them as their lips met. Magic conjured from love was the most powerful magic of all, more powerful than hers. Seeing that her presence was no longer required now that the ceremony was complete, and happy for the bridal couple, Pele turned and walked back into the forest.

Had there not been thirty-some people intently watching them, with some of the witches sniffing loudly and making syrupy sentimental noises – and the sudden sounds of disgust emanating from the peanut gallery romping in the garden, with one urchin yelling, "Eww, they're kissing!" – the couple would have continued kissing for far longer. Hermione and Severus both were of the same mind that a couple should not kiss so passionately that it was unseemly for a decorous ceremony; suddenly they were now themselves so swept up in their kiss, they had to hold back despite feeling the call of magic for them to continue on and without reservation.

As they reluctantly ended their kiss, Hermione felt equally overwhelmed and extremely exhilarated; she wasn't sure if she wanted to cry or burst out into peals of laughter from joy and relief, the ceremony was over and they were finally married. She could feel her head reel as if she were drunk. She held on to Severus' arm for fear she just might topple over, even though he'd forced her to have a late-morning snack to hold her over until food was served.
It was then she finally realized that Halulu's husband, Greg, had been taking photos during the ceremony. She saw him as he got up in front and took a few snaps of Severus and Hermione looking quite happy after their kiss.

"It is with great pleasure I now introduce Mr. and Mrs. Snape."

There was applause from all the guests, some more enthusiastic than others. Ron whistled and clapped loudly to Hermione and Severus' surprise, but then again, he did say he was happy Hermione found someone who made her happy, and Severus did that indeed.

Jerry cued to recessional music, which to Hermione's slight annoyance was Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" as it started to pick up around the seven and a half minute mark as the lead baritone singer launched into the recognizable melody. And while she thought it was a bit over the top, she conceded it was the perfect song as it was a joyous occasion for her and Severus.

The bridal couple led the way down from the pergola down to the back patio and lowest level deck where hors d'oeuvres and refreshments were being served, Meanwhile, Mario and his catering crew worked to reset the area under the pergola for the late bridal luncheon that would begin shortly.

To Hermione and Severus' relief, Jerry changed the music. Once the bridal couple and most of the guests were on the patio, he switched the music to something soothing, a compilation of jazz tunes both classic and contemporary that were unobtrusive to conversation as it played quietly in the background.

Lavender came up to the couple to wish them well, and began to talk with Hermione about her wedding sari. Albert and Tim asked Severus about the many colorful plants used to landscape the backyard and how did he get the gardenias to bloom so prolifically. Ron was busy shoving one of every kind of hors d'oeuvre into his mouth, not wanting to miss one.

"What is this?" Ron asked Hermione with a rapturous look about his face as he chewed with gusto.

"Duck lumpia with hoisin sauce, a little dish we came across in the Philippines while Severus joined me on a quick business trip there to meet with a distributor. She took us to this great restaurant in... where was it? Manila or Cebu City?" Hermione asked, turning to her husband.

"Lipa City," Severus jogged her memory as he handed her a glass of champagne. Then he
discreetly slipped his arm around his bride's waist, his fingers lightly skating across her back where her skin was exposed just below her choli, before his hand finally rested upon her hip. He was rewarded with a restrained shiver Hermione tried to tamp down that was noticed only by him.

"Well, the food is fantastic," Ron professed earnestly around a mouthful of goat cheese wonton, a few drops of the cranberry-ginger dipping sauce clinging to the corner of his mouth and the edge of his mustache. He was oblivious to the way Hermione's eyes briefly fluttered shut.

Knowing if she did not escape from Severus' attention, he would continue to tease her mercilessly in hopes of having her aggressively pounce upon him later, she slid from his grasp. She cast a faux coquettish look over her shoulder at him that two could play at that game.

Hermione also figured it was probably a good opportunity to grab a bite finally, feeling relaxed enough to grab a mini-samosa from a tray that floated by. She popped it into her mouth and savored it, now that everything was in Mario's capable hands and the ceremony was over.

Zhubanysh came over at this time to pass on a message of congratulations from James Hoover, since Hermione had stopped seeing the Muggle therapist some months prior, feeling as though she had worked through her issues with him long-distance. Mrs. Potter worked with James part-time now, a few days a week, helping him with his wizarding clients where there was fear, trauma, or anxiety involved that hampered his ability to help them. She would teach the client's partner who had come along how to help soothe the witch or wizard's mind to calm them enough so that James could help them. If the client was alone, she sang to them instead, using her compassion to help soothe them. James found that love and compassion, as given through song and intent, was a far better alternative to a pharmacological solution for some of his magical clients who needed to calm down before addressing problems. Hermione was glad that Zhubanysh's special talent was being shared and taught to those who needed it most.

There was another round of excited screams from the children's garden as the elves and someone from Mario's catering staff brought sparkling pumpkin juice for the children, to keep them cool and hydrated in the warm Hawaiian sun, what with all the rigorous playing they were engaged in.

Hermione's parents greeted the bride and groom, welcoming Severus into the family formally, though they had already done that when they met up during part of Christmas break in Greece. Hermione and Severus had periodically met up with her parents, since she did promise to stay in better contact with them now that she no longer had Weasley family obligations to keep her away. Living on the other side of the world was less an impediment of her visiting with her parents than the endless Weasley family engagements she was formerly obliged to attend that was now Lavender's duty. And given Lavender's blackmail capabilities over Molly, Lavender kept her own attendance to a manageable schedule. Even Ron agreed, amazed at his wife's ability to talk them out of attending every Weasley function, that it was nice not to have so many family gatherings all the time.
For in-laws, Severus was quite pleased Hermione's parents were such agreeable and sensible people. So it did not bother him that a few times a year they met up with her parents abroad, such as Poland, Canada or the Caribbean. They might go see one or two sites together and enjoy dinner together one night, but otherwise left the young couple to their own devices. Much to Severus' relief, the Drs. Grangers did not want to spend the entire time together with their daughter, understanding the need for the young couple be left alone. Even for the week before the wedding, they stayed at Justina's hotel knowing that for the fact they did not have wands would mean they would require more help around the Snape house, where as Justina's hotel was adapted for Muggles already.

"I don't see Blanche here. I thought you said you invited her," Albert queried Severus on the whereabouts of the owner of the very lucrative Miniature Man-Eating Miniature Masdevallia orchid farm.

"She was, along with the children, but unfortunately there was a death in the family that required her to Portkey to Ohio a few days ago. I know you were going to discuss techniques on how to train them for pots so they thrive for distribution, since orchids are your specialty. I do not know how long she'll be gone, since she said there would most likely be family drama involving her brother who feels aggrieved that she isn't supporting him like she is her husband, who last she heard was living on a fishing boat in San Diego."

Albert shook his head thankful his children and various grandchildren all got along harmoniously.

Trevor Spawn was also invited, but could not make it either since his master, Royston Bentwick, refused to let him go that weekend to Hawaii. The Potions master was still rather miffed at Hermione and Severus over the doozy of a prank she laid upon him at the booze-up they had at Niles' house after she was certified by the committee three months prior. Given the effects of the prank, it was no wonder Royston was royally pissed at the Snapes and refused Trevor the chance to attend.

Severus' mind also was thinking about certain parties acting harmoniously with each other as well. He glanced over at the still slightly astounding sight of Draco and Potter talking with each other rather amicably, which still boggled him; he also saw their wives, Ginny and Zhubanysh, getting on like old friends without a smidgen of animosity between the two witches. Zhubanysh even thanked Ginny for leaving Harry when she did, for if events had played out otherwise, Zhubanysh and her husband would have never met. And if Zhubanysh was never in Potter's life, then Severus may not have been able to bring Hermione back, thanks to the witch's special magical healing technique she taught him.

To avoid awkwardness, there were a few people Hermione did not invite, most notably the
Longbottoms and the Krums. Hermione understood Severus' rather unforgiving grudge and jealous streak where Neville was concerned. Though Luna and Neville had invited Hermione to their own wedding, even Hermione felt rather uncomfortable being there and was only at their reception briefly before making a hasty retreat. Regarding Viktor and Anne, Hermione eventually told Severus about her dinner with them and the accidental revelation. There was a somewhat awkward conversation that followed, given they had not discussed Severus' former profession for some time, but it was mutually agreed that though Hermione was friends with the Krums, they would not be invited for everyone's sake and sanity.

Mario announced that lunch was ready, much to the delight of the children who had only had a light snack before the wedding and who were now famished after playing so rigorously. Ron grabbed a last miniature cha siu bao and cucumber cup filled with ceviche before he followed the rest of the guests back up to the deck under the pergola, that had now been set up with a table arrangement in the shape of a large U.

The only arranged seating was a spot in the middle of the table configuration where the bride and groom could view all their guests, who sat on either side of the table. Having no seating arrangements was one less thing for Hermione to deal with, on top of running a business and training Akela, her Potions apprentice.

Lavender and Mouna wound up sitting next to each other as Lavender was also visiting Malu Palekaiko for business, seeking to finalize buying a large piece of property on the west side of the island, with plans to open a resort and spa there. The site had a hot springs on it, which cost a pretty Knut since the owner of that particular spring had Manny – Severus' old real estate agent – negotiate the deal on his behalf, and Manny was a very good negotiator. Lavender had been prompted to open a hot springs spa and resort after hearing Hermione and Severus bemoan that though the hot springs they had use of one day a week was very nice, they missed certain things from Madam Hope's Springs Eternal and Day Spa, like the natatorium, dry sauna, steam rooms, hot and cold plunges, and spa treatments.

And then there was the fact that since Malu Palekaiko was very Muggle-friendly, given the number of mixed couples on the island, there would be a need to make the proposed what the local building code regulators called "Muggle-compliant," which meant Lavender's architects back in London would have to personally come out and work with the government officials instead of the usual conference through mirror or albatross. Given how long it took to get final approval for her manufacturing facility a few years ago, she wanted to expedite the process.

Hermione watched nervously as Fred and George sat close to her parents and hoped the twins had the good sense to behave. With a stern glance, she gave them a warning with the flash of her eyes, darting to her parents indicating that what she did to Niles, Braxton, and Royston would pale in comparison if they pranked any of her Muggle relations. Fred gave her a reassuring smile that there would be no cause to worry, but he cast his eyes toward Ron with a mischievous smile towards her ex-husband. Hermione gave him a nod of approval that Ron was fair game.
Severus, who caught the nonverbal exchange between the two, asked, "Should we have antidotes ready?"

"Depends on how much pity you feel for Ron," she retorted, amused when Severus did not suppress a wicked grin.

"Yeah! Mac and cheese!" some of the children cheered, as bowls of the cheesy dish appeared in front of them. The children were finally seated next to and across from their parents as the salad course was served to the adults. And it was a fair number of children being served, the ratio of guests being three adults for every two children.

"It's pasta with a blended cheese sauce," Severus grumbled under his breath, loathing that particular American name for the dish. He speared his melon, prosciutto, and feta salad with some malice as Hermione patted his knee to soothe him. Few things nettled Severus unlike food being called by inappropriate names, which was going to make the soup course rather challenging, given Mario made gazpacho according to Severus' recipe. Severus still was rather aggrieved over the fact that his soup was once referred to as "salsa." And then there was the incident when Rainbow referred to his braised veal and pork pâté as "meatloaf." This wedding was the first time the Finaus had been back to dine at the Snapes' residence since that culinary misunderstanding.

Ginny and Draco seated themselves and their brood almost directly across from the bride and groom. Their children were sandwiched between them in order to better monitor them and prevent food from being flung, a recent bad habit the Malfoy children had discovered when one triplet's magic kicked in one day and a plate of grilled courgettes suddenly went sailing across the room. Phoenix was the one who hated courgettes, so it was most likely her magic that caused the plate to suddenly levitate and fly across the room with the plate shattering into large pieces, much to the triplets' delight and Ginny and Draco's distress. Now plates and bowls were spelled with sticking charms. Fortunately, Mario was an expert at catering events with children present; he made sure everyone's plate would stay firmly on the table with the appropriate spells to prevent such inadvertent disasters.

The wine flowed freely as Hermione and Severus had been stocking their cellar recently with trips to the West Coast of the mainland, as Lavender wanted feedback and reports on Muggle and wizarding spa resorts in order to design towards regional tastes. Many of those trips involved going to spa resorts on the other Hawaiian islands and Northern California's wine country where there were hotels and spas built around hot springs in the area. Severus had, upon a thorough tour of several Muggle and wizarding wineries of the area, finally conceded that the Americans could indeed make some wines on par with the Europeans. The lightly sweet Cabernet Sauvignon Blanc from the Sonoma Valley balanced out the acid and vinegar of the tomato-based Spanish soup. For the children, the sparkling pumpkin juice that flowed freely was worth it to put up with the fact their parents had put them into fancy clothes for the day.
Albert, who sat on Hermione's right, asked how Akela's apprenticeship was coming along as the soup course was finally cleared away.

"She's an apt student, but a bit overly sure of herself at times, an attitude that would have been brought more into line if Severus had the chance to tutor her and teach her a bit of humility," Hermione confessed, knowing that her husband was pretending not to listen in on their conversation.

Severus stopped the facade and confirmed he was eavesdropping when he mentioned casually, "If I recall, I did teach you, yet your own self-assured cockiness in the classroom did not seem to falter despite my best attempts to temper it."

"You used to confuse cockiness with rigorous studying, darling," she said with saccharine sweetness.

"And you used to confuse studying with wisdom and experience," he gently reminded her.

This comment made Hermione nod her head in agreement that while in school she was extremely naive about certain things. She now looked back on them with some embarrassment, but chalked it up to her own youthful guilelessness.

"Come, children, don't bicker; it's your wedding day," Albert gently chided them.

To the bridal couple's consternation, George piped up, "Bickering is probably their form of foreplay!"

George's comment earned a few glares from nearby parents, who were hoping the sexually-laced innuendo would fly over their children's heads.

"Four-play? Is that a game that requires four people to play?" Devlin asked his father innocently. This made Ron choke on his wine, and Lavender glared at her brother-in-law for his comment that prompted her son's remark.

Devlin's plain-spoken question sent Tim, Jerry, Mouna, and the twins into fits of laughter that
earned them harsh glares from many of the women sitting next to them.

"Sometimes, if it's that type of marriage," Hermione heard Draco mutter under his breath in a slightly derogatory manner, too quietly for Devlin to have overheard. Draco's comment indicated that while others may have such an arrangement, he found the idea of sharing his wife with anyone distasteful.

Hermione noticed that Harry heard Draco's comment and blushed, a sign he was still somewhat uncomfortable with the topic of sex and the memory of both wizards sleeping with Ginny during the same time period.

Fortunately, lunch was served for the adults, which distracted everyone from the topic at hand. People had the choice of either chilled poached salmon with cucumber dill sauce, lightly dressed greens, and cold buckwheat soba noodles – or the leg of lamb with grilled eggplant, curried garbanzo beans, and couscous, with mango chutney, of course. Hermione felt that with so many people coming from England, having a cold option in the warm climate might help them combat the tropical climate that could become a bit overwhelming in the afternoons until one acclimated, even with the shade of the pergola overhead and a few Cooling Charms.

Since the children ate their meals during the adults' salad and soup course, most parents excused their children from the table to play for a bit more before it was time for a nap.

With the children mostly gone from the table, all the adults began to relax and enjoy their entrees, now that the sibling bickering had been banished to the children's area of the backyard. Josephine demanded to know when she was going to get her chocolate cake, but was told firmly by her mother it would be later after the adults were done with lunch and the meal settled a bit. The child knew from her mother's clipped tone that further questions as to when she would have cake would result in no cake at all, and she ran off to amuse herself with her cousins and other children playing.

Devlin and Michael decided that "mac and cheese" was below their palate standards and held out for the adult fare, enjoying the salad, but passing on the chilled vegetable soup. Conversation flowed more freely with the children away from the table, helped with an excellent Merlot that complimented the lamb and a fantastic Riesling that had Lavender asking about the vineyard and vintage, wanting to order a few cases for her own cellar at home.

As people were finishing their lunch, there was a tapping of a glass coming from the direction of where Mounga was sitting, and the growing chant of "kiss, kiss, kiss."

Hermione and Severus sighed, knowing they could not escape all wedding traditions, but agreed to
amuse the crowd, not minding to kiss for everyone's amusement this once.

Ginny, who took her camera back from Greg after the ceremony, played photographer during the reception. She asked for the couple to wait a second while she whipped out her camera. Severus merely rolled his eyes, noting the spontaneity of the moment was somewhat hampered with a request to wait.

Now that she had given the signal that she was ready, Hermione shrugged noncommittally, feeling as if it was yet another performance for the benefit of others.

Severus leaned forward, but stopped short, his lips a mere inch from hers. Hermione was ready for him to perfunctorily plant one on her, but was perplexed when he withheld his lips from hers. As she began to crane her neck forward, Severus retreated while keeping his lips close to hers, but not touching. Hermione smiled, wondering what Severus’ game was, a game that would be more suited to the bedroom given his playful sultry smile he was giving her. She began sitting back, but then Severus' lips chased hers, still unwilling to let their mouths meet, but still keeping his face close to hers.

"Sev–" Hermione began to protest at his game, but was cut short when he leaned forward swiftly and captured her mouth with a kiss, surprising her.

Hermione melted against him as he wrapped an arm around her and trailed a finger along her jaw tenderly. They felt the pull to let their kiss deepen and become more impassioned unaware of Ginny taking their photograph, but withdrew when they heard the crude wolf whistles from Jerry and the twins.

"Didn't take you for a tease, Snape," Fred called out, which earned a quick glare from Severus.

Kaimi, who had been sitting at one end of the table with her family, suddenly felt very protective of her Uncle Severus and Aunt Hermione who were obviously uncomfortable with these sexual innuendos she had not missed and made her blush furiously. Knowing it would be bad form for the bride and groom to hex guests, Kaimi felt duty-bound to do something to protect their honor, since they were far above what Uncle Severus called crude humor. While Fred and George were busy laughing, Kaimi discreetly whipped out her wand and silently performed a Jelly Legs Jinx equivalent on the rear legs of their chairs, causing the wine they were holding in their hands to be spilled into their laps while they simultaneously fell flat on their backs. For a nearly eleven-year-old, Kaimi was very deft with a wand, having honed her skills against her older siblings now that she had a wand to defend herself since turning ten.
Everyone around the table began laughing, even earning a smirk from the groom and a smile hidden behind the hand of the bride.

Mounga noticed Kaimi wasn't laughing, but looking rather smug. When he arched a brow to her in question, she merely replied too innocently, "Yes, Papa?" He gave his daughter a warring look of pride and suspicion.

Severus looked about to see who'd cast the spells, figuring he knew who it was. Upon spying Kaimi, she merely gave the groom a gentle nod, indicating she had fulfilled her duties, as Severus had warned her ahead of time that the twins might need a discreet hex to pull them back into line if their wives did not. Severus gave her a nod back indicating that was enough, and he would handle any more bad behavior personally. Given her age, she was maturing in a way that was surprising for her youth. Going to the new wizarding school had exposed her to a greater social dynamic than she was exposed to when she was exclusively home-schooled, and she was now forced to socialize with kids she normally would not have dealt with before.

The year before a few boys at school called Kaimi some rather nasty names and put her into tears. Kaimi's parents spoke to the young wizards' parents, which only seemed to make matters worse. Severus seemed to be the only one who could truly sympathize with her plight, as she had gone to him for advice since the taunting had increased. He then taught her some rather inventive hexes and jinxes, and even instructed her how to stow her wand away quickly enough up a sleeve so that no one noticed that she was the one who cast it. It wasn't exactly proper for one of the Governors of the school board to be teaching a student how to cast spells that were against the school's code of conduct, but as he made exceptions for his Slytherins when he was Head of House, he was just as fiercely protective of Kaimi. He was sure that if she went to Hogwarts instead of the local academy, Kaimi surely would have been sorted into either Ravenclaw or Slytherin, as she was a rather clever and resourceful witch.

"All right, all right," Fred and George said, knowing they were getting a bit carried away. "Ten points to whoever cast that. We get the point," George admitted. They stood up and spelled away the wine stains and fixed their chairs, testing them before sitting back down in them once more.

Things settled down. Some of the guests started moving about to various chairs at other ends to talk with people they didn't have a chance to converse with before.

Hermione sat back and swirled her glass of Merlot with a practiced hand, looking quite serene. This was, in her mind, what a wedding should be like, a large dinner – or luncheon – party among friends without the restrictive formality. There was no fretting about perfect décor or rituals that made her feel like she was observing some custom that made her feel like a piece of property passed off. Her feeling was that some acts performed during a traditional wizard wedding were antiquated procedures that served no purpose other than to add irrelevant flamboyant rituals for show and little else. To reduce her stress, Hermione picked out her own bridal bouquet, but let
Ginny picked her own flowers. She even let the florist have free license to design the floral display on the table with the one restriction that it wasn't to be so large that it would take up large amounts of table space, and that it would not prevent people from easily seeing their dining companions over them.

The biggest decision Hermione had to make in preparation of the wedding was which of the dozens of beautiful red and gold bridal saris to pick from, and which design for the ruby and golden sapphire earrings to pick to go with the necklace Severus had spotted in a jeweler's window in Varanasi and insisted he buy for her immediately. She even let Severus plan the menu with Mario, with a suggestion of a cool lunch option, which most of the visiting British contingent ate; she'd predicted they would be unable to face a hot lunch on a warm day, even with the gentle breeze coming up from the ocean.

"You look relaxed. So I'm guessing you're actually enjoying your own wedding for once," Severus asked his bride.

"Having Molly not present playing Attila the Wedding Coordinator helps greatly. And you taking over the catering was also a relief. Jerry arranging the music as DJ and keeping the music light and pleasant – despite his jibe he was going to add AC/DC's 'Highway to Hell' or 'Victim of Love' by the Eagles to your music box for the bridal processional – was one less thing to coordinate. And Rainbow, Akela, and Kaimi's offer to help with anything else I neither had the time nor inclination to deal with was also a joy." Hermione tipped her glass up and took a sip, savoring the balance of flavors and the tannins that washed over her tongue. She was glad Severus had the foresight to buy six cases, since they probably had gone through almost a case at the reception alone, and that was just the Merlot. A whole case of Riesling had probably been polished off by now.

Severus leaned over and placed a chaste kiss against her neck that sent a shiver up her spine. If anyone had spied the couple in this brief intimate moment, no one made comment, continuing on with their conversations.

Parents left the table to take children – who were starting to cry, get cranky from exhaustion, or had literally fallen asleep on the grass – off to the room set up for naps. Once they had returned from setting wee ones down, Jerry got up from his seat across from Fred and his wife, Grace, to approach the bridal couple. "Think we can talk you two into one dance for tradition?"

While Hermione and Severus did not plan to have dancing, they were amenable to the suggestion. They decided to stick with a simple foxtrot since Hermione was not used to dancing in a sari, even though it was charmed not to come undone.

Jerry set the music box to play "At Last," that particular rendition by Etta James, who Jerry coached Draco to imitate when he serenaded them during Hermione's Christmas visit at Bongo's.
It was a small area just large enough to dance within the U-shape of the tables.

"Are you ready to be dipped?" Severus asked, hearkening back to their first dance lesson when Hermione pitched over and pulled him down, after telling him years ago how Ron dropped her at their wedding.

"As long as it's you doing the dipping, and thank you for not stepping on my feet," she added, remembering how Ron tromped on her sandal-exposed toes.

They moved perfectly in time to the music, having danced to it many times before, the song supplanting the song about San Francisco as Hermione's favorite. At the end, Severus spun her under his arm and then dipped her with grace and ease. As he brought her up, he planted a kiss sweetly upon her lips, much to her delight; this earned some soft murmurs of appreciation from the guests for the tender gesture.

A few of the other guests decided to get up and dance a bit, now that the bride and groom sat down. The Potters, the Malfoys, and George and his wife, Florence, got up for a quick spin. Since there was little room within the confines of the U-shaped table arrangement, Akela and Tristan danced on the deck just below the one where the tables were, and were eventually joined by her parents.

Katrina and Veronica, the cats, decided that since the children were gone, they could grace everyone with their presence. They sauntered into the backyard and flopped on their sides, sunning themselves now that the motley muster of moppets was finally gone.

Not long after, children began to wake from naps, fully re-energized and ready for the promise of chocolate cake to be fulfilled. The emergence of the loud and grabby urchins caused Katrina and Veronica to seek shelter in the front yard where they could continue to sun and nap undisturbed.

Hermione and Severus cut the cake together, cajoled into yet another ceremonial gesture, as Ginny snapped away with her camera. Ginny had taken up the hobby of photography so she could take photos of her students during dance recitals, and she enjoyed taking snaps of her children. There was one framed photo of hers that Severus and Hermione had put on the mantle. It featured a sleeping Draco on the couch, looking quite exhausted, with scruff on his face, but happy, with all three of the children, when they were still small infants. Draco held one of the girls in each arm and had Sebastian sleeping on his tummy on his father's chest. In the photos you could see Draco's chest rise and fall slowly along with little chubby hands opening and closing as they slept and little mouths periodically making the sucking motions. It was the Snapes' favorite photo of their godchildren.
The bridal couple delicately fed each other a single bite without any of the childishness the Malfoys engaged in at their own wedding. Severus gave Draco a smirk of triumph that he had not succumbed to such antics.

Sitting down as Mario began cutting the cake and serving it to the guests, Hermione leaned close to Severus' ear, whispering intentionally so that her warm breath grazed his ear, "We'll have to make sure to take some cake along with us for the honeymoon. Who knows how long it will take for you to lick all that frosting off my breasts or me to nibble away the last of the crumbs from your stomach, and lower." Before withdrawing, Hermione gave Severus' ear a delicate swipe of her tongue, which made a very low-register sigh escape from his slightly parted lips.

"Didn't I warn you about teasing the animals before?" he softly warned her with a playful growl, his hand slipped around her back to caress her spine below her choli once more.

"It's not teasing if it's a promise," she reminded him innocently.

As everyone was eating cake, Draco stood with a glass of champagne that was served with dessert. "I'd like to propose a toast. To Hermione and Severus. May your love be ever growing, your blessings boundless, your tears be only joyful ones, and your sorrows few. To the bride and groom!" It was a toast of similar hope for the future that Severus had given at Draco's wedding.

Everyone said, "Cheers!"

Many of the guests remarked what a wonderful cake it was, as the use of cherries in the cake along with the fudgy chocolate base was decadent. Of course the second tier was plain chocolate cake since some of the children preferred their cake without the addition of fruit to the cake batter. Severus and Hermione smiled secretly, remembering how one of their first bets involved that very same cake recipe Severus served long ago.

Arnold decided that this was a perfect time to serenade the bridal couple, and he sang a beautiful a capella version of Elvis' song "Can't Help Falling In Love." The lyrics rang quite true for the couple for they could not help but fall in love with each other, despite how much they fought against it at first.

As Arnold finished with a bow, with a sincere round of applause from the guests, Uncle Tim went up to Arnold and praised him for his wonderful Elvis impression. He then committed the inadvertent social blunder of asking if Arnold had ever tried to enter an Elvis impersonator contest,
for as Tim professed, he would surely be a winner.

Hermione sat there with her head in her hand groaning silently to herself, while Severus watched with amusement as Arnold turned five shades of red before quietly storming off. The bride wondered if she should have warned her Uncle Tim that the reason why Arnold had sought sanctuary years ago was that Arnold had bought a lock of Elvis' hair at a Muggle auction, then proceeded to brew Polyjuice Potion and enter Elvis impersonator competitions Polyjuiced into the "King of Rock 'n Roll." When the Japanese and American magical governments got wind of this, Arnold hightailed it to Malu Palekaiko and had been a resident there ever since. Since Arnold's granting of sanctuary, sighting of Elvis in the Muggle gossip rags dropped dramatically. However, since it was not Hermione's place to share Arnold's tale, she never made a point of warning her uncle not to say anything about it. Ranjit went off to assure Arnold that Hermione's Muggle relation meant no insult, and that he should take it as a compliment regarding his Elvis impersonating skills without the use of Polyjuice Potion.

Since most of the single witches at the wedding were aged six and under, with the exception of the Finau girls and Fastrada, who was a widow and not interested in any rituals for finding a new husband, the tossing of the bouquet was omitted from the itinerary that afternoon. Severus and Hermione both agreed without question the tossing of the garter was not going to happen. Period.

In addition, Akela had asked her mistress on advice about how to stop her mother from nagging her about when she and Tristan were going to get married; Akela recalled hearing similar stories about Hermione's ex-mother-in-law. A bouquet landing in Akela's lap would only add fuel to Rainbow's harping. Besides, Hermione thought it a shame that a bride always gave away such a beautiful and sentimentally meaningful bouquet of flowers. Hermione had heard from her Aunt Christine about how most Muggle brides kept their wedding bouquet and ordered a small tossing one instead to throw, which inspired Hermione to make sure to spell her flowers with a preserving charm, keeping them looking fresh and vibrant as their wedding day, before they left on their honeymoon.

Now that cake had been served and it was getting late in the afternoon, many people with children decided to call it a day.

Josephine had begun whinging about going to the beach to go swimming, taking her father's earlier suggestion as a promise instead. Ron looked to his oldest brother and asked pleadingly, "Bill? When do the terrible twos stop?"

"Around the time they take their N.E.W.T.s and start living on their own," Bill quipped, looking over at his eldest, Michael, playing with Devlin, looking like they were plotting something again. Though those two could be quite the devious pair at times, he was glad Michael had a cousin the same age and have someone he could pal around Hogwarts with when they both started in about three years. He was also glad that friendship between Houses was much more prevalent after the war instead of the constant rivalry that bordered on animosity, though Slytherin and Gryffindor
were still a contentious pair, which he'd heard from Sprout. Michael was most likely going to be a Gryffindor, but who knew which House Devlin would be sorted into.

Before guests started departing, Ginny wrangled all the children together so that there would be a picture of the bride with all of them. Ginny had seen it in a Muggle book on photography she had bought and thought it a charming idea. The children did not, however. There was a special bribe of more treats from some of the parents of the more unruly children, which quelled them into smiling sweetly for the few seconds required to take the photo. Of course, after Ginny took the photo, everyone with spawn in the picture wanted a copy for themselves. Ginny promised she would send them off as soon as she could develop and make prints, having had a dark room built in a small office cottage they had added to their property in the back. The cottage also held a sewing room for Ginny to make costumes and Draco's quilting supplies, as well as a small belly-dancing practice studio.

Guests began departing, wishing the couple well. There were hugs and kisses, with Severus shaking hands only with any wizard who was a Weasley or a Potter. The Malfoys stuck around along with Hermione's parents, Albert, the Finau family, Tristan, and Jerry.

After draining the last of the champagne from her flute, Hermione asked her old Master, "Don't let me forget to give you Royston's antidote before you leave tonight. Three months of punishment is surely enough, though you can take your time giving it to him if you think he's still not sorry yet."

"Oh, trust me," Albert assured her with a hearty reply, "he's most utterly, deeply, regretfully sorry."

"Good," Severus said, almost crooning with glee, looking very satisfied.

"You never did say exactly what your revenge was," prompted Mouna, hoping to finally get the details.

Hermione looked about and noticed that Kaimi was off playing with the Malfoy triplets in the kinders' garten. Iakona was sixteen and probably old enough to hear it, but she was glad to notice that Iakona was in the kitchen getting more to eat, as Mario and his crew were wrapping things up and cleaning the kitchen before leaving. The Finau's son was going through yet another growth spurt.

Quietly, so only the adults present could hear, she said, "Well, the twins came up with the idea, but it required a great deal of research on our part..." Hermione stopped and turned to her husband, "... would you say it was reverse-engineering, or would you say it was something completely new?"
"Oh, something completely new, I'd say," Severus said darkly, crossing his legs while remembering the final end result, glad he and Hermione had an antidote ready that worked.

Albert laughed, understanding that Severus had put himself into the line of testing and felt some pity for him.

"And what exactly did you slip Royston at the party after you passed and became a Potions Mistress?" Mounga prompted her once more.

"Since Royston seemed to have some sort of perverse pleasure in trying to make Severus lay out intimate details and kiss in front of them, I slipped him a potion that every time he gets an erection, his manhood shrinks. The harder it gets, the smaller it is," she said with malicious pride. "And it doesn't wear off; it's permanent until one takes the antidote."

All the men sitting groaned and crossed their legs while the women cackled with amusement or gasped in shock, especially Hermione's mother who did not think her daughter could be so devious.

"And you let her test this on you, Severus?" Jerry asked incredulously.

"I wanted to get him back as badly as Hermione," Severus replied. "And considering I worked alongside of her, between the two of us, we could reverse anything so it was not permanent for me."

"Trust me, the antidote is effective to reverse it completely," Hermione assured them, then blushed considering she said it with a bit too much gusto.

"Damn, the things we do for love," Mounga groaned, making a silent pledge to never get on the Snapes' bad side, considering that Rainbow was still mortified regarding her behavior after sipping Hermione's revenge drink.

"The twins plan on selling it as a sort of jilted-lover revenge potion and promised us forty percent of the profits, since we did all the hard work, with the antidote selling for twice the cost of the original potion," Hermione further explained.
"Gouging Galleons out of those who need it most. One would think the twins should have been sorted into Slytherin instead of noble Gryffindor," Draco noted acerbically.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I commissioned donkinana (http://dokinana.deviantart.com/) to do the wedding fan art for this chapter. You can view it on my Tumblr page here: http://atdlheabetz.tumblr.com/image/158121879960

Thank you to my fabulous betas, JuneW and Hope.

Title taken from the Spanish saying: Vivieron felices y comieron perdices (y a mí no me dieron).
Translation: They lived happily and ate partridge (and didn't give me any).
Meaning / English equivalent: And they lived happily ever after.

Quote: "Y'know, you got them bad eyes, like a gypsy." Moonstruck (1987)

A pallu is the decorative edge of a sari that is draped over the shoulder at the end of the fabric.

"Can't Help Falling In Love" written by Hugo Peretti, Luigi Creatore, and George David Weiss.

There is still the honeymoon and epilogue to come. Stay tuned.
"Mount Ruapehu"

Chapter Summary

It's the honeymoon! Lemon season has returned once more!

WARNING: NSFW fan art embedded in this chapter about three-quarters of the way down. NC-17/Mature for sexual situations. So don't get caught gawking at the hawt Hermione/Severus sexy times on your computer at work.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter One Hundred Seventeen
"Mount Ruapehu"

Disclaimer: Five score and seventeen chapters ago, this author brought forth on the Internet a new fanfic, conceived in fun and without profit, and dedicated to JK Rowling who is the creator and owner of Harry Potter and its universe.

A/N: Disclaimer a parody of the opening paragraph of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

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Since the Snapes had a six o'clock Portkey, they had to start getting ready. As much as Severus wanted to take his bride right there and then as he helped unwrap her from the yards and yards of vibrant silk that encased her, he held back. He wanted this night to be just a little extra special, despite Hermione's attempts to make their wedding nothing more complicated than a simple day when their life together was finally on paper.

While Severus was assured the Portkey would have them landing inside instead of outside in the snow, they wore clothes warm enough for where they were going, without sweltering in heavy clothes for the tropical climate they were still in. They had warm winter cloaks ready in a satchel.

They went through their checklist verbally as they did when they were about to travel, even for the short weekend jaunts abroad they made to Japan and China when Hermione was studying her languages, or to California for resort spa research.
"Toiletries?"

"Packed."

"Underclothes, socks, trousers, shirts, jackets, cloaks, your skirts and dresses?"

"Definitely packed," Hermione replied, remembering the one time she forgot to pack socks for both of them when they used to just list "clothes." That had resulted in item-listing all the items for future trips. Toiletries were easier to replace than clothing at the last minute.

"Your belly-dancing outfit too?" he asked with a sensuous hint in his voice. He enjoyed how she would let him watch her practice, especially since the recital was in less than three weeks and she needed to work on her routine for the group.

"Yes, and I even packed your turban if you want to play Sultan again," she answered with a knowing smile.

"Books?"

"Absolutely." Though as to how much time they'd have to read on their honeymoon was under discussion, but she did have a few travel books she included after finding out where they were going.

"Potions?"

"Yes: Standard kit plus Portkey Lag Potion, Sequoia, Lubrication, Polyjuice, Contraceptives."

Downstairs with their trunk ready and packed, and cloaks ready for travel, Hermione went over a few last details with her apprentice. Akela assured her mistress the cats would be fed and taken care of, the passion vines properly tamed, items harvested and prepared, and everything watered accordingly for all the gardens, including the farm on the west side of the island, while Akela continued working on her Spanish, anatomy and Code of Ethics. Final farewells to the last of the guests were given shortly before they locked up their house for the next two weeks.
Since time was running short, they took the Floo to the Portkey office, besides not wanting to walk through town in warm clothing that was making them sweat slightly, even with a Cooling Charm.

Much to their surprise, some of the townsfolk and people who worked at the manufacturing facility were there at the Portkey office to give the bride and groom a send-off. They tossed flower petals and rice, and held their wands aloft, sending sparks that raced along the ceiling of the Portkey office before trailing off into faint glowing embers. There were more handshakes and kisses wishing the couple the best on their trip. It wasn't a surprise luau reception, but it was a pleasant ambuscade.

As they landed at their destination, Hermione hugged Severus with delight as a roaring fire was burning in the fireplace. She had decided to let him plan the honeymoon, and so where they landed with their Portkey was a complete surprise to her since the only thing she knew was that they were going to New Zealand and nothing else.

In their blissful denouement cuddles when they wished they could lay there much longer, but had to get up and hurry off somewhere, she had talked about how she wished they could be off in some remote snowbound cabin. There they would be undisturbed and thereby left alone for them to fuck their brains out endlessly.

After untangling her arms from about his neck and giving him a slew of grateful kisses peppered about his cheeks and lips, she ran over to the window to peer out. Sure enough, all she saw was a field of snow lit with the golden glow of the low-slanting sun since it was just after four in the afternoon – the next day. The time zone difference was twenty-two hours ahead, but for their body clocks, it was just two hours behind, which meant the Portkey Lag Potion was optional if they wanted an additional two hours of energy that night.

"Ooh, there is even a hot tub!" She squirmed with gladness seeing that everything seemed to be just as she wished. Had she been a dog, her tail would have been excitedly wagging. Even without a tail, her bottom wiggled back and forth in an enticing manner such that Severus had to prevent himself from taking her right there and then. "Which mountain are we on? Mount Cook? Mount Hutt?"

"Mount Ruapehu," he informed her.

"Really? This much snow on the North Island?"
"Yes, I was assured there was a nice base and we might even get a flurry or two as we're still in the snowy season. Next week we'll go to the South Island." That was all he spilled on the details. He wanted to surprise his bride with the fact they would be spending a few days at a Muggle bed-and-breakfast in Christchurch close to the botanical garden, including a romantic picnic while punting on the River Avon, before spending the last days of their honeymoon in a wizarding village on Stewart Island.

Severus went over to the ice box in the kitchen area of the large one-room cabin – well, mostly one room as the toilet, shower, and sink were in a separate walled-off area, but the large tub for two was in the living room area for easy placement with a wand for soaking in right in front of the fire. Looking in the icebox, he was pleased it had everything he stipulated when he made the reservation through a wizarding travel agency over in Honolulu. There was even the right brand of champagne ready and chilled.

After putting the wedding cake in the ice box, he grabbed a couple glasses before popping the cork on the champagne. As he was busy doing that, Hermione did a quick unpack charm.

"Did you tell your parents about my wedding present to you?" Severus asked Hermione as she put away their toiletries in the small bathroom.

"No, I didn't get a chance," she answered, her voice carrying out easily to Severus in the next room. "And given we originally agreed that we wouldn't go through the bother of fretting over what to get each other, it would have felt a bit awkward to tell them you got me something while I got you nothing. And that doesn't include the ruby necklace and earrings you got me. How does one come up with a present comparable to two acres of prime land?" she asked rhetorically. Hermione was still rather overwhelmed. Severus had Side-Along Apparated them on the eve of their wedding to his farm on the west side of the island to announce to her that he’d bought the adjoining two acres for her to do with as she willed. Stunned and thrilled was putting her reaction mildly.

"Well, I did surprise you with it last night, so it wasn't like you had time the morning of our wedding day to pop on out and get something last-minute," he conceded.

In fact Hermione did come up with an idea that morning, but wanted to wait until now to surprise him with it.

Hermione emerged from the bathroom in her silk floor-length Slytherin green nightgown edged with silvery gray lace, her ropes of pearls, the henna tattoos that still adorned her hands, wrists, and feet, and nothing else.
Severus stopped in his tracks entranced by the vision of his bride giving him a come-hither look in her silk nightgown that he loved to slip her out of. The sight of her hair cascading around her shoulders just completed the alluring vision before him, in addition to clearly seeing the outline of her nipples standing out against the silk, casting slight shadows.

"There is one present I thought I could give you, but I'm not sure how it could compare," she said, a bit shyly.

She slunk over to her husband and plucked one of the flutes from his hand and replaced the flute with a vial containing a pale, clear liquid. Hermione looked up at him questioningly, trying to gauge his reaction to her present to him.

Severus swallowed hard, more nervous than when he asked her to marry him or the night she showed up on his doorstep after her anniversary dinner with Weasley in that red dress, but it was also the perfect present, if she was indeed suggesting what she did with this vial in his hand.

"I said you didn't have to decide now—" he began to question her decision, but was stopped short with a soft finger upon his lips.

"I have been thinking about it for a while. And if I'm so willing to drink pomegranate juice to bind myself to you in one way, then what is there to stop me from wanting to bind myself to you completely as your wife with children?" she asked him as she gazed up into his face that looked down at her in amazement and growing happiness. She tossed the flute of champagne down her throat and quickly set down her glass.

Severus matched her action and drank his in one quick go. Then he set the empty flute and the unopened vial of contraception potion Hermione never took that morning on the table before scooping her up in his arms.

It was a bruising kiss. Hermione felt she would nearly drown in it, the way his arms held her so tight and his mouth demanded so much that she surrendered to his every desire. She mewled with want from his ferocity.

The bed had been strewn with flower petals in anticipation of the bridal couple's arrival, but they didn't even make it the few extra feet and instead wound up on the couch in front of the roaring fire. Both sets of hands went to work on removing Severus' clothes completely before he took the extraordinary pleasure of peeling the green silk away from his bride's skin, leaving the pearls to
caress her skin along with his fingertips.

The pair already perched on the couch, Hermione was ready for him as she threw a leg around his waist and drew him between her legs. She was willing to keep the foreplay brief since she was already aching for him, having taken the Lubrication Potion when she changed.

"Are you prepared with the idea of getting pregnant on our honeymoon? Ready to jump into parenthood right after marriage?" he asked. He spoke around a mouthful of nipple as he played with them and licked them teasingly, which made Hermione arch her back against the couch and grind her pelvis up against him harder as he knelt between her legs. He knew how Hermione liked to plan things and take her time with large decisions in her life. She stressed easily if things did not go according to her carefully laid-out schedule, which is why it seemed somewhat sudden, though she did indicate she had thought this over carefully.

"We've been playing house as if we were married in everything but the rings and license for the past year and a half," she assured him. "It's not as if we didn't have some time to settle into our lives together. Trust me, I'm ready," she growled playfully as she hooked an ankle around him and with her legs drew him forward, which caused him to canter forward.

If having a backyard full of screaming kids all day no longer fazed Severus, he knew he was certainly ready for children as well.

Alternating between kissing her neck and suckling at her breasts, he slipped a hand down between her legs and toyed with her a bit. With his teeth lightly capturing her nipple, he smiled up at her and she gazed back with begging need. This time, he wanted to make her beg. With a thumb slowly circling her clit, he slipped two finger inside of her and found the spot that made her sing her cries of exultation.

"Please, Severus, I need you! Fill me, take me..."

Severus was not willing to relent to her pleas, as delicious as they were to his ears.

Hermione could feel herself close, and she wanted Severus to be inside of her for her first orgasm on their wedding night. "Please, Severus, I want you inside of me." Realizing that he could quickly counter that he was technically inside of her with his fingers, she added, "I want to feel more of you. I want you inside of me now." The end of her plea morphed into a keeling wail.
Severus was happy to oblige. Keeping his two fingers inside of her, he pressed the head of his cock to slide just below his fingers and press at her entrance.

Hermione's eyes momentarily widened, realizing what he was about to do and nodded her head minutely giving him permission, as her body was willing and wanting.

Carefully, Severus slid himself into with slow and shallow strokes, going deeper each time while his two fingers remained inside of Hermione, palpitating her G-spot. They had done this a few times before, and he knew to proceed slowly so her body could accept the extra girth without discomfort.

Once seated into her, Severus began to slide in and out, his fingers continuing their work to add extra pleasure for Hermione.

Eye shut tight, Hermione reveled in the feeling of being stretched while fucked. It didn't take very long for her to crest and squeeze around him as she came, the experience heightened with the pressure on her G-spot. She froze momentarily as she bellowed, a sign that it was a particularly powerful orgasm that would paralyze her until she finally came down.

Now her appetite fully unleashed and hungrier for her husband than before, Hermione bucked against him, her back pressed against the cushions propped behind her back as Severus knelt on the floor in front of the couch. He removed his fingers before he began plowing into her with feral abandon. Her sweet cries of ecstasy and the sight of her breasts jiggling and bouncing with each forceful thrust of his nearly pushed him over the edge, but he would be damned if he would orgasm so quickly on their wedding night. In order to change positions and stop himself from peaking too soon, Severus pulled Hermione off the couch. He lay on his back, feeling the warm woolen rug against his skin heated by the fire that danced with bright yellow flames, matching their passion.

Hermione mounted him and rode him.

She could tell from the way Severus shut his eyes tight, he was close to orgasmming and that's why he changed positions. Hermione loved how he would try and prolong his first orgasm for as long as possible, trying to make her cum as often as possible before finally seeking his own release, even with the aid of the Sequoia potion to restore his vigor and continue on as before. As she sat astride him, she rolled her hips back and forth and loved the way his eyes would roll up into his head with she rotated her hips just right and would make him arch his own back against the rug. His eyes now opened, she cast him a glance that could set ice afire and she licked her lips and let one hand casually play with one of her nipples, knowing he loved to watch her play with herself. The sight of pearls swaying and caressing her skin as she rode him added to the eroticism of the moment.
Sitting up as she continued to rock against him, he reverently whispered, "My queen." With little imagination, he could envision Hermione bedecked with more jewels and a grand diamond tiara set upon her glorious mane.

She loved it when he called her that and began to ride him harder. As his eyes were ablaze with desire for her, his face half-lit by the glow of the fire, lost in the throes of passion is when she found him most starkly beautiful. "My dark angel lover," she called to him.

He loved her pet name for him in the midst of their carnal feasts. She had said when in the middle of making love there was another worldly beauty about him that was transfixing. And though he knew he was not the most handsome of men, to her in those moments, he was the most alluring and beautiful of all men to her.
Spurred on by her, he quickly lifted her off and turned her around to mount her from behind. He was her dark angel lover, who would protect her and cherish her for all eternity, in this realm and all other planes of existence. The front of his thighs slapped against the backs of hers, and he rammed himself into her deeply.

Hermione howled with pleasure, feeling as if Severus would shake her apart at the joints with each savage thrust as he fucked her with animal-like intensity. She was so close again. The sweat was dripping off of her brow, especially with the searing heat of the fire added to their rigorous act of consummating their marriage.

Severus could hear how close she was, and he wasn't going to hold out much longer. He leaned forward and braced one hand on the ground while his other hand sought out Hermione's clit to stroke and bring her to completion soon.

It didn't take but a few seconds of Severus' deft finger-work as she bucked against him before an orgasm ripped through her with a scream torn from her throat. She shuddered and could feel herself tighten around him as Severus let out a groan of release that he had finally let himself join her. He clutched onto her around the waist and held her still as he thrust his hips into her, pushing his seed deep into her. They could almost feel the completion of the pomegranate juice sow threads of magic between each other, ensuring their binding was once again complete with this final act.

Both gasping for air, they collapsed on the rug in front of the fire, both lightly coated with sweat. The rug was not as soft as they'd imagined and so they both hauled themselves, with great difficulty, back up onto the couch to catch their breaths. The air hit their knees, and they both discovered they had rug burns on them now. Fortunately they had a salve in their standard kit that could take care of that, but it would be later – once they stopped panting as if they had run a marathon since they were at an altitude of over eight-thousand feet and the air was much thinner than they were used to. Fortunately, Severus had packed an altitude adjustment potion for the trip, but he had not gotten around to fetching it before his wife inspired him to attack.

Hermione cuddled up next to her husband, brushing a sweat-drenched tendril away from his eyes, glad she was able to convince him to wear his hair a bit shorter. While she loved playing with his long hair, the slightly shorter layered haircut that came half-way between his ears and shoulder was much more flattering, especially with the beard he still kept to her delight, while still holding to societal convention that he keep his hair a little on the long side until he was at least fifty. The only reason she convinced him to cut his hair was during a recent round of Polyjuice play where she experimented on cutting her hair, while in Severus' form, at varying lengths until they found a length they both agreed was better than his longer hair that had grown all the way to the middle of his back.
For a brief moment Hermione thought about saying they should go for another round to make sure they that consummated their marriage, but they had been consummating for over a year before the ceremony, and it was a bit too corny, even for her. Instead, she just sighed and smiled sweetly at Severus.

"I love you... my husband," she sighed with great satisfaction.

Severus smiled openly back at her and tucked a stray curly tendril behind her ear that was getting rather frizzy due to low humidity from the cold and high altitude. "And I love you... my beautiful bride. My wonderful wife."

Hermione gave a slight purr of contentment and put her head back on his chest.

"Are you ready for a bit of cake?" Hermione asked a bit too eagerly, ready to fulfill her promise of eating every crumb off of him and making good use of her mouth wherever needed.

"Depends, are you ready for about two more hours of consummating our marriage?" Severus said, somehow having read Hermione's thoughts moments before as he summoned a vial of Sequoia and two vials of the altitude adjustment potion with his wand while Hermione got up to fetch the cake from the icebox. They would certainly need their stamina to breathe at such high altitude to survive the effects of the Sequoia potion so they could continue to express their joy at the prospect of being together for the rest of their lives.

For Hermione and Severus, it seemed that living happily ever after was not going to be an improbable thing to attain after all.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yeah! They are married. How long will marital bliss last? And what happens when kids enter the picture. One more chapter left, the epilogue, and hopefully I can answer those questions.

Thank you to my ever fabulous betas: JuneW and Hope.

NSFW fan art of Severus and Hermione making love in front of the fire, by Hassly (http://hassly.deviantart.com/), commissioned by me, "His Queen and Her Demon
Angel Lover: As They See Each Other." Yes, I realize I forgot to include the henna tattoos when I commissioned this. Oh well. You can also view it on my Tumblr page here: https://atdlhea-betz.tumblr.com/
Epilogue: "Darling, Something Has Come Between Us"

Chapter Summary

Ten years later, the Snape family travels back to England for a visit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 118: Epilogue
"Darling, Something Has Come Between Us"

Disclaimer: Yeah, last fucking disclaimer! Rowling and various corporate entities own Harry Potter, I don't, I'm just playing with them for your and my non-revenue-generating amusement. There, DONE!

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As Hermione sat staring at her mug of tea, she heaved a troubled sigh. Glancing up, she looked at her husband, who sat far away at the other end of the table.

With her mouth pulled into a moue, she said with some great somberness, "Darling, something has come between us." There was a tired look in Hermione's eyes as she cast them down at the gulf between husband and wife.

Severus looked at his wife sitting at the other far end of the table, appearing a bit forlorn. He gladly would have slid right over across the long bench, and held her in his arms, but two of their three children on whom Hermione cast her gaze were sitting between them filling up that vast space, thus keeping them momentarily apart.

It was Hermione's subtle line indicating that though she loved their children, she needed a bit of T.L.C. from her husband all by herself, away from the kids. Last night they were hoping to have a night alone, but alas, their youngest, Albert – named after Hermione's Potions master and friend, who had passed away about a year before his namesake was born – decided that the rooms at the Leaky Cauldron smelled funny, the building creaked and the ghost in the room he was going to share with Kaimi was a bit too scary. So of course, that meant their four-year-old son demanded to sleep with his parents. No amount of assurances that the ghost was friendly or that all old buildings made noises could convince Albert to sleep in the room he was going to share with Kaimi. The
youngest Finau child had agreed to come along for the trip to England for a free Portkey ticket, meals, lodging, and all expenses paid while coming out for a job interview at Hogwarts; all she had to do was play nanny to the kids while along for the trip.

It was strange for Albert to be afraid of ghosts, as he had befriended some during the many trips abroad that his parents brought him along, as well as sleeping in many a dusty, drafty and creaky old temples, palaces, and manors. He was a sensitive child who was highly attuned to the emotions of family members, especially his parents. It was probably their apprehension of coming back to England for the first time since Albert Dobmeir's funeral that spurred him to cling so tightly to their sides, sensing his parents' own fears of returning.

Kaimi, who was twenty now, picked up on the subtle exchange between Mr. and Mrs. Snape. "I can always take the kids out sightseeing for the day if need be so you have a chance to rest," she said delicately.

"We may take you up on that." Severus scrubbed his face with his hands, thinking if he and Hermione did have a few hours, instead of making love, they might just drop off to sleep instead. Hermione had to sing Zhubanysh's old lullaby to Albert for nearly half an hour before he dropped off the night before, long after his father had already been lulled to sleep by his wife's sweet voice.

They did take their Portkey Lag Potions when they arrived the night before, but it had been a trying few months for both the Snapes. Hermione was finishing training the new Operations Manager at the Malu Palekaiko facility before her week-long trip away, given that Draco was back in England with his family that week too and would not be there to supervise in her stead. Not to mention, one of their children had had a case of Troll Flu about six weeks prior; it threw everyone's schedule off for a while with her constant need for care until she was over the worst of it.

Severus also had quite the harrowing week. Jerry, who still tutored part-time at his shop when he wasn't teaching at the local academy, was laid up in the clinic. When a Peruvian Vipertooth dragon came to nest in the caldera the previous week, the beast decided to investigate the activity in the town and started climbing down the volcano mountainside towards the town. Jerry, as he had done in the past when a dragon got too curious, has transfigured into a dragon in order to lure the beast away from the town, and – if need be – out to sea to encourage it with its migration towards southern Chile. What he didn't count on was the dragon was male and that a female was approaching the island, intent with mating with the dragon roosting there. The pair were out of their usual mating area, which was normally Easter Island, since breeding pairs met halfway between Chile and Malu Palekaiko on their migration to and from Japan.

The male dragon suddenly decided it wanted to battle for the genetic supremacy of mating with the female, even though Jerry's transfigured form was of a different dragon breed entirely. Jerry, who was not familiar with mating habits of all three dragon breeds that visited the island during migrations, ducked down his head and the leading edge of his wings, exposing the tops of hi
wings; he was thinking this was an act of submission, and that the other male had won the right to breed with the female. That might have worked with a Japanese Imperial Dragon or a Chinese Fireball, but with a Peruvian Vipertooth, it was a challenge to battle, a posture a Peruvian Vipertooth male would take before launching himself at the challenging male.

It resulted in Jerry taking to wing and flying as fast as his could out on a southwest vector, closer to the normal breeding grounds. And to Jerry's detriment, he learned that though he might transfigure into a dragon, he was not entirely fireproof from other dragons. Mounga had followed on a broom with a Portkey to bring him to the clinic. Mounga was able to catch Jerry before he fell into the ocean, too tired to remain in his transfigured form any longer after flying till his wings ached and his heart nearly burst from exhaustion while suffering from some moderate burns.

Those in the clinic, especially Rainbow, who treated him for burns, were sworn to secrecy of Jerry's particular Animagus form, since they were able to piece together how that third dragon mysteriously appeared on the island to draw the two dragons away.

Severus was drawn away from his own thoughts of his co-worker and friend when Hermione asked Kaimi, "Since Albert didn't sleep with you, you must have had a chance to prepare for your interview for the Herbology opening?"

"Actually, I was too excited to review my notes and latest journals, and so I went downstairs for a couple pints last night." Kaimi poked at her breakfast distractedly. "In fact, some Irish dude was seriously picking up on me. Shawn... no Seamus. Seamus Flaherty... Finnoley--"

"Seamus Finnigan," Hermione corrected her tartly.

"Yeah, that's it. You know him?" Kaimi asked, her smile brightening as she plopped her chin in her hand with her elbow on the table, just like her mother did. She was suddenly energized despite the lack of caffeine after earlier complaining about the quality of the coffee in England, calling it "lamprey quality, because it sucked so badly."

"Yes. Stay away from him," Hermione warned sternly, recalling his rude comments after her divorce from Ron.

"Whoa. You must have gone to school with him for you to dislike him that badly," she replied with an amused chuckle to see her Aunt Hermione take on such a sour disposition so quickly by the mention of a name alone. "Well, don't worry. He had desperation coming off of him in waves, like some sleazy lounge lizard on the prowl."
Severus nodded, pleased his favorite niece still had more horse sense than her older sister when it came to some wizards. At least Akela had the good sense to hold on to Tristan when he came along in her life, instead of pining her days away for that no-good Ulrich boy who had fathered a few bastards on the island out of wedlock, much to the distress of his wife, Kiki. The Snapes and Kaimi were planning on swinging through Salem on the way back home towards the end of their trip to visit Akela, Tristan, and the new baby.

"So when do you think Draco and Ginny will show up? Today?" Kaimi asked, as they had spent the night at the Leaky Cauldron since the Malfoys were delayed coming back to England for a few days. There was a last-minute rescheduling to meet with the psychologists, counselors, and school officials regarding Libra back in Hawaii. It seems transitioning to a Muggle school for a Squib could be just as difficult as a Muggle-born to a wizarding school during their first year.

"Tomorrow. They assured me they will be back in time to meet Phoenix and Sebastian when they get off the Hogwarts Express when it arrives tomorrow evening, but we'll have to spend one more night here, since Malfoy Manor is closed until the Master and Mistress return," Severus explained.

This news was met with cheers from their daughters Gabrielle and Viola, but only made Albert snuggle against his mother's side in search of comfort, not enjoying the "charming and old-world rustic attributes" of the pub that was over five-hundred years old.

Gabrielle, who had her mother's curious brown eyes and brown hair that was tamed a bit by her father's genes, asked, "So the party at Malfoy Manor will still happen, and I'll be able to ask Phoenix and Sebastian about their first year at Hogwarts then?"

"Yes," Hermione assured their eldest daughter. "The party will happen, and you'll have a chance to ask them. And you can ask Devlin and Michael about taking their N.E.W.T.s as well."

Some months after Hermione was granted sanctuary, Severus began asking her very specific details about the woman who met her on the path towards what they referred to as the Valley of Death. It was with a viewing in a Pensieve that Severus' thoughts were confirmed, identifying the woman as his dead first wife. Three months after their wedding when Hermione discovered she was pregnant, she asked him if it was a girl whether they could name her after Severus' first wife, for it was Gabrielle who pointed her in the right direction so that they could be rejoined.

The whole reason why Hermione and Severus finally decided to return to England was for the fact that Gabrielle was nine, and would soon have the choice of starting wizarding school at the local
academy when she turned ten, or attending Hogwarts like her parents did when she turned eleven. This trip was for Gabrielle to weigh the options of going to a school far, far away on the other side of the world with the reputation as being one of the world's best schools, or to stay in Hawaii and go to the local academy where all her friends would be but the education and prestige were not as august. And while she would not be without friends, as Phoenix and Sebastian were three years older, and there was a whole brood of Weasleys infecting the school who would stick up for their "cousin," there was the aspect of being far away from immediate family to think of. Regarding the quality of her education, should she stay in Hawaii, with Severus and Hermione's endless work on the Board of Governors to improve the quality of teaching and the curriculum, she would be well-educated to be sure. The school was rising up through the ranks of notable academic institutions. And then there was the fact she was a Snape, so she would be tutored to excel above and beyond the standard requirements needed to pass her classes, if she was anything like her parents, which she was in that regard.

This trip was not just for Gabrielle to weigh her options, but for Hermione and Severus to see if they could deal with the thought of their daughter being away in England, a country they both fled due to prejudices, injustice, violence, and the deep lingering after-effects of the war. Draco and Ginny had been back to England many times; they themselves were somewhat hesitant to let their children attend Hogwarts, but noticed that as time passed, life did somewhat resume a sense of normalcy. For example, Victory Day was now being celebrated more with sales signs in window shops along Diagon Alley than as a day of somber remembrance of those who perished and those who fought against bigotry and tyranny. Even the numbers who attended Victory Day speeches by the fountain in the Ministry atrium had dwindled over the years to the point that those who regularly attended were those who had fought the hardest and lost the most. It seems Alan Parker was right in the respect that people had moved on to forget dark days of the past, to only wanting to remember better times.

Viola, who had her father's dark locks but blessed with some waves and body from her mother's side, asked, "Kaimi? Why didn't you go to Hogwarts?" The child's ice-blue eyes blinked up at her favorite babysitter curiously; she had the same striking blue eyes Severus' great-grandmother, Septima Snape, once had. Between her wavy raven locks, striking eyes, and delicate features, Severus knew he would be chasing the boys off with a Beater's bat and setting some very stringent wards on his daughter's window when she was older.

"That's because I'm not a British citizen. You, Gabrielle, and Albert are. Your parents never gave up their citizenship, even though they live in Hawaii. So of course since you are British citizens, you'll get a letter with an offer to attend Hogwarts, just like Phoenix and Sebastian did," she informed her charges with great authority, knowing how these things worked.

It was when Libra's letter to Hogwarts never arrived, Draco and Ginny's fears their daughter was a squib were confirmed. They even Portkeyed to Scotland and talked directly to Headmistress Sprout to make sure that the letter was in no way lost, as it would have gone half-way around the world via albatross.
Albert poked at his porridge sullenly. "Mummy, isn't there any fresh fruit or rice for breakfast?"

Severus looked over at his son's breakfast and looked down at his, noticing he'd barely touched his own. "Would you care for my eggs and sausage instead?" he offered Albert.

His son eagerly nodded his head and gladly swapped breakfasts. Severus was in the mood for something lighter than what he'd ordered, not realizing his own stomach would be in knots from the trip and the constant sense of tension. His hand was always at the ready to grab his wand and defend his wife and family at a moment's notice, given Hermione's reason for seeking sanctuary years earlier.

Last night as they checked into the Leaky Cauldron, Severus had been approached by a witch with a frantic look in her eye. It was when she shoved a copy of *Severus Snape's Home Brew Tips: Volume Four* that he realized she was not a threat bent on eradicating the ex-Death Eater due to some longstanding grudge, but a fan of his newspaper Potions brewing column seeking an autograph on her copy. Severus' column had quickly turned from a weekly column to a daily one with publication in many of the English-language wizarding newspapers around the world within five years. It pleased him that in the latest poll in the United States and Europe he was far more famous than Gilderoy Lockhart, who was still a permanent resident at St. Mungo's.

Knowing of his own fame – of the good kind – still did not ease the fear that there were those who remembered him under less respectable circumstances. There were many still roaming about Great Britain who were sympathetic to the Dark Lord, and who might view him as the traitor who turned the tide against the greater good of wizardkind, much like Alan Parker.

Kaimi looked at the breakfast fare on the table, and her own kippers that did not live up to her expectations, and muttered to herself, "I would Crucio or A.K. for a bagel, cream cheese, and lox." It was a popular breakfast item at the Ohana Family Diner upon Jerry's insistence they include the New York breakfast staple on the menu, and it was one of Kaimi's favorites.

Severus glared at Miss Finau, not particularly caring for that particular slang phrase that was popular among the young set of witches and wizards on the island, making light of two of the three Unforgivables. Upon seeing Severus' pointed look, she quickly apologized.

To change the mood that had suddenly grown a bit gloomy, Kaimi brightly asked, "Why don't we let your mom and dad have a chance to take care of boring things today while the four of us go have some fun. What would you guys like to do today?"
"Florean Fortescue's Sybaritic Mountainous Matterhorn Sundae!" Gabrielle shouted, as she was as much if not more of a chocolate fan than her mother.

Hermione's stomach turned at the thought of a rich chocolate dessert so early in the morning. She had ordered toast for breakfast and had barely nibbled at it and sipped at her tea. Her own nerves were somewhat frazzled at the fact she was back in England after leaving the country in haste eleven years ago.

"That's not something to do, but we can put it on the itinerary – after lunch." Kaimi took a swig of her coffee and winced, put off by the bitter and acid taste compared to the Kona coffee she was spoiled on growing up.

"Flourish and Blotts?" Viola suggested.

"That big fat Ferris wheel?" Albert said, now less attached to his mother's side, being swept up in the excitement of sightseeing. "And the Knight Bus?"

Severus gave a short laugh at his son's suggestion that a purple triple-decker bus would be something in which to visit on purpose. The rest of wizarding Britain viewed it as a mode of transportation to be avoided at all costs unless absolutely necessary as a last resort.

Kaimi conjured parchment, quill, and ink with her wand, and began scribbling down suggestions for the day.

"Hogsmeade!" Gabrielle added.

"We'll go to Hogsmeade together as a family later this week. Today I would prefer if you all stick around London," Severus recommended firmly.

Kaimi understood his concerns, replying, "Not a problem." Turning back to the children, she excitedly added, "There is so much to see and do around here, we won't even have to Floo anywhere."

"Ooh! What about London Bridge?" Viola suggested
"The one that fell down?" Albert queried, wondering if it was the same one from the nursery rhyme.

"No, no, the tall one," Viola clarified, not knowing the exact name.

"Oh, you mean Tower Bridge," Hermione corrected her.

"Yeah, that one! I hear you can even walk along the top between the two towers."

Kaimi wrote that one down as well for ideas. "Sure. And the Tower of London is right next to it. Do you want to see that too?"

"No," Gabrielle declined, making a face she was not impressed or inclined to visit that place. "Naomi said the Crown Jewels were pretty tiny actually, and the ghosts are sort of surly."

The mention of more ghosts who were less than friendly sent Albert burrowing into his mother's side once more for security and comfort. He was only four and still very much a little boy who would only be starting at the new kindergarten and elementary school next year.

It had taken a while for the town to accept the idea of letting a formal institution teach children basic reading, writing, and math during formative years before starting wizarding school. However, given how many witches worked at either the busy resort on the west side of the island or at the Lovely Lavender facility and didn't have the time to teach their children themselves, it was welcomed.

"That sounds like a full day." Hermione patted Albert's hip and gave him a buss on the top of his head.

Gabrielle turned her attention to the growing list next to her parents across the table. "Mum, Dad, will you show us where you lived in Diagon Alley before you moved to Hawaii?"

"Sure, it's not that far from H.Q.," Hermione assured her, referring to The Lovely Lavender Company world headquarters, "but not today."
Albert, sensing his mother's fatigue, asked, "Are you both okay, Mummy?"

"Yes, your father and I are fine." She patted her son on his hip again, slightly puzzled by the slightly frustrated look on Albert's face. "We've just had a long week and would like to take a breather before the party commences at Malfoy Manor, celebrating the first of the next generation of Weasleys graduating Hogwarts," Hermione said with a bit of wariness hoping she could avoid speaking or running into her ex-mother-in-law all night long.

Noticing that no more breakfast would be eaten, Kaimi announced in a slightly theatrical tone, "Well, if everyone has their brollies and jackets, in case of rain, let's get going and see if we can beat the crowds at the London Eye. And we need to be back here by four, as your mother has an appointment to take you girls with her to Madam Mandel's."

Since there was going to be a party at Malfoy Manor, Hermione figured it was a good excuse as any to get a few good dresses for the girls for the party and several good new dresses for herself. She no longer fit the dresses she bought years ago; her body changed due to age, a little extra padding Severus was glad she was finally sporting that added to her curves, and three pregnancies.

After making sure that Kaimi had enough Muggle money for fees, lunches, Tube fare and such for everyone, plus souvenirs, Hermione told them to stop before they headed out the door.

Reaching into her blouse, she pulled out her Auror's necklace she promised Harry she would wear any time she came back to England. She had worn it for when she came back for Albert's funeral and alerted Harry she'd wear it for her return this trip.

"Here. Put this on. I will feel better if you have this with you just in case. Just call out in your mind for Harry and he'll come if you need anything, like if Albert wanders off again," Hermione recalled that rather fretful time he toddled off when she took the kids to the mall in Honolulu to go Christmas shopping last December. Albert didn't want to be found since he was busy enjoying himself at the mall toy store, which made locating him much harder.

Kaimi already knew how it worked and didn't exhibit any impatience when having it explained to her again, understanding a mother's concern. "Are you sure, because--"

"I'll have Severus with me. I'll be safe." Hermione squeezed Severus' hand as they stood side-by-side, the parents already having given strict orders to their children to obey Kaimi while they were out and about, and warnings that any mischief would certainly be reported back to them.
Viola and Albert demanded hugs and kisses before leaving. Gabrielle was too excited to finally be in England to think of giving her parents a farewell before tromping off into the big city on some grand adventure.

Before they left, Albert decided his mother needed one extra kiss goodbye before he readily clasped his hand in Kaimi's and they were off.

As Hermione dragged herself upstairs back to their rooms, Severus informed Tom the barman they'd need the rooms for one more night. They would have stayed at Lavender and Ron's place, but the house was currently under renovation. Besides, Severus felt odd at the idea boarding at the home of Hermione's ex-husband and his former employer.

Hermione had almost dozed off by the time her husband followed her into the room shortly behind her.

"Albert seemed quite concerned for you. Are you feeling all right?" Severus asked as he toed off his boots, pulled off his long frock coat, and crawled onto the bed to curl up behind his wife, rubbing her back with the flat of his palm along her spine. He had learned to pay attention to his son since he seemed to have a certain sixth sense about things that later proved to bear out.

"Yes, I suppose," she sighed, giving a soft moan of appreciation of his hands caressing her back in a mix of reassurance and therapeutic need. "Weeks of worrying that we'd arrive and find an angry mob to greet us came to nothing, thank goodness."

Severus remembered her nightmares that manifested and woke him with her shouts in the middle of the night once they’d agreed to come back to England. There were a few times he had to sing a song of his love to calm her down and keep the nightmares away, her apprehension about returning growing as the departure date arose.

"I'm just feeling pretty tired as of late. Long nights, training Yvonne, the new Operations Manager. I mean, she proved herself by working her way up through the various divisions, but I'm still a bit nervous. But there is the mirror in Lavender's office if anything arises, so I shouldn't worry. And thank God for hired elves, or we would have been eating Floo take-away every night this week." And then there was the fact they didn't even have the time or energy to go to the hot springs the Wednesday before to soak their aches away.

Severus gave his own sigh of exhaustion and threw an arm over Hermione's ribs to snuggle up closer to her. "It didn't help that Jerry's accident occurred right when Pat took off for two week to go take care of Orin's family as the baby came a few weeks early. But I was able to wrap up and
reschedule everything so I could shut the shop down entirely, since Jerry won't be there to tutor."

Smiling to herself, Hermione bumped back against Severus groin playfully. "Think there's enough fire under that cauldron to get in one lazy tussle?"

"Did you pack any Sequoia, because after the long couple weeks we've both had and Albert rabbit-kicking me in the kidneys and ribs for half the night, I don't have the energy unless I get a boost," he ruefully admitted.

Hermione made an exaggerated grunt as if her wand was made of lead as she halfheartedly made an attempt to Summon a vial, but she let her hand and wand flop back down on the bed with a groan of defeat. "How about a nap and then a shag?" she mumbled with her face half smothered in a pillow.

Severus did have just enough energy to cast a spell to undress them both and tuck them under the bedclothes to sleep in the nude. They figured the children would not be back for at least six hours, so hopefully that would give enough time for a rejuvenating nap and a full round of much overdue intimacies, since it had been almost two weeks.

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Since it was just a family gathering and a few friends of the various Weasley and the Malfoy children from school, it was a much more informal affair for the evening party. That still meant that wearing semi-formal attire or at least a nice set of dress robes was required at Malfoy Manor for the affair, instead of formal wear.

Severus and Hermione mingled as the children ran about, playing with their "cousins." While Hermione was no longer officially a Weasley after divorcing Ron, many in the Weasley family did still consider her part of the clan in a similarly adopted fashion as Severus was with the Finau family. Molly's, Percy's and Charlie's votes on the matter were informally overruled; however, they still ignored the ex-wife of Ron. Hermione and Severus kept their civil distance from the more contentious and unforgiving members of the Weasley family as they milled about.

Devlin and Michael, who were still thick as thieves, were both trying to put the moves on the lovely Miss Kaimi Finau.

The youngest of the Finau daughters had grown into a lovely witch in her own right. She was a mix of Polynesian goddess and Tongan-Amazonian warrior, with a very fit and femininely muscular frame she had built up with her aggressive Quidditch skills as a Seeker on the local amateur adult team back in Malu Palekaiko. She had been approached to play professionally, but after growing up with tales about the life of a Quidditch player from her Aunty Hermione, she decided to pursue
Herbology as a career and keep the Quidditch playing as a hobby. For the fact she had been approached to play professionally only intrigued Michael and Devlin; the boys were thinking a witch who played Quidditch that well must be a Chinese Fireball in the sack, having learned the Weasley way of equating Quidditch skills into the bedroom.

Devlin, who stood up on the balls of his feet in order to appear taller while standing next to the six-foot-tall Miss Finau who towered over him, offered her a glass of champagne as Michael scrambled to get one into her hand before his rival.

Kaimi, who was amused to have two wizards vie for her affections, cast an amused glance over at Hermione, who merely shrugged at the droll situation. As Kaimi began dating a few years prior, Aunty Hermione and Aunty Gig-Gin both gave her some rather sage advice regarding young wizards, expectations, experience, and dating. Looking at these two young wizards who were a few years younger than her, she figured if anything, she could teach either of them a few things, though her own experience was rather limited. It was hard to find wizards in the Hawaiian Islands who dared to date the town judge's youngest daughter and the favorite niece of the formidable Potions master, Severus Snape, six-time Pele Festival Dueling Champion. Heaven help the wizard when Severus' god-daughters and own daughters came of age.

After accepting a glass of champagne from Michael, who at least was nearly as tall as her, she thanked him, patting him on the cheek, saying, "Owl me when you've learned to shave, iki kane." Then she glided off to talk with Draco, since he wanted to discuss with her about where he should build the orangery in the gardens.

Ginny, who stood next to Hermione and watched the exchange, laughed. "Maybe we taught her too well. What a man-eater," Mrs. Malfoy noted, watching how Michael and Devlin watched Kaimi with ephebic adoration as she glided away from them without a glance backwards.

"She has the good sense to avoid immature wizards," Severus praised his niece, announcing his presence to the pair of witches as he brought his wife a glass of champagne. He had his own good sense to not make any comment about the fact that both witches had not learned such lessons until they were much older, to their sorrow.

As the Snapes strolled around, they caught sight of Gabrielle in a corner with the Malfoy triplets and Josephine, no doubt exchanging the pros and cons of attending Hogwarts. One of those cons would be the reputation that preceded their names.

During the early part of the school year, Draco and Ginny had to personally Portkey all the way from Hawaii to Hogwarts to speak with Headmistress Sprout after Phoenix had sent Finch-Fletchley Jr. to the Infirmary to have his tongue reattached. Neither Ginny nor Draco saw any reason for their daughter to be censured or given detentions, given the fact the little Hufflepuff
upstart said, "It served the Malfoy family right that a Death Eater would give birth to a Squib."

Of course Phoenix had a month's worth of detention that was school policy for such attacks on another student, and Finch-Fletchley Jr. had six weeks of detention for such a cruel and insensitive statement, inciting the incident to begin with. The rest of the Weasley clan backed their little Malfoy cousins, also feeling rather protective of Libra, who could not be there to defend her own name. Needless to say, the few Weasleys who were also sorted into Hufflepuff continued to make life Hell for Finch-Fletchley Jr. the rest of the year with various Treble-W "experiments" going off in the little shit's bed at all hours of the night, without getting caught as any Weasley worth their salt would. Given that there were twenty Weasleys attending Hogwarts at once, the school quickly learned the any attacks on their ickle firstie Malfoy cousins, verbally or by wand, would be dealt with swiftly and with prejudice.

Hermione took a sip of champagne and grimaced, setting it down finding the taste slightly off, before guiding her husband over to the buffet. Her appetite had returned now that it seemed that her presence back in England was a non-event, and no one would be out to get her, Severus, or their children. That still didn't mean she wanted to move back, given the fact she and Severus had fit into the community in Malu Palekaiko quite nicely and loved living there.

As Hermione wolfed down another canape, the twins ambushed the pair. "Got any more interesting books that you've 'translated' into English you'd like to publish?" George asked, as he came around Hermione's right side while Fred came up from behind Severus' left.

"There is no lack of... inspiration of source material; however, time and energy are limited with three young children in the house, something you're familiar with," Severus reminded the brothers.

"Your book..." Fred coughed to correct himself with deliberateness. "Sorry, Taichi Daikon's book of Japanese haiku, Dark Passions, is selling so fast we can barely keep up with demand." The Galleons flowing into the Snapes' vault in Hawaii told them as much.

Of course Fred and George knew that Hermione and Severus wrote that book of erotic haiku, sold under the alluring narrative that it was discovered in a long-forgotten cavern temple built where two lovers secretly met to consummate their forbidden passions, given the war between their clans. The collection of haiku was "supposedly" penned by the lovelorn wizard and his secret witch lover. This collection was eventually “accidentally” discovered centuries later by the Snapes as they searched for rare Potions ingredients while abroad and stumbled into the hidden sanctuary. Then the collection was faithfully translated by the couple.

Smiling up at her husband, she demurely said in Japanese,
"Falling petals twirl
A dance between two lovers
Drifting on a breeze"

Fred and George exchanged glances. "Is that one that can be translated with underage children around?" Fred asked warily.

Severus translated faithfully as he gave a smirk of triumph, knowing he could still inspire his wife since that was a new one he had not heard from her before. Severus and Hermione were not ones to spout poetry to each other, but they did enjoy the economy of contextually rich words of the Japanese language, imparting so much meaning, overt and subtle with a few syllables. It had become a game to them, which is how they eventually compiled their first attempt at publishing poetry under the nom de plume that roughly translated to "big/thick radish."

"Whew," George said prematurely before Severus launched into one he came up with suddenly upon recalling their long tryst in their room at the Leaky Cauldron the other day.

"Glistening nectar
Beckons bees to the flower
Sipping from her bloom"

From the knowing smile Hermione suddenly gave her husband, the twins knew better than to ask for a translation right there and then.

Just then, Lily Potter and Jessica Taylor barreled straight into Fred and George, asking their "uncles" for some trick or joke to give them to get back at their older brothers, James and Auberon.

"It's not fair Auberon has a wand and can give me little shocks, but I have to wait until I'm eleven until I can get a wand to get him back," Jessica whinged loudly as only a nine-year-old girl could. She had already started displaying signs of magic, and knew she'd attend Hogwarts one day.

Upon hearing Jessica's complaint echo across the room, Christine stormed across the ballroom, growling her son's name murderously under her breath, as he'd broken a cardinal rule of their house.

Fred pulled something out of his pocket, insisting, "Don't tell your mum where you got it. Say it fell out of Uncle Ron's pocket if you get caught."
"As her cousin, I did not hear that," Hermione feigned, while trying to stifle a giggle, somewhat pleased that the twins might put her ex in the doghouse with her Aunt.

Hermione had her own urchin suddenly clinging to her side. Albert, who had been circulating among the many blood and adopted cousins at the party, clutched onto her arm possessively, asking, "Are you both okay, Mummy?" Like all the Snape and Malfoy children growing up in Hawaii, they may address their parents with a British accent regarding their names, but the rest of what they said was pure American accent. This had also caused some teasing of Phoenix and Sebastian at Hogwarts from the other children for a while.

"Yes, Albert, I'm fine." She was wondering if she had fretted too much about this trip and caused her son to be overly concerned with his highly attuned senses. "And so is your father," she assured him, but then suddenly felt a bit faint. She asked Fred to take Albert for some dessert to distract him temporarily.

Severus noticed his wife clutching on to his arm a bit harder than usual and the way her eyes momentarily unfocused, a sign she hadn't been eating usually. He guided her to sit over on a richly upholstered antique Rococo récamier set into an alcove. It was unusual, since he had seen her eating well enough so that she did not have low blood sugar.

Ginny, the Healer in the family, spotted Hermione looking a bit unwell and went to investigate. She guided them to a nearby guest room where Hermione could properly lie down on a bed.

"Overdoing it again?" Ginny chastised her friend.

"You know me," Hermione drawled sarcastically. This earned a warning glare from her husband, all too familiar when his wife over committed herself.

Ginny waved her wand over Hermione, since some of the children at the party were getting over a dose of the Troll Flu and still might have been contagious. And with stress, one was naturally less immune, even if Hermione did not catch Viola's sickness that had struck about six weeks prior and caused the child to be bedridden for a whole week.

Hermione did not like the brief frown that tugged at the corner of her friend's lips. Perplexed, Ginny did a few more spells, resulting in her eyebrows rising up in surprise.
"When were you due?" Ginny plainly asked.

"Due what?" Hermione asked and then froze, suddenly understanding the question.

Hermione's mind raced back to when Viola had the Troll Flu and suddenly vomited violently all over her bedroom. That stopped Hermione just as she was about to take her contraceptive potion that week. Instead, she had to race to take care of her daughter, cleaning up the mess, bathing her daughter, and getting Severus to brew something while she sat by her daughter's bedside ready with a bucket. And it wasn't until Wednesday she remembered to finally take the contraceptive potion after she and Severus began alternating with the job of constantly tending to their daughter, but she did not think that taking it three days late would result in...

"I'm pregnant," Hermione realized aloud. Well, she had thought she skipped last week because of stress again, but hadn't bothered to check otherwise, given her propensity to skip when stressed. That answered the question of why she was late this month.

"What?" Severus asked. "How?"

Hermione found his question rather amusing, even considering how weak she was currently feeling, suddenly out of breath. "Well dear, you ought to know. You were there. And this isn't your first time at the rodeo," she ribbed him, using a favorite quote of Jerry's.

Severus didn't want to laugh, but allowed a smile to creep through. "What I meant was, despite all our careful planning--" He suddenly remembered Hermione telling him about delaying taking that one vial a few days late, but considering it had always taken three to six months for Hermione to get pregnant after going off contraceptives, neither thought that three days delay of one vial would make much difference, especially as Hermione was thirty-seven.

"So this isn't planned," Ginny realized, seeing the mixed look of surprise and shock on their faces. "I'll leave you two to talk alone."

It was early enough in the pregnancy where Hermione or Severus could brew something and end it. They had originally agreed to try for one of each, stopping at three if they had all boys or girls. Albert had been a bit of a relief, since Hermione did want to give Severus a son.

"What do you want to do," Severus asked, both knowing what the questioned implied.
"I don't know," Hermione admitted, a bit overwrought. "I mean, my Aunt Christine had Jessica when she was forty, Halulu was about my age when she had the twins." The tears suddenly swelled in her eyes, unsure if she could face either decision.

Severus pulled her into his arms and rocked her, unsure himself how he felt, though a bit secretly thrilled. One would never guess it, but Severus loved babies, especially his own. He loved singing to them, teaching them, reading to them, cuddling with them, watching them nurse at their mother's breast, seeing their faces light up with joy upon seeing their father and knowing he was loved so unconditionally, especially when those little arms trembled as they tried to hug him with all their might.

Looking up to gauge her husband's face, she asked seriously, "Can you handle another pregnancy?"

Due to the very deep bond Hermione and Severus shared through the pomegranate juice, Severus experienced a sympathetic pregnancy alongside his wife with each child. There were the mood swings, fatigue – which now explained why he himself was so knackered as of late if Hermione was indeed pregnant, the cravings, the backaches and such. The labor – oh, the labor. And while Hermione may have occasionally vomited from morning sickness, Severus did not, though he did find his stomach frequently unsettled during the first trimesters. Then there was the weight gain. During Hermione's pregnancy with Albert, the connection was so strong between them that Severus grew quite the pot-belly. The joke around the island questioned which between the two were actually pregnant. It had taken to swimming six days a week and some gentle weight-loss potions for Severus to fit back into his clothes after his son was born. As for Hermione's figure, she was still fairly fit, but he liked her with this slightly softer, curvier, lusher, and less hip-bone-clashing figure she sported after children.

Caressing her cheek with his hand, as he said the day they were married, "You don't have to decide today." She wanted his feedback, but ultimately he knew this was her choice. "But whatever you do, I still love you, and more so every day."

Their tender moment was interrupted when Albert burst through the doors, disturbing them from almost kissing.

"Albert," Ginny called out, as she had tried to stop their son from interrupting them, but the child could not be swayed and bolted right past his auntie.

"It's okay, Ginny," she assured her friend, who closed the door behind the child.

"I asked you if you were both okay, Mummy," Albert asked, looking a bit cross as he ran over to
his parents.

"Your mother and I are fine," Severus said, trying to soothe his son.

"No, Daddy! Not you. Mummy and my baby brother," Albert corrected his father with a bit too much cheek for a four-year-old to possess.

"What?" his parents asked in unison.

Albert rolled his eyes and sighed with deep exasperation. "I said... are Mummy and the baby fine." He huffed and put his little fists on his hips, tired of being so easily dismissed when he asked a question he wanted answered.

Severus and Hermione looked at each other, stunned. Albert asked yesterday if they were "both" fine before Hermione went upstairs to collapse for a much-needed nap. She now understood his look of frustration when she'd assumed he meant his father as well. This evening he asked just before she felt faint and out of breath. Somehow their son knew of the impending child before even Ginny or themselves.

"How do you know there is a baby? And that it's a boy?" Hermione asked.

"Because I can hear him," Albert said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Hermione and Severus could only stare at each other, confounded how their son heard his baby brother who was probably no more than five or six weeks along, but given Albert's unusual talents, they did not question.

"Yes, the baby and I are fine. I'm just a bit tired, which is normal. I was tired and sometimes had to sit down or take a nap when I was pregnant with you, and the same with your sisters. We'll be okay." She soothed her son with a swipe of his dark hair out of his eyes and a kiss on the forehead. Albert returned the gesture with two kisses: one for his mum and one for the baby. It was something he did prior as well, giving his mother one extra kiss before going out sightseeing for the day.

Severus picked up his son in his arms, suggesting, "How about we let your mum rest for a bit. You and I can go look for some sparkling pumpkin juice," remembering how poorly his own body
withstood alcohol during Hermione's previous pregnancies. He gave Albert a peck on the cheek, causing his son to throw his arms about and hug him tightly as they left the room and rejoined the party.

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Hermione and Severus strolled arm in arm up the High Street in Hogsmeade, amused at their children's reaction to seeing Zonko's Joke Shop and Honeydukes Shop for the first time. Mrs. Snape shook her head, still trying to grasp what Ginny and Draco told them about Libra's test results at the party, after she had rested for a bit.

"I mean, I knew Libra was bright, but I never would have imagined," Hermione remarked with amazement. "An I.Q. of 172? I mean, Einstein was only recorded at what? 160? 165? And he was considered one of the greatest minds of the early Twentieth Century."

They ambled along a little further before Severus added his own conjecture. "I had a feeling that the problems she was having at school were not that she could not keep up, but that she was bored to tears and considered the work before her beneath her bothering to finish." Severus had felt similarly when he had some assignments in school regarding basic Potions scrolls his first few years, but Libra was years ahead of her peers in every discipline, even reading and writing.

"Now Ginny and Draco will be spending the summer looking for a Muggle school for gifted children, preferably along the West Coast, so that Libra can start in the autumn and be with others with whom she can hopefully relate to better. I didn't think she would have such trouble making friends her first year given how well she gets along with her siblings, our kids, and her friends on the island, but I can certainly empathize," Hermione recalled, her own first year making her stand out and remain friendless for the first few months due to her academic excellence.

Libra trouncing Severus at chess at the tender age of seven was one sign she was an exceptionally bright young girl. They played using the new chess set Hermione had bought for him, featuring a pair of younger Severuses that glared at the original human Severus in disgust that someone so young had beat him and almost refused to play a second game.

Since Severus' exoneration and knowledge of his work as a spy for the Order became common knowledge, new chess sets of the 20th century finally featured Severus as Albus Dumbledore's rooks, a symbolic gesture of Severus' spy work, since kings and rooks can both move in the same turn in a move called castling.

"I suppose when she started checking out college-level texts on astronomy from the public library in Hilo, that should have tipped us all off," Severus admitted with a sigh, acknowledging another sign of her keen intelligence.
After their wedding, Severus had built a telescope observation deck above the pergola. Hermione bought him a very nice refracting telescope their first Christmas after they were married. Often after an evening barbecue on the back deck, the Malfoy family would climb up the steps while Severus set up his telescope. He’d align it to view the planets and stars. Draco, Severus, and Hermione took turns telling stories to the children about the constellations, and why they moved across the sky, before letting each of the children look at the celestial bodies through the eyepiece.

Libra began asking questions which none of the adults could answer, and she had to start researching in Muggle books. When Libra asked about what the stars were made of, how did they know what they were made of, how far away they were, how did they measure that distance and why the stars were different colors, even they were slightly out of their depth. And when there was math in some of the higher-level books she read, she started asking for books from which to learn algebra, trigonometry, and the beginnings of calculus. Severus and Hermione were very good at Arithmancy, but some of the calculations she was starting to attempt were quite complex even for them. When Libra came across one old chemistry book in German when she was eventually introduced to the concept of spectronomy, she then asked to learn the language, which she picked up at a speed that even boggled Hermione who had only just learned it herself from Severus.

Ginny and Draco were thankful that Hermione, a Muggle-born who had two parents who were dentists, could give them some guidance on how to better instruct Libra, since she was so taken with the Muggle sciences.

As they approached the Three Broomsticks, they corralled their children inside with a promise to go shopping at Honeydukes before they went up to the castle to meet with Headmistress Sprout. It was kind of the Headmistress to let Gabrielle have a tour of the castle before deciding if she chose to attend Hogwarts or attend the academy close to home. Severus also wanted to talk with the Headmistress since he was on the Board of Governors back home and there was a proposal for the Malu Palekaiko Academy students to study a year abroad, and Hogwarts was a possible school to incorporate into the program.

Severus’ eyes scanned the crowded tables for someone, while his wife found a table for the six of them. He did not spot Kaimi among the patrons. Waiting for the last in their party to arrive, Severus turned to his eldest and asked, "So after speaking to your cousins last night, have you come closer to a decision of wanting to attend your mother's and my alma mater?"

Severus and Hermione offered to fill their children in on life at Hogwarts, but it seemed that Gabrielle was more interested in the opinion of her contemporaries rather than the nostalgic ramblings of her parents.
Gabrielle blew air out from between pursed lips and gazed up at the cobweb-strewn ceiling in thought. "Well, Phoenix said some of the kids were pretty snobby towards them, calling them 'Yanks,' and not in a good way. Then there was that whole thing with the tongue she hexed off. And you're not allowed to leave the castles on weekends until your third year? I mean, that's harsh. And then when you can go, it's only one weekend a month, and that's if you don't have detention," she added dramatically with a roll of her eyes. Viola and Albert sat there transfixed, hanging on every word their big sister said, forming opinions in their minds if they wanted to attend Hogwarts some day. "And if you don't mind the lack of fresh fruit selection, I mean seriously, no mangoes, no papaya? No fresh pineapple?"

Viola gasped with disbelief, "No."

"Yeah, I mean they had apples, pears, and oranges, and the pumpkin pasties and cakes. The turkey is pretty awesome, and the sausage and bacon amazing, but they said the coffee was gross," Gabrielle added with some disappointment. "Oh," she added with great dramatic preamble, "and no sushi!"

Viola made a face that said she didn't want to go to a school where she couldn't have sushi and fresh tropical fruits.

Then Gabrielle's eyes alighted, "But the ghosts are awesome and know all sorts of really cool stuff; the library puts Mum and Dad's library to shame. And the castle is, like, over a thousand years old, and huge! Phoenix sleeps in Gryffindor tower, and Sebastian said his room is in a dungeon under the Black Lake!"

"Cool!" Albert piped up.

Even Viola was having her opinion turned from dislike to keen interest.

"Remember, your father was Head of Slytherin House for many years," their mother reminded them of Severus' stories about Hogwarts.

"Oh, that's another thing. Depending on which House you get Sorted into, mentioning Dad can either be a good thing or a bad thing. Seems Phoenix got lip when she mentioned you to her House-mates, Dad, and she said how nice you were. They even gave her a hard time that her brother was sorted into Slytherin. It seems the Gryffindors still hate you, Dad."
Severus gave his wife a cool look. "Gee, Gryffindors, so brave of them to continue embracing their prejudices against other Houses."

"Oh, don't even go there," Hermione warned her husband with her tone and a look.

"It seems Dad deducted more points from Gryffindor House than any other teacher in the history of Hogwarts," Gabrielle clarified.

"Color me surprised," Hermione said with dry sarcasm staring blandly at Severus, which he returned with a triumphant smirk.

Before Hermione and Severus could begin a round of civilized fripping in front of their children, Madam Rosmerta swept by the table, looking just as lovely as ever, if not older from her graying hair. "Bless my soul! Hermione Weasley and Severus Snape."

"Mrs. Hermione Snape," Hermione said, holding up her left hand for inspection.

Madam Rosmerta's eyes scanned and registered the resemblance of the children sitting at the table to their parents in conjunction with the ring on Hermione's finger. "Well, considering the tripe that fish wrap called the Daily Prophet publishes, I wasn't sure if the rumors of you two getting hitched were true or not."

"Oh! Finally made it!" Kaimi huffed as she slipped into the sixth seat. "Man, what a haul from the castle all the way down here! Sorry, the interview went longer than anticipated."

"Madam Rosmerta," Hermione said with an indication of her hand, "this is Kaimi Finau, family friend, here with us to help watch the children while we visit England, and interviewing at Hogwarts for the open Herbology professor position."

"Muggle Studies," Kaimi said under her breath as she picked up a menu and glanced over the choices, looking for something not so grease- or butter-laden. "I'll have the chicken salad and a cold beer," Kaimi announced, ignoring the surprised looks from the Snapes.

Madam Rosmerta took orders for the rest of the table, getting introduced to each of the Snape children in the process.
As the pub owner walked away in a swish of her many skirts, Severus turned to their traveling companion and asked in a slightly confused tone, "And what is this about Muggle Studies?"

Kaimi drew a deep breath before exhaling and sitting up as straight as possible. "It seems," she began, indicating it was going to be a long story, "that Headmistress Sprout is reluctant to relinquish her precious greenhouses to someone who only just finished their apprenticeship, despite my years of experience before even starting my apprenticeship. And while my work breeding orchids impressed her, she wanted me to have more years experience before letting someone of my youth take over the very important position of teaching Herbology and maintaining her plants in the greenhouses." She let her breath finally out and took one more steadying breath before launching into the second part of her tale.

"However, it seems the Muggle Studies professor tendered his resignation yesterday in order to take a Ministry grant to study Muggle radio." Kaimi rolled her eyes, thinking that was a pretty Mickey Mouse subject to study given the plethora of other Muggle modes of communication available. "So when the Headmistress asked what I knew of Muggle studies, of course I launched into my experience. It seems not even the previous Muggle studies professor knew what a cellular phone – sorry, mobile – was," she said, accentuating the British word equivalent, "or had a driver's license, much less drove, and for the fact I have both, have driven before, have used computers, knew what the Internet was and have my own email account sealed the deal. So you are looking at the new Muggle Studies professor starting in the fall – sorry, autumn. And while I'm at Hogwarts, Sprout will let me continue on with my Herbology experience, and if the professor she has decided to pick chooses to leave after a few years, she will put me at the top of her list for his replacement."

"Who did she hire, as it seems she picked him or her instead of you, before you arrived," Hermione asked, somewhat aggrieved.

"Oh, I was a contender, but upon talking with me and gauging my experience, she decided by the end to go with the other guy, Longbottom, I think his name was," Kaimi said offhandedly.

Had Severus been sipping his drink, he surely would have choked on it.

Hermione suddenly went a little pale.

Kaimi, noting their reactions, asked, "You know this wizard?"

Hermione exchanged a brief look with her husband, who crossed his arms over his chest and sat...
back, allowing his wife to explain.

"Neville Longbottom was a classmate of mine, same year and House, and often my partner in Potions, when Severus taught. Neville was terrified off him, and let's say he melted more cauldrons than a dragon in a lead foundry." There was the issue of Hermione sleeping with Neville once, which was the source of the hostility coming from Severus regarding the subject of his former pupil and bane of his teaching career, but that would be discussed when the children weren't around to prepare Kaimi so that she understood the delicate history between them. "Severus is not too fond of him, and Neville and I parted on awkward terms."

Kaimi's brows shot up, picking up on the slight inference, but let it drop.

To the relief of all the adults, food and drink arrived so they could change the topic to something more pleasant and less contentious, like the twenty-year reunion tour of the Weird Sisters who were playing in the amphitheater under the Three Broomsticks later that night. This was to be their first concert after breaking up during the war in 1996.

Kaimi was dismayed to learn right then that the English version of chicken salad on the menu meant chicken mixed up with an ungodly amount of mayonnaise, onion, and celery served on a single leaf of iceberg lettuce, not the copious amount of mixed greens with fresh fruit, chopped vegetables, grilled chicken, and light vinaigrette she was used to. It seems Kaimi and the Malfoy children were not the only ones spoiled on Hawaii's bountiful produce; Albert poked his fork at his tinned peach half sitting on his plate in a puddle of syrup, giving it a sneer that made him look like a miniature version of his father.

Hermione and Severus walked arm-in-arm up towards castle as the children ran ahead, dragging Kaimi with them. Since she had accepted the position, she figured she'd get the ten-Sickle tour with the Snape children, as she was going to be moving to Hogwarts at the end of August anyway. During lunch, Gabrielle had stated that if Kaimi was going to be on the staff at Hogwarts, then she wanted to go to Hogwarts too.

"I wonder if all four of our children will want to go to Hogwarts," Hermione asked, wondering aloud.

Severus stopped and looked at his wife. "You've decided? You're sure?"

Hermione smiled up at him and patted his arm as she began walking up towards the front doors.
"Albert seems to have already established a connection with his brother. As much as I would not have chosen to get pregnant, it seems we've been given this opportunity. Since the saying goes that Aller guten Dinge sind drei, we'll have to see if it holds true for four as well."

Severus stopped once more and cupped his wife's face in his hands, smiling down at her. "Have I told you how happy you make me and how much I love you?"

"Not since this morning," she reminded him.

Severus kissed his wife sweetly. He could have swept her up into one of those dizzying kisses that made time stop, but it had been a while since he gave her one of those kisses, and the children were hounding them to catch up. There would be time tonight for Hermione and Severus to show how much they loved each other, if they weren't too tired at the end of the day.

"You know, it's a good thing you forgot to pack the Polyjuice Potion, I would not want to be the fourth wizard in recorded history to go through a male-pregnancy," Severus mused, eliciting a chuckle from his wife. The third one had recently been recorded just a year prior in Argentina.

"Just be prepared for the jokes that you are the fourth one from Mouna and Jerry if your sympathetic pregnancy is as bad as the last time," Hermione warned him, patting his mostly flat stomach lightly.

Arm-in-arm they strolled, walking up to the front doors of Hogwarts castle. And they did live happily ever after.

The End

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you to my betas for this chapter, JuneW and Hope.

"Iki kane" means "little boy" or "little man."

Fripping: 1910's slang for domestic bickering between husband and wife.
Aller guten Dinge sind drei: All good things come in threes.

Well, it's been a long, fun ride, and I hope you enjoyed it. It went a bit longer and got more complex than I anticipated, but I got it all out and committed to keyboard and screen in the end.

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